

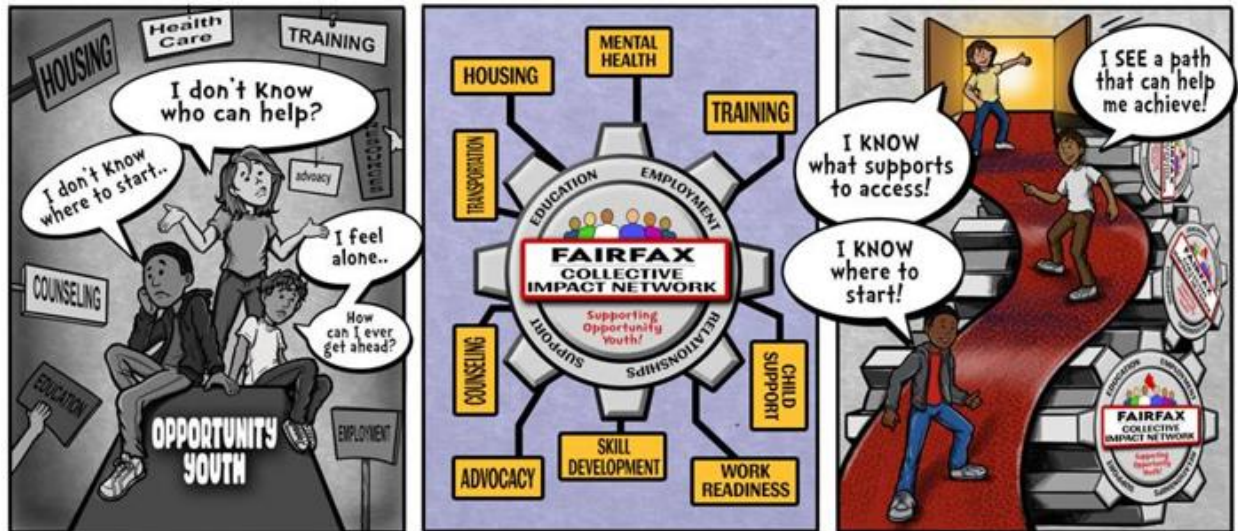


Fairfax County Opportunity Youth Collective Impact Network

Report and Recommendations
SCYPT Workforce Readiness

January 2023

Current State to Desired State



Confusing and Disconnected Supports:

- Opportunity youth are looking for direction on where to start, engagement with trusted advisors, and connections to new career paths of their choice.
- The system to support these youth, ages 14-24, is a disconnected and confusing one with multiple barriers that block their vision of a pathway to a prosperous future.

Aligning the System Around Youth Voices:

- The proposed Fairfax County Opportunity Youth Collective Impact Network begins to pull the pieces together using human-centered design principles centered around youth voices, engagement, and interests.
- This network surrounds youth with an array of accessible support and training that matches their diverse needs and interests.

Clear Pathways to Career Advancement:

- As the gears begin to work together, a well-defined plan, informed by youth experiences and emerging potential, offers clear pathways toward career goals of their choosing.
- Their successful progress represents a long-term solution to address employers' need for skilled talent and the county's goal of inclusive prosperity.

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Executive Summary

I am more than the labels often used to define me -- disconnected, disabled, slow learner, addicted, mentally ill, or criminal. But because I've heard them so often, I fear that I'm destined to be defined by negatives forever. I feel scared and alone and don't know where to start developing a career, whatever that means. I don't trust adults who seem to see me mostly as a problem to solve, so you will have to earn my trust over time by listening to me and helping me identify and develop my unique talents, rather than seeing only my difficulties. If you try to force me to conform with a bunch of forms and requirements so that you can sell your program rather than hear my story, then I'm out. One thing I've been taught is how to spot a phony who says one thing but does another. My friends will continue to invite me to live for the moment because they don't really see a future anyway. To be honest, I don't really know what's possible either. So, I'm going to need a series of second chances and many types of support over several years to pull away from all these negative forces to be more of what I hope to become, which maybe you can help me see? Please don't give up on me like so many others in my life have.

This passage is a composite interpretation of what under-represented Fairfax County youth participating in 2022 focus groups shared about opportunity youth's perspectives and how they hope to be supported in their tumultuous journey to launch a professional career. This report and recommendations are centered around these and other youth voices and related outcome data to develop and shape a proposed Fairfax County Opportunity Youth Collective Impact Network developed in response to SCYPT's charge below.

SCYPT's Charge: Develop an action plan based on the recommendation of the Chairman's Task Force on Equity and Opportunity to: Engage educators, businesses, government, and nonprofits, and involve youth and young adults to align their resources and initiatives to create an education-to-career system that better connects Fairfax's youth ages 14-24 who are not in school or working (e.g., opportunity youth and those at-risk of becoming opportunity youth) to in-demand careers.

There is a systematic mismatch between what opportunity youth want and need from engagement with various county programs and services and how those programs and services are delivered and coordinated (or more often not coordinated). In many cases, opportunity youth and younger students who are at risk of becoming disconnected either don't know where to start or need to explore their interests and innate talents before committing to any program or service. Often, when they do engage, many confront narrow program requirements coupled with extensive paperwork that doesn't match their current exploratory stage. While they want and need trusted advisors who ask questions, listen, and direct them to services that best match their interests, what they often get are very well-intended and dedicated staff who use policies and processes to screen youth out rather than people-centered

approaches that screen youth in by building relationships of trust. Many youth are either turned away or choose to disconnect when they lose hope when confronted with compliance-first program approaches.

