

## Listening Session Summary: Focus on Youth Employment and Transitions

Location: Chicago, IL

Date: August 24, 2010

### Approach

The Interagency Working Group on Youth Programs (IWGYP) hosted a series of listening sessions across the country to gather input from stakeholders to inform the development of an overarching strategic plan for federal youth policy. In order to go in depth on specific issues, each listening session had a special focus topic, such as juvenile justice, housing, positive youth development, and others. Sessions lasted approximately four hours and were led by an experienced facilitator.

### Participants

See Appendix A for participant information.

### Questions and Responses

Summaries of participants' responses follow each of the questions below.

#### What is the single most important thing we could do to make a difference in the lives of youth, related to youth employment and transitions?

- **Do not treat employment as an isolated activity**, because it relates to other issues (mentoring, social and emotional learning, physical and mental health and wellbeing, etc.).
- Focus on behavioral change and youth development **earlier in life** (e.g., work ethic).
- Provide **continuity of support** and case management for individuals.
- Develop **consistent and streamlined criteria** for individuals to receive services across systems.
- **Coordinate** service provision **across systems** (wraparound services).
- Collaborate across agencies at federal, state, and local levels so that youth experience a **seamless transition between agencies and a continuity of supports**.
- Provide adequate **follow-up services** for youth in transition.
- Teach youth self-advocacy.
- Give youth from disadvantaged backgrounds activities that support their development (e.g., connect them with the business community to show them how they can become a part of that).
- Provide **mentors** for youth, especially those in communities with few positive role models.
- Give youth **exposure** to a **variety of careers**, including non-traditional careers.
- Use school-business partnerships to **show youth how different types of businesses operate**.
- Create employment **opportunities in communities**.
- **Educate employers** about how to work effectively with young employees.
- Focus on families.
- **Convey positive messages about youth** and youth issues to the community.
- **Restore** drastically reduced federal **funding** for youth employment.

#### What are the needs of youth (up to the age of 24) related to youth employment and transitions?

- **Listen to youth**; empower them as advocates; recognize their expertise about their own needs.
- Provide youth with **life skills** such as effective communication, good decision-making, ethics, anger management, negotiation skills, a sense of autonomy, and coping skills.

- Provide youth with **job skills**.
- Let young people know the purpose of education.
- **Involve families**.
- **Encourage adults to take responsibility** for meeting the needs of youth in their care.
- Provide guidance, mentoring, and access to **adult advocates**.
- Provide opportunities for youth to participate in **community service**.
- Help youth realistically **assess their goals**, skills, and opportunities so they can achieve their goals and work in the field of their choice.

## What are effective programs and strategies regarding youth employment and transitions? Are there program or policy gaps?

### *Effective programs*

- The Secondary Transitional Employment Program teaches employability skills, opportunities, and supports through a **partnership between state vocational rehabilitation efforts and schools**.
- Neighborhood Youth Corps (NYC) is a discontinued program that had an out-of-school youth component and provided **job training and support**.
- Motivational Educational Entertainment (MEE) Productions (Philadelphia) provides employment opportunities in combination with **social supports and mentoring**.
- After School Matters gives youth stipends and **creative job opportunities**.
- Alternative Schools Network (Chicago) builds **practical skills** into education for employment.
- Community Build (Los Angeles) helps youth in crisis.
- The Way (New York) provides transitional services for youth who have been wards of the state, focusing on the **life and social skills** needed to obtain and maintain employment.
- The Transportation Institute (America's Maritime Cruise Line) helps many former foster youth to become successful in the shipping industry, and their work colleagues become like a family.
- San Pasqual Academy (San Diego) is a residential high school for wards of the state that provides multiple services to **support youth transitions** to postsecondary education and employment.
- Anger Adjusters (Joliet, IL) helps youth **focus on a purpose** for their lives.
- Scenarios USA (New York) provides youth with **opportunities to work in the media**.
- The Corporation for National and Community Service has an **inclusion** project for youth with disabilities.
- Career Academy (LaGrange Area Department of Special Education) completes a detailed vocational assessment so that youth have a **personalized plan**.
- Successful programs teach youth **self-advocacy**, let them know about the **potential consequences** of their actions, provide them with a **stipend** so they don't have to drop out to work, get them **actively engaged** with other supports within six months of leaving high school (e.g., employment, social networks, etc.), and have **flexible scheduling**.

