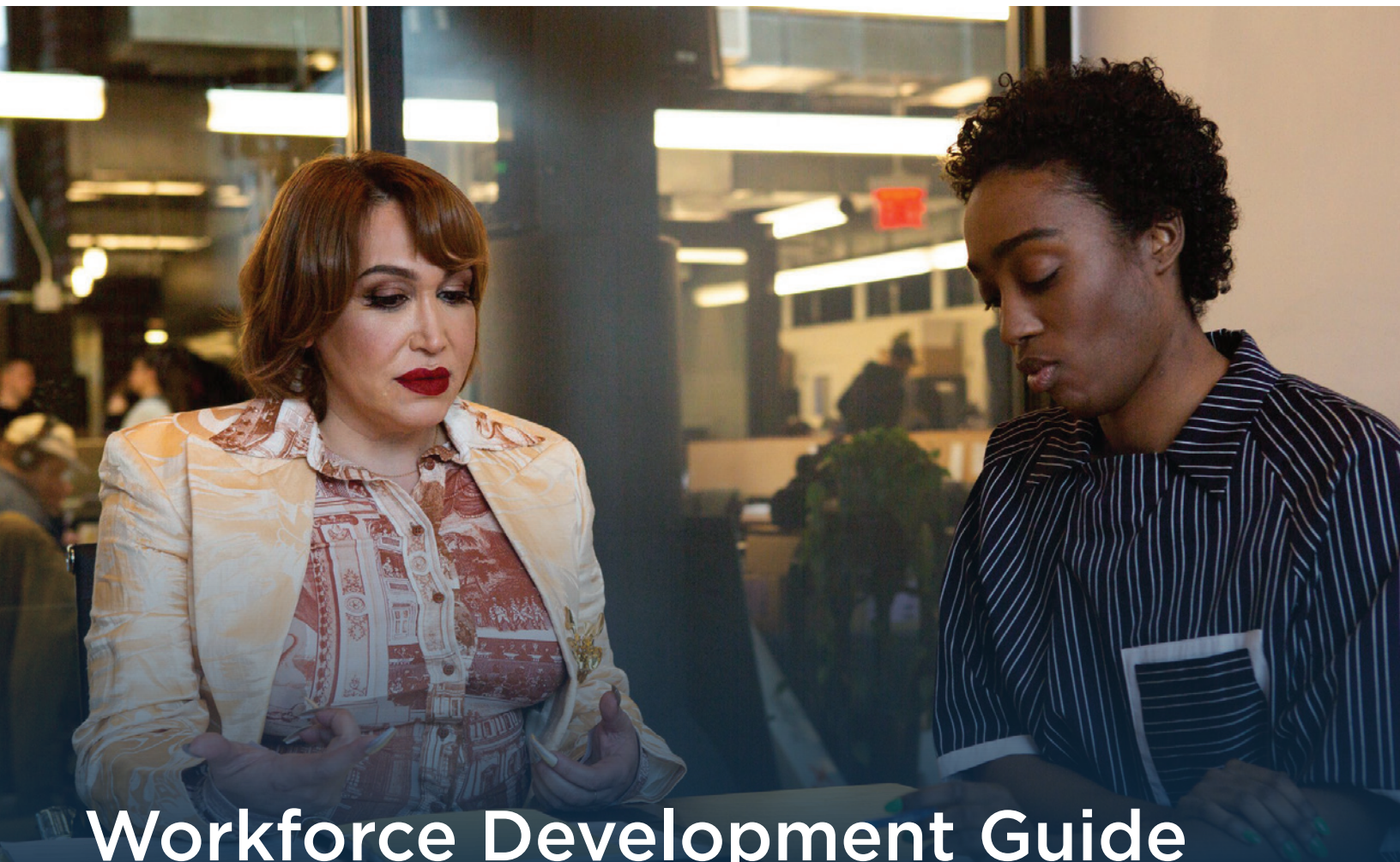




NATIONAL  
**MENTORING**  
RESOURCE CENTER  
A Program of **OJJDP**



# Workforce Development Guide for Opportunity Youth

2022

# INTRODUCTION

**The reengagement of older youth who are unemployed, underemployed, or without the requisite skills to maintain employment has been an investment made by the labor market to meet current needs and emerging trends.**

Youth considered disconnected represent those 16-24 years old, they developmentally are in the emerging adulthood stage, and referred to as “opportunity youth”. They represent approximately 10% of the youth population 16-24, but much of the future workforce who will be required to fill critical jobs that often go unfilled because of a lack of employable skills.

Although the number of disconnected youth began to dissipate over the last decade, the novel coronavirus left this population without the required education or skills and at risk of greater unemployment and disengagement in the years to come.<sup>1</sup> It is a risk of disconnection that can present devastating effects on the individual young adults, their communities, and society as a whole.<sup>2</sup>

Research highlights that opportunity youth benefit from mentorship and holistic support that both teaches and models the skills they are required to exhibit. Workforce development programs can therefore be an important component in beginning relationships with other adults that keep opportunity youth engaged and prepared to contribute to the economy.

Workforce development for opportunity youth should provide mentoring relationships, connections, training, and resources, which these young adults often lack. Many mentoring programs have components of workforce development that are part of what they provide for youth who they are supporting. When youth, for instance, have been connected to the juvenile justice system and are seeking reentry into constructive environments, developing their interests and allowing them to connect with new networks of people is important. Our pilot program and research in 2021 demonstrated 88 percent of opportunity youth maintained their employment past the 90-day period when they had a mentor engaged in their professional journey.<sup>3</sup> Programs that include holistic support provide for the acquisition of social capital for the youth, which transfers into skills that allow the youth to secure and maintain employment.

This guide weaves together the research and real-life experiences of current youth and leadership from workforce development programs. It provides an insight into what can strengthen a program and its impact on the youth they serve, which can then build stronger individuals, families, communities, and can positively contribute to the labor market well into the future.



# CHALLENGES OPPORTUNITY YOUTH FACE

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In literature relating to opportunity youth, they are described as multifaceted older adolescents who may face many barriers that are social, emotional, and physical. The barriers may create trauma that must be addressed so that the youth has a better opportunity to overcome difficulties, which may hinder their future aspirations and work options. Trauma impacts their self-esteem, resiliency, and socioemotional skills.

Recognition of the factors that are most prevalently found as barriers impeding opportunity youth include:

- **Disengagement from educational institutions and resources**, which have led to low numeracy, literacy, socioemotional, and soft skills. An