Ironically, the disconnection often associated with opportunity youth is mirrored within the system of mostly disconnected service providers across the county. Youth-serving organizations and programs are often friendly competitors whom each strive separately for program enrollments, funding, employer relationships, and political support. Compared to other regions with organized and well-supported opportunity youth collaboratives, Fairfax County's system is notable mostly for what is missing: no common data-gathering approach to enable system-wide tracking and reporting, limited business engagement with no identified youth employment champions, and limited capacity to deliver person-centered, low-barrier and holistic programs for youth.

In successful collective impact collaboratives, the common denominator is a well-resourced and trusted backbone organization. Backbone organizations are charged with clear ownership and accountability to evolve and align an interconnected system of organizations, programs, and supports for opportunity youth.

The #1 goal recommended within this report is to establish a backbone organization to develop Fairfax County's Opportunity Youth Collective Impact Collaborative. This report recommends a specific county-affiliated nonprofit organization that already creates and manages collective programmatic initiatives within the early childhood education field: Fairfax Futures.

The report also recommends four additional goals which together comprise a framework to develop an interconnected collective impact network of affiliated organizations and programs to engage and support opportunity youth. The SCYPT committee is asked to endorse this framework, which centers on a set of guiding principles known as TAPE: Trauma-informed, Asset-based, Person-centered, and Equity-focused. These principles shall be infused into all the goals, strategies, and initial action steps recommended in this report. By following this long-term roadmap that centers the new system around the needs and interests of opportunity youth, Fairfax County will join a collective network of several dozen communities nationwide that are making continual progress towards "solving" the problem of opportunity youth by developing these youth to become the solution to employers' urgent need for skilled talent and a shared vision of inclusive prosperity.

This report was prepared by a core team of 16 organizational and program leaders from FCPS, several Fairfax County agencies, and other representatives from youth-serving organizations, guided by three SCYPT members as sponsors. (See Appendix A for the full list). The report is based on an in-depth inquiry conducted over a period of nine months that included five focus groups with 50+ opportunity youth, interviews with 19 organizations within the region's ecosystem of service providers, and a nationwide scan of opportunity youth collaboratives to identify effective practices and models. This three-pronged inquiry process led to initial findings that identified unmet needs and system-wide gaps within the current disconnected "system" of youth-serving organizations. These findings led to the recommended framework of goals and strategies to address these unmet needs and gaps and to a recommendation to establish Fairfax County's Opportunity Youth Collective Impact Network.

Introduction

With the correct resources and support, all young people can reach their career and educational goals. They are valuable assets in Fairfax County. Yet an estimated 9,200 youth are labeled *Opportunity Youth*: 14–24-year-olds who are mostly disconnected from school, work, and from organizations that can support progress towards those goals.

Some of these youth leave high school without a diploma. Disproportionate numbers are low-income students of color and students with documented disabilities. Leaving high school early is not the only route to disconnection. Every year roughly 450 seniors earn diplomas but have no plans for post-secondary education or work, according to the FCPS Senior Survey data. Connecting with viable alternative education and training programs can be especially difficult for under-resourced youth.

Most Fairfax County youth are ambitious about their futures, and good jobs increasingly require postsecondary training. The community, led by the Fairfax County government and schools, must prevent young people from falling through the gaps in our secondary and postsecondary educational systems, which compels us to work more collaboratively to reconnect those with whom our systems have failed. Such systemic solutions are required to face the growing need to support opportunity youth in Fairfax. The solution must be rooted in equity and lean into youth voices in naming the problem, creating opportunities, and developing collective solutions.

The key to building momentum is to establish a Fairfax Collective Impact Network, anchored by a well-resourced backbone agency, to create a human-centered collaborative network dedicated to supporting opportunity youth. This investment will position Fairfax County to make significant progress in the coming years to accomplish the goals outlined in this report.

Fairfax County has a unique opportunity to do this critical work at scale at a moment when employers in virtually every sector have urgent needs for skilled workers represented in the untapped talent that these thousands of opportunity youth represent. This report identifies strong partners, both public and private, interested in coordinating support for opportunity youth in the community. In focus groups, many older youth who had made some initial progress expressed eagerness to help drive the work forward with their voices, experiences, and expertise.

The Problem: Key Findings

The problem of youth disconnectedness is prevalent across urban and rural areas of the nation. Studies estimate that there are more than 4.5 million opportunity youth nationally¹. Since the pandemic began, youth employment nationally has declined by 1%, and unemployment rates for many segments of youth are several times higher than the overall national unemployment rate of 3.7% in November 2022. These segments include youth who are Black (15.9% unemployed), Asian (10.8%), Hispanic (9.7%), and male (8.8%). (Source: U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics [report](#), August 2022.)

Several national data findings underscore why this matters so much. By age 28, those who experience longer youth disconnections earn one-third less than the average income at this age and only 1% have completed at least an associate degree. After age 25, the lifetime social burden related to health, crime, and public assistance associated with each opportunity youth total \$529,000. (Source, [Making Apprenticeships Work for Opportunity Youth](#), Jobs for the Future, 2017.)