### *Program and policy gaps*

- A **lack of funding** limits partnerships between vocational rehabilitation providers and schools.
- More funding is needed to establish and **sustain** effective programs.
- States should not just rely on the federal government to fund programming.
- Loss of funding has taken away programs that help youth transition to postsecondary education.
- There is a lack of **evidence for promising practices**—not all practices work in all contexts.
- AmeriCorps Vista needs to expand to include youth from more diverse backgrounds.

**Do specific populations of youth have disproportionately poor outcomes related to the topics we have addressed? What are some ways to best serve these populations?**

***Populations with disproportionately poorer outcomes***

- Youth with **mental health** issues.
- Youth who have experienced **trauma**.
- Young adult **veterans**, including those who have become disabled.
- **Youth with disabilities** (they tend to be disproportionately unemployed or underemployed).
- Young men who **lack positive male role models**.
- Youth living in **poverty** (they are at higher risk for health and wellness issues that negatively impact their lives, such as HIV or unplanned pregnancy).
- **Gay, lesbian, bisexual, and transgender** youth (they suffer employment discrimination and increased health and safety risks).
- **Youth who are wards of the state** or who otherwise do not have stable adult caregivers.
- Youth who have literacy issues and/or who have **dropped out of school**.

***Best ways to serve these populations***

- Effective employment programs for youth with disabilities have continuity, build self-esteem and self awareness, have a mentoring component, provide real jobs, and include an employer advisory board.
- The public must be better educated to address discrimination against youth with disabilities.
- Early intervention needs to be brought back.
- Young men who lack positive male role models need **mentors and adult male role models**.
- **Youth who are wards of the state** or who otherwise do not have stable adult caregivers benefit from extended support and continuity of support.

**What programs really make a difference in the lives of youth? How do you know this?**

- Community school models that **extend beyond the typical school day**.
- Programs **integrated into the school curriculum early on**, before students drop out.
- Programs that integrate **social and emotional learning** standards into the learning environment (e.g., Illinois state standards for social and emotional learning).
- Programs that focus on the resources, experiences, and opportunities needed for all youth, and those needed for young people in specific situations (the **Response to Intervention** model).
- Programs that include **youth leadership**, are implemented by youth, and/or include **peer-to-peer components**.
- Programs that **actively listen to youth** about their needs and encourage youth advocacy.
- Programs that include **parental involvement**.
- Programs that ask **adults to take responsibility** for youth, ask adults to share their real experiences with youth (not just that adult's own successes), and/or build youth-adult connections.
- **Hands-on life skills programs** that teach things such as automotive repair, cooking, etc., that can lead to a career, but can also make daily life easier.
- Programs such as Project Strive that help youth who are/were wards of the state by providing a counselor or **case manager specifically focused on their education**

**What are the barriers to collaborating on youth outcomes, and how can these barriers be removed?**

- **Funding requirements and inflexibility** can discourage collaboration.

- Funding often does not cover collaboration.
- There can be reluctance to take on successful models that have worked in other states.
- Service providers need **better information** about apprenticeship and workforce development programs (e.g., JobCorps).
- Quality improvement can be hampered because funding does not cover data gathering and analysis.