Lack of Standard Definitions and Accurate Data

The universal challenge faced by communities that have begun to tackle this issue is the lack of shared data definitions of young adults disconnected from school or work and the resulting absence of any direct data about this population. While there is a growing understanding of the unique challenges that young adults between the ages of 14 and 24 experience, better data is needed to shape public discourse and policy dialogue. In Fairfax County, a recent study estimates the number of youth neither in school nor working to be 9,200. (Source: Fairfax County Opportunity Youth Landscape Analysis, November 2021.) However, this estimate may not be completely accurate. No Fairfax County youth-serving organization interviewed has a data definition of opportunity youth nor collects any data specifically on this population. The lack of consistent data definitions also makes it impossible to determine how many of these youth are receiving services across the county and community-based programs.

Disconnected Regional Ecosystem

Opportunity youth in Fairfax County do not benefit from an ongoing initiative to support, coordinate and improve system-wide performance among a network of independent service delivery organizations. Regional partner interviews conducted by committee members and with The Forum for Youth Investment staff demonstrated the lack of coordination on behalf of opportunity youth in this community. National research underscores the importance of strong coordination between various entities providing support to opportunity youth in other communities (See Appendix E). Specific gaps are recognizable by their absences in Fairfax County compared with others with established collaboratives. For example, in contrast to other collaboratives studied, there are no regular convenings of peer networks of program delivery staff to learn from and about one another; no systematic way to identify, assess and scale

¹ Kim, A. (2020). *Abandoned: America's Lost Youth and the Crisis of Disconnection*. The New Press.

promising program innovations across the system; no coordinated employer outreach and engagement; and no online platform or website with system-wide information on the many programs and services for opportunity youth.

Fairfax County has a disconnected network of friendly competitors operating separate programs rather than closely collaborating networks of partners. Individual organizations and programs compete rather than collaborate to enroll mostly easier-to-reach (e.g., not completely disconnected) youth, secure and administer program resources that offer only a limited menu of program and service options and have difficulties engaging beyond a few easier-to-access employers. Even where there are examples of closer collaboration, such as summer youth employment programs run jointly by the Department of Family Services (DFS), Neighborhood and Community Services (NCS), and Virginia’s Department for Aging and Rehabilitative Services (DARS) there is no documentation of what successful collaboration entails. These practices include developing high levels of trust among partner representatives, expertise in navigating separate federal program policy frameworks and braiding funding to mutually support youth participants, joint employer engagement strategies, and a large investment of staff administrative time to effectively manage such complexities. (For a chart of Fairfax County’s current ecosystem of identified youth employment-related programs and services, see Appendix B.)

Capacity Limitations and Lived Experience

There are challenges on the prevention and treatment side of the effort with younger youth in Fairfax County. Keeping young people connected in school is preferable to reconnecting with them post-high school. However, service coordination challenges exist between schools and county or community-based programs for timely intervention to exploit the windows of opportunity before disconnection.

Building authentic relationships with at-risk young people is foundational for success. Many service providers and youth interviewed pointed to specific individuals with exceptional abilities to build trusting relationships with at-risk youth as crucial in youth engagement efforts. Additionally, many older opportunity youth in focus groups expressed a strong interest in using their lived experience in making progress toward education and career goals to support younger youth in similar circumstances, but there are currently few or no opportunities for them to serve in such roles.

Structural Problems of Racial Equity

The literature review supports the notion of youth disconnectedness as a structural problem rooted in historic racial and social inequities. Nationwide, and in Fairfax County, most of the disconnected youth have a common condition of limited household income at or near poverty levels. Opportunity youth are comprised of many sub-groups of youth who struggle to access opportunities that are designed primarily for “mainstream” youth. These often-overlapping segments include higher proportions of youth with disabilities (estimated to be as much as 80% of opportunity youth), English language learners, and black and Hispanic youth. Each of these, and other subgroups, benefit from customized, person-centered services to address their specific needs. Opportunity youth are also found in greater proportions in historically underserved areas within Fairfax County, such as Opportunity Neighborhoods. The

disproportionate representation of students of color among opportunity youth is not a matter of coincidence. It results from structural and institutional legacies and active manifestations of racism. *One Fairfax* identifies race as the number one predictor of how well one will do today. There are wide gaps in income, employment, education, and opportunity by race and geography across the county. Most opportunity youth come from neighborhoods and family backgrounds that limit their choice of economic mobility in school, at home, the workplace, and in the marketplace.

Recognizing the structural nature of the problem and the limited opportunities that the system is currently affording to these young adults has two implications for the effort to address the issue of youth disconnectedness. First, it calls for the application of an equity lens at all intervention levels in understanding the individual youth and how we work with them to provide support. Secondly, such efforts should be combined with more extensive policy and practice-level interventions that focus on the structural problems at all levels. Equity-informed approaches break down structural barriers and open ladders of opportunity for youth who otherwise would not have them. There needs to be a sustainable platform for elevating issues of critical importance to our youth based on data and practice to aid the effort to create a level playing field for all youth regardless of their race or other socioeconomic markers.

Disconnectedness as a Continuum and Mirror

Youth disconnectedness is also best represented on a continuum, which can either be addressed in a preventative mode when early indicators of disconnectedness and struggles emerge while still in high school. Disconnectedness can also be addressed via a re-engagement mode for older youth after they have left high school, a critical moment in the continuum where they are most at risk of dropping off a cliff and rapidly drifting into greater disconnectedness from career and educational opportunities.

Ironically, the definition of opportunity youth as “disconnected” is mirrored by their view of a confusing array of disconnected organizations with no clear map of where and how to connect. System gaps and unmet needs identified by youth show that many are confused by a disconnected and hard-to-access system of providers, not knowing where to start. Many segments of youth are not currently reached or supported in the ways that they need and want to be. Youth focus group data suggest that many of these youth learn best via hands-on skill-building opportunities in work-based learning and apprenticeships rather than traditional classroom learning.

Lack of Trust and a Youth-Focused Menu of Options

According to youth focus groups and national research, opportunity youth view trustworthiness when someone demonstrates a commitment by showing up repeatedly and taking time to listen to their authentic story with a non-judgmental attitude. As noted previously, some youth service professionals have succeeded in building trusting relationships with youth. Such trusted people can include school advisors, parole officers, county social services staff, and nonprofit youth workers. However, many of these people also often lack a clear road map of where and how to connect youth beyond their organizations and programs.

When services are accessed, additional hurdles such as immigration status, income eligibility, and lack of formal education create roadblocks. Some partner programs interviewed report that as many as 50% of youth who make initial contact are turned away due to non-eligibility or opt-out during intake processes when paperwork demands come before the trusting relationships and support that they need are offered. The stories shared by former opportunity youth also confirm that they undertake a multi-dimensional journey over a timeframe greater than a year, while most programs are more narrowly focused and delivered in a limited timeframe that may be as short as one week.

Untapped Youth Talent and Limited Business Engagement

Opportunity youth represent one of the largest sources of untapped talent in Fairfax County at a moment when employers in virtually all sectors have urgent needs for skilled workers. As the county's Spring 2022 [work-based learning report](#) documented, long-term demographic signposts point towards an era of chronic labor shortages in Northern Virginia and elsewhere in which the number of available jobs will far exceed the number of unemployed workers. Employers value youth for their agility with technology, diversity that is linked to innovation and productivity, ability to relate to young customers, willingness to learn, and health. As one report about youth concluded, "*Young people have skills, enthusiasm, and innovative ideas to bring to the workplace, helping your business to stay fresh and up to date*". (Source: [The Advantages of Hiring Young Workers](#), The Australian National Youth Mental Health Foundation.)

However, despite businesses' urgent need for talent, many employment-related youth program leaders reported difficulty in successfully engaging with employers to promote the hiring of relatively inexperienced youth workers.

Limited Access to Summer Jobs

A related element is access to summer paid work experience programs. Beyond the small incomes generated, they also help youth develop critical foundational workplace skills (e.g., "soft skills") and habits such as the persistence and stamina to hold down a job, the ability to plan and execute a structured and productive workday and showing up on time. It also helps them to learn important people skills on how to work with peers, customers, and supervisors and build their social (networking) capital. It also boosts their future income earning potential by having work history to put on their resume and raising their confidence and positive stories that they can discuss in interviews and professional references. The summer work experience program coordinated by DFS is the largest such program in the county, serving about 100 youth. A similar program in the City of Alexandria serves twice that number despite having a population a fraction of the size of Fairfax County. Fairfax County government, as one of the largest employers in the region, should set an example by providing increased work experience opportunities for youth so private and nonprofit employers can also follow suit. This could go a long way in addressing disconnection from work as first jobs tend to instill a sense of purpose and direction in the lives of our youth.

Lack of Access to Person-Centered, Low-Barrier, and High-Quality Career Training Programs

Career training pathway programs are limited in their scope of services and often present barriers to access for the opportunity Youth in Fairfax County. These barriers include cost, location, prerequisites, and lack of wrap-around services and schedule flexibility, which combine to exclude the participation of many opportunity youth and contribute to lower success rates for those who do enroll. Northern Virginia Community College, FCPS high schools, FCPS Adult and Community Education (ACE) division, and dozens of proprietary training programs exist in the community but access to these programs is limited for many youth. During focus groups, participants cited typical barriers such as transportation, cost, and lack of information about programs as reasons for not participating. Another less obvious barrier emerged as well – the lack of a champion or a person in their lives who believed they could be successful in a career-centered educational program and professional careers.

Proposed Goals and Strategies

In response to the findings outlined in the previous section, this report offers a framework of long-term aspirational goals, strategies, and initial action steps. In this framework, goals represent broad strategic objectives, strategies represent major components of a set of initiatives to undertake to accomplish goals, and initial action steps are specific recommendations of where to begin these efforts in the near term.

The project team is seeking endorsement from SCYPT on guiding principles to elevate critical service approaches across participating programs and services within the collaborative. The guiding principles, known by the acronym TAPE, shall be infused into planning and operations for all recommended goals, strategies, and action steps, which are described below:

- **Trauma-Informed:**
Recognize that many of our youth have gone through challenging traumatic experiences. Hence, solutions will focus on nurture, care, safety, choice, trustworthiness, and agency in the service approaches to avoid re-traumatization and to ensure a greater chance of success.
- **Asset-Based (See Youth Potential as a Solution, not a Problem):**
Collective efforts will also recognize, honor, and develop the extraordinary potential of all opportunity youth, who also represents a long-term solution to employers' need for talent.
- **Person-Based (Center All Efforts Around Youth Voice and Engagement):**
All initiatives will continually place opportunity youth voices, needs, and interests at the center of efforts and actively engage youth in shaping a system more responsive to their needs and interests.
- **Equity-Focused (Engage Youth to Address Structural Inequities):**
The framework acknowledges the central place equity plays in this initiative in accordance with

One Fairfax. Opportunity youth are disproportionately students of color, disability, immigrants, and other under-represented population groups. These youth voices must be included in the broader racial equity framework.