### What types of initiatives could promote collaboration and improve outcomes for youth?

- **Better performance indicators and better long-term tracking of youth program participants** would improve our understanding of who is benefitting from which kinds of interventions.
- **Examining employment rates and the relative costs and benefits** of preparing youth adequately for employment (e.g., employment versus incarceration).
- Provide government support to expand the scope of programming to **require collaboration** between education and workforce development.
- Improve alignment between how employers want to be involved in youth workforce preparation and how youth employment programs want them to be involved.
- **Ensure that youth are ready for the workplace** to improve collaboration with employers.
- Build **awareness and buy-in** for programming among youth and teachers.
- Improve collaboration among service providers and between service providers and potential employers to decrease overlap and gain efficiency.
- Create a **cultural shift** that encourages collaboration and evaluation.
- Mesh parallel administrative systems (e.g., procurements, supplies).
- Ensure that all Illinois schools participate in the Illinois Youth Survey to provide comprehensive **information on youth needs and program effectiveness**.
- Keep important support systems for youth in place (collaboration in Joliet, IL under Safe Schools Healthy Students provided students with needed supports, but then disappeared after three years).
- Engage in **comprehensive, collaborative strategic planning** with partners from across agencies (e.g., Illinois Children’s Mental Health Partnership).

### What can be done for all youth (not just those directly benefiting from programs) in order to use resources effectively?

- Provide **social and emotional learning programming** for all students.
- Provide **universal screening** for social and emotional learning, mental health, and other issues that are barriers to success (the same way we screen for vision and hearing).
- Create an **online forum** where youth can find up-to-date information on programs and services.
- Use the media to **provide youth with positive messages** that they can use in their own lives.
- Use **direct, honest, and clear communication** with youth in all media (i.e., spoken, written, and online) so that information can be understood by youth with a variety of abilities.
- Encourage youth who have made successful transitions to go back and mentor others from their communities (perhaps with incentives such as student loan forgiveness).
- **Use effective collaboration models** for service providers to efficiently learn from each other, and to develop a common language.
- Stop developing programs with barriers that exclude youth who need that program.

## What are your ideas for federal policy to improve the coordination, effectiveness, and efficiency of programs affecting youth?

- Every federal mandate should be funded.
- Fund programs in a way that ensures **seamless service provision**.
- Look across systems and **change policies that need changing**.
- Ensure that program funding includes collaboration goals and activities.
- Make sufficient funding available to collect data and **evaluate programs**, and to share information regarding what works and what does not.
- Focus on how underdevelopment of youth has a negative impact at all levels of society (i.e., local, state, and national) and **make development a key issue**, funding things like afterschool programs.
- Federally fund a **self-advocacy initiative** for all youth.
- Provide sufficient resources to **combat discrimination** against youth with disabilities among all youth-serving organizations.
- Develop more policies to ensure that youth in need get **priority for services**.

This work was originally produced by the American Institutes for Research in support of the Interagency Working Group on Youth Programs through a contract from the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services (HHS). The content does not necessarily reflect the position or policy of HHS, the Interagency Working Group on Youth Programs, or the other departments and agencies represented on the Interagency Working Group on Youth Programs.

## APPENDIX A: PARTICIPANTS from Region V (Chicago, IL)

### **Participating organizations\*:**

- Casey Family Programs
- Chapin Hall at the University of Chicago
- Research, Evaluation & Technology, Youth Guidance
- Illinois Caucus for Adolescent Health
- SEL Midwest at Learning Point Associates
- Alternative Schools Network
- DHS Division of Alcoholism and Substance Abuse
- Streamwood Behavioral Health Systems
- Illinois Violence Prevention Authority
- Gary Comer Youth Center
- All Stars Project of Chicago
- ABJ Community Services, Inc.
- Great Lakes West Comprehensive Center
- Illinois Department of Human Services, Division of Rehabilitation Services
- Access Living
- Advance Illinois
- LaGrange Area Department of Special Education
- Lawrence Hall Youth Services
- Chicago Public Schools
- Research and Strategy, Chicago Workforce Investment Council

*\*Note: Participant information is only provided for participants who registered for the session and may not represent all organizations that were present.*