Goal 1: Establish Clear and Consolidated Ownership and Accountability for a Collaborative Network of Organizations and Programs Supporting Opportunity Youth

Strategies:

- Establish a county-designated backbone organization governed by an executive council to develop policies and performance metrics related to opportunity youth, engage youth in developing a more youth-responsive system, and coordinate, train and align a network of independent organizations to guide the advancement of economic opportunity for youth and young adults. (See Appendix C for a description of the initial roles and budget estimate for the backbone organization.)
- Infuse all collaborative planning and initiatives with the guiding principles (TAPE).

Initial Action Steps:

- Establish and fund the Fairfax County Opportunity Youth Collective Impact Network within Fairfax Futures as the backbone organization to support an opportunity youth collaborative in Fairfax County. (See Appendix C.)
- Convene regular meetings with county leaders, youth-serving organization and program leaders, business leaders, and youth representatives to define and refine the vision, goals, and performance indicators of the collective effort.
- Actively engage within and learn from a national community of practice with leaders of similar communities that have developed opportunity youth collaboratives.

Goal 2: Lower High School Dropout Rates and Improve On-time Graduation Rates.

Strategies:

- Ensure school staff builds collective responsibility around on-time graduation, dropout prevention, and re-engagement for students at-risk of becoming opportunity youth.
- Support English Learners entering FCPS at ages 17-21 with appropriate academic and career planning, wrap-around supports, and monitoring of progress toward graduation.
- Increase capacity at Alternative High School programs to allow alternative pathways to graduation that are more tailored to individual needs.
- Leverage local business partnerships to establish work-based learning (WBL) experiences and internship opportunities for school-aged youth and recent graduates.

Initial Action Steps:

- Establish a central staffing formula to support on-time graduation coordinator positions (203-day teacher) in schools with demonstrated GCI/Dropout risk.
- Develop strategies to increase capacity in Alternative High School programs and connect programming to emerging re-engagement initiatives and partners within the county.
- Establish consistent work-based learning and career pathway staffing supports in each region to ensure all schools are offering high-quality WBL opportunities equitably and increasing connections with business partners and youth employment champions.
- Develop strategies to increase the facilitation of mentors for opportunity youth at community and teen centers through Check-and-Connect.

Goal 3: Provide Consistent Regional Re-Engagement Outreach and Navigation Support to Help Opportunity Youth Access Quality Programs and Services.

Strategies:

- Ensure youth voice is considered in every decision and shared practices related to supporting opportunity youth.
- Coordinate outreach among provider organizations to the most disconnected youth and provide them navigational information and supports and trusted advisors to help opportunity youth choose programs and services that match their interests.
- Using experiences with the WISH Center as a model, create a blueprint for youth re-engagement centers offering high school completion, career training options and holistic support services within lower income neighborhoods and high schools.
- Establish a network of re-engagement centers within each Health and Human Services region as a collective impact approach where opportunity youth can connect to access wrap-around services using a human-center design to holistically address mental health, substance abuse, financial literacy, job readiness, life skills, education and training needs, and other critical services to support their progress towards economic mobility.
- Leverage the Healthy Minds Fairfax Transitional Youth Program to provide wraparound services (e.g., housing, health care, childcare) to support successful engagement in education and career development services.

Initial Action Steps:

- Pilot a Youth Employment Ambassador program within multiple organizations to engage older youth with lived experience in achieving career progress to help build trust with young people in the community, connect them to relevant services, and support progress toward their career goals.
- Develop a website that serves as a portal to learn about and access relevant programs and services and coordinate processes that assist young people in navigating the system of support.

Goal 4: Increase Local Capacity in High Quality, Low Barrier, and High-Impact Career Development Programs and Services for Opportunity Youth

Strategies:

- Convene networks of practitioners at the program management and direct service levels to develop joint training, peer learning, and partnership development opportunities.
- Increase the accessibility, capacities, and partnerships among a network of low-barrier youth employment organizations, programs, and services.
- Convene key leaders at local colleges and universities to jointly develop comprehensive approaches and partnerships to recruit, retain, and support opportunity youth in degree and non-degree career training programs.
- Expand innovative and impactful youth summer work experience programs targeting underserved youth populations.

Initial Action Steps:

- Conduct a pilot to develop a collaborative of accessible, high-impact, person-centered programs within a small network of youth employment and training programs to test and assess new youth-focused and collaborative approaches to employment and training services (See Appendix D for an introductory description of a network of pilot projects currently in a formation stage)
- Create a cross-departmental/agency year-round program where youth will receive career-training experience and targeted interventions with stipends while learning job skills that will empower them to have a successful start and interrupt generational poverty.
- Support and monitor the WISH Center's youth outreach, engagement, support, and training programs and services as a model for place-based approaches in other opportunity neighborhoods within Fairfax County.
- Engage with local colleges and universities in developing collaborative "co-enrollment" approaches to provide more low-barrier, high-quality education programs in which youth aren't forced to choose between post-secondary career education and wage-earning jobs.
- Invest resources to increase the capacity of summer work experience programs.
- Expand summer youth employment sites with county agencies, private sector employers, and non-profit agencies as employer-partners.
- Create strategies to increase restorative justice practices for opportunity youth who face barriers due to justice system involvement and criminal records.

Goal 5: Increase Business Engagement to Help Develop Untapped Youth Talent into Reliable Sources of Skilled Workers

Strategies:

- Identify and deploy individual Employer Champions to support and advocate youth employment engagement within their organizations and business sectors.

- Identify, document, and promote promising and positive employer practices on youth talent development and acquisition.
- Leverage Fairfax County’s work-based learning initiatives to increase the availability of work-based learning opportunities for youth workers.

Initial Action Steps:

- Develop a network of Youth Employer Champions from multiple sectors and occupational pathways to begin building out career pathway onramps and support for opportunity youth and develop an ecosystem of youth-supportive employers from the first job to skilled professional careers.

Potential ARPA Funding to Accelerate Initial Next Steps

At the time of this report, Fairfax County is in an unusual position in that there are significant unallocated Federal American Rescue Plan Act (ARPA) resources available that could fund a two-year pilot investment to develop a backbone organization and to pilot promising youth-focused practices with a collaborative network of initial partners as described in Appendices C and D of this report. While the SCYPT does not generally make funding recommendations or decisions, the availability of ARPA resources presents a unique and immediate opportunity. If the committee is interested in accelerating progress in addressing the needs of opportunity youth and more rapid implementation of the goals and strategies outlined in this report, it can choose to signal its support for immediate county consideration of county ARPA funding for these foundational action steps.

Conclusion

Data demonstrates that opportunity youth and younger students who show signs of disconnecting from education - if they continue to experience disconnected support systems at a critical moment in their development – are at risk of enduring a lifetime of challenges that thwart their future growth. As other regions have shown when communities invest in providing opportunities for disconnected youth to earn a living wage, the whole community benefits.

The SCYPT committee is in a position to support this roadmap of recommendations and the creation of the Fairfax County Opportunity Youth Impact Network. The establishment of the Fairfax County Opportunity Youth Collective Impact Network is essential to surround these youth with an aligned network of support organizations, programs, and relationships to help them develop their potential. By doing so, Fairfax County can join a network of other opportunity youth community collaboratives that are already demonstrating measurable progress in supporting these youth and learning from one another. (See Appendix E for examples of what ongoing collaboratives with strong backbone organizations are achieving.) Our success as a community depends on our youths’ success. Now is the time to invest in and support opportunity youth.

Appendices

Appendix A: SCYPT Sponsors and Core Team Members

This report was developed under the guidance of three sponsoring members of SCYPT and a core team of 16 members, listed in the charts below.

SCYPT Sponsors

Dr. Michael Becketts	Director	Fairfax County Department of Family Services
Rodney Lusk	Franconia District Supervisor	Fairfax County Board of Supervisors
Dr. Sloan Presidio	Chief Academic Officer	Fairfax County Public Schools

Core Team Members

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Tatiana Nuth	Fairfax County Department of Family Services
Jamie Hudson	Fairfax County Department of Family Services
Kim Carr	Fairfax County Department of Family Services
Bill Browning	Fairfax County Department of Family Services
Sallyann Bergh	Fairfax Futures
Francisco Klockner Gonzalez	Fairfax County Juvenile and Domestic Relations District Court
Tracy Harrington	Virginia Department for Aging and Rehabilitative Services
Amy Dudas	Venture Philanthropy Partners

Appendix B: Ecosystem Chart - List of Fairfax County Youth Employment-Related Organizations

The initial ecosystem mapping conducted in 2022 identified over two dozen youth-serving organizations and programs that provided services related to education and employment for opportunity youth aged 14-24. Information was gathered directly through interviews and other data-gathering methods with 19 of these organizations and programs. The chart below lists the results of this exercise organized by estimated annual service capacity for Fairfax County Youth. The organizations contacted and/or researched are highlighted in **bold font**.

Large Capacity Organizations/Programs (1,000 or more county youth served annually)

Fairfax County Public Schools
Northern Virginia Community College

Moderate Capacity Organizations/Programs (100 to 999 county youth served annually)

Fairfax County DFS Employment and Training Programs
Fairfax County Neighborhood and Community Services
Fairfax County Juvenile and Domestic Relations Court
Virginia Department for Aging and Rehabilitative Services (DARS)
Capital Youth Empowerment Program
Edu Futuro
Northern Virginia Family Service Youth Programs
Second Story

Smaller Capacity Organizations/Programs (under 100 county youth served annually)

Melwood (Operator of the Lee District WISH Center)
Building Momentum
Cornerstones Pathways to Sustainable Employment
Britepaths Workforce Programs and Financial Empowerment Center
Raeye Children Aid
Lutheran Social Services Refugee Assistance Program
Generation Hope
English Empowerment Center (formerly the Literacy Council of Northern Virginia)
Year Up
Genesys Works
Chris Atwood Foundation
Josh Anderson Foundation
Catholic Charities Refugee Resettlement Agency
Korean Community Services Center
United Communities
Lamb Center

Appendix C: Initial Description of the Role of a Backbone Organization

As noted in the previous Problems and Findings section of this report, the presence of a backbone organization has proven to be essential to the success of collective impact initiatives elsewhere. Furthermore, the absence of such a coordinating entity in Fairfax County has resulted in a disconnected array of provider organizations that contributes to disorientation among youth and professional staff about how best to connect with resources within the network of the youth program and service providers. This glaring gap in collaborative system management leads to a strong capacity-building recommendation and goal to establish a backbone coordinating organization, upon which progress in addressing other goals depends.

This report recommends the selection of and investment in Fairfax Futures to develop and coordinate a collaborative that is held accountable to shared goals and is both responsive to and driven by youth. Fairfax Futures already works in a comparable role for early childhood development. *[Note: If this recommendation is endorsed, then this proposed coordinating role of Fairfax Futures will need to be affirmed by the organization's board, followed by organizational funding and a scaling-up process to meet the initial needs of the collaborative.]* The collective impact backbone organization largely serves as a management partner that promotes collective ownership, accountability, coordination, and greater system integration across the collaborative. In its initial phase, Fairfax Futures would convene collaborative working groups to develop more detailed strategies and joint action plans as outlined in this report, develop shared data definitions and metrics to begin developing a regional data management and reporting system, and secure additional funding and in-kind resources to continue building capacities within the collaborative network.

Over an initial two-year period of capacity-building and with an infusion of new resources, the new backbone organization will:

- Enhance rather than compete with affiliated service delivery providers.
- Be equipped with basic fiscal and network management capacities to coordinate system-level activities to help keep collective initiatives accountable.
- Facilitate and sustain stakeholder convening, knowledge management, and system alignment efforts at multiple levels, including:
 - Executive leadership sponsor level to prioritize system goals and identify and advocate for resources
 - Program management level to learn from innovations and promote deeper service delivery integration among a collaborative network of service delivery organizations and programs
 - Youth service delivery staff, youth ambassadors, and volunteer networks to develop, document, and share effective youth-centered engagement practices
- Facilitate and develop collective data management systems and metrics to track and report on progress at system and program levels (see the section on data systems below).

- Secure and manage additional non-county funding and in-kind resources, such as volunteers, to invest in ongoing system-level capacity-building and strategic program investments in promising practices within the collaborative.
- Actively engage within and learn from a national community of practice with leaders of similar communities that have developed opportunity youth collaboratives.

Developing these foundational capacities over a two-year timeframe will require an estimated initial investment of approximately \$860,000, and a county leadership commitment to help secure ongoing investments in the backbone organization over time. As a result of this two-year pilot, progress towards achieving many goals and strategies outlined in this document will be significantly accelerated and resulting in collaborative networks already at work on system integration such as building a collective impact data system among providers. During this timeframe, organizational leaders are expected to identify additional resources that can reduce the county’s long-term investment in backbone organizational capacities at Fairfax Futures.

Establishing a Regional System of Progress Indicators and Metrics

One major gap to address immediately is the absence of a shared definition of opportunity youth and system-wide data-gathering on this population. Fortunately, the county’s collaborative can draw upon data systems developed by the Aspen Institute’s Opportunity Youth Forum’s network of collaboratives, as described in [this 2019 report](#). Starting by developing a shared definition among provider organizations, the backbone organization will gather data to assess progress in system integration, as well as a set of collective impact metrics to track Fairfax County’s progress in engaging more opportunity youth and supporting their achievements in career education and career-track employment. These collective efforts to develop metrics will also engage youth in helping to identify success measures that reflect their experiences of progress milestones and goals that are meaningful to them. Below are initial thoughts on data measures that can be shaped into a balanced scorecard to assess progress in both areas. Given that any system will involve many participating organizations to agree upon common data definitions and new data-gathering methods, it will likely take two years to develop a county-wide data system.

System Integration Metrics

- Acceptance and Use of Common Data Definitions (e.g., the definition of opportunity youth, at-risk youth, re-engagement continuum indicators, outcome indicators, etc.)
- Total Number of Organizational Members Participating in Collective Impact Network and a Summary of System Connectivity Activities
- Member Assessment Results from a Network Health Survey (For an example, see [this Network Health Scorecard](#).)

Proposed Preventative Metrics for Younger In-School Youth

- FCPS Graduation Rates, Dropout Rates, Attendance Rates
- FCPS Non-Traditional School Program Enrollment and Successful Completion Outcomes

- Engagement with Graduating FCPS High School Students Who Report No Plans for Education or Employment

Proposed Re-Engagement Metrics for Out-of-School Opportunity Youth (Individual service delivery organization/program reports rolled up into a system-wide report)

- Overall Volume of Opportunity Youth Engagement Contacts
- Re-Engagement Continuum Measures (following first contact, to include retained engagement, enrollment in service/program, completion of service/program, etc.)
- Employment-Related Success Measures (e.g., credentials earned, new jobs, and wage gains)

Appendix D: Innovative Pilot Project Experiments

Conduct Innovative Pilot Project Experiments:

As described in the Problems and Findings section of this report, candid conversations with youth program leaders found that many have policy requirements - often with federally-funded programs - that limit whom they can serve and that mandate specific eligibility requirements. These compliance requirements are out of step with the exploratory stage where many opportunity youth are at, their expressed need to be heard and not judged, and their difficulties forming trusting relationships with authority figures. As a result, many youth voluntarily disconnect from further engagement or are turned away if they don't meet program eligibility requirements.

The regional scan of programs and organizations also identified examples of youth-focused promising practices that can address these findings. Five agencies represented within the core team built upon successful practices to develop and begin discussing a coordinated series of pilot proposals. They each proposed a new youth-focused approach to address opportunity youth needs in a two-year pilot initiative timeframe. These project leaders also identified an initial alignment strategy built around common youth-focused features and mutual referrals to package these proposals into a cohesive, interrelated series of pilot projects that each use human-centered design processes to assess and learn from youths' experiences and results. Together, these organizations are prepared to begin developing collaborative approaches in response to many of the goals and strategies identified in this report. A pilot initiative to test these approaches will sharpen the collective roadmap and inform the next steps to enlarge the collaborative to include additional participating organizations.

If this pilot network is supported by an ongoing backbone organization and funded over the next two years, these pilot projects can engage an estimated 500+ opportunity youth and younger school-age youth to make faster progress towards career-track employment of their choice. They can also demonstrate progress in testing action steps that include new employer engagement practices and work-based learning, training and deploying youth ambassadors affiliated with multiple programs, and developing an initial network of several dozen youth employment champions with area employers. Ideally, these pilots will coincide with the creation of a backbone organization to support the process of convening, monitoring, and assessing these pilots. However, if these resources are not available, a smaller set of pilot programs may launch within the existing county and school system structures with fewer participants and more modest goals.

In the initial conversation, participating agency managers from DFS, NCS, DARS, and Juvenile Justice agreed to further develop these projects using common youth-focused and human-centered design features outlined below:

- Low barriers to entry, beginning with an exploratory phase in which each youth will have access to a youth employment coach to help them decide which of multiple program options they can choose from.

- Build on the successful practices of current summer youth programs to expand these opportunities year-round.
- Options include access to customized support services to help youth address their specific challenges including disability support, English language acquisition, digital technology, job readiness workshops, paid work experiences and career-specific skills development.
- Incentives that reward continued engagement, such as stipends during training, professional equipment upon program completion, and transportation support if needed to access paid work experiences.
- Rapid expansion of social capital associated with economic mobility, including ongoing coaching services, warm handoff referrals to specialists, introduction to employers, and peer support cohorts.
- “Fading support” empowerment strategy in which youth who demonstrate readiness receive less intense coaching support.
- Opportunities for youth who demonstrate successful progress to be considered for “youth employment ambassador” roles to help advise the collaborative network, support outreach activities, and support the success of other youth like them.

If these proposed pilot initiatives are recommended for immediate funding consideration, program leaders are prepared to accelerate a coordinating process to further refine and align these plans into a cohesive portfolio of pilot projects, including an assessment process to inform the development of a broader collaborative network. This process would begin by applying the TABE guiding principles in further developing this initiative. An estimated two-year collective investment of approximately \$3.0 million can engage and support over 500 opportunity youth and younger in-school youth towards their employment goals. Importantly, the success of several hundred youth within two years can also begin to shift the narrative around opportunity youth and create positive word-of-mouth ripple effects among opportunity youth that can lead to more rapid re-engagement efforts. With the support of the backbone organization in assessing results, these pilots are expected to yield field-tested recommendations that can sharpen and focus action steps on proven strategies and accelerate progress toward addressing more of the proposed goals and strategies within this report.

Appendix E: Excerpts from a National Scan of Opportunity Youth Collaboratives

In several stages from early summer to December 2022, core team members conducted a national scan of opportunity youth collaboratives across the U.S. to address an inquiry question: *What have other regions' opportunity youth collaboratives learned and done that we can adapt for Fairfax County?*

Team members reviewed dozens of reports and case studies, interviewed leaders with several regional collaboratives, and worked in partnership with a national expert from the Forum for Youth Investment. In early Fall 2022, a working group summarized several findings that emerged from this work:

- Within the national network of dozens of regional opportunity youth collaboratives in the U.S., **successful regional collaboratives have made long-term investments in a backbone organization coordinating the regional system** by convening providers and other key stakeholders, reaching out to disconnected youth, and gathering system-level data.
- Among opportunity youth collaboratives, there is a **significant variance in the types of system and program level data that they gather and report on.**
- Nearly all opportunity youth collaboratives nationwide have **actively engaged these youth in shaping youth-focused plans and activities.**
- Several collaboratives' plans and experiences have especially valuable insights and experiences that Fairfax County can learn from, especially [Seattle](#), [Nashville](#), and [Washington D.C.](#)
- Opportunity youth collaboratives often make **strategic investments in a portfolio of high-potential programs and services.**

A later scan of other collaboratives' reports was conducted in December 2022 to learn more about the operations of ongoing collaboratives' backbone organizations and what they have accomplished. Several highlights of interest are summarized below.

- In 2020, six years after Seattle's backbone agency began convening monthly meetings of several dozen practitioners to share promising practices as part of its "open doors" campaign to re-engage opportunity youth, the collaborative reports 2,500 formerly disengaged youth are actively participating in employment-related education programs. The Seattle collaborative also reports rising "stick" rates of continuously engaged youth toward successful completion of their respective programs. (Source: Opportunity Youth Action Plan 3.0 [Report](#) by the nonprofit [Community Center for Community Action](#), 2020.)
- Washington D.C.'s Opportunity Youth Re-Engagement Center has developed a searchable [online platform](#) with information on 37 participating programs and a chat function enabling any youth to immediately connect with a re-engagement specialist.
- Three collaborating anchor organizations in Boston operate summer youth employment programs and organize employment opportunities into a tiered ladder of more advanced opportunities that serves well over 1,000 youth each summer. Youth 14-15 years old begin with highly supported starter opportunities within a network of neighborhood-based nonprofits, with older and more experienced youth eligible for summer employment in city agencies or with

private businesses in summer internships that have the potential to become gateways to new careers.

- Jobs for Maine’s Graduates’ third-party evaluator’s [research report](#) showed progress resulting from their focus on early engagement with youth with disabilities while still in high school, reporting 23% higher employment rates and 49% higher earnings for participants by age 19 compared to a comparison group of similar youth who did not engage while in high school.
- Using a set of common measures piloted across many opportunity youth collaboratives, collective data reported by The Aspen Institute’s network of 35 opportunity youth collaboratives showed a total of 44,000 youth served, with 4,475 youth earning a high school diploma or GED, 3,284 enrolling in postsecondary education, and 3,896 securing new employment. (See [this 2019 report](#) from The Aspen Institute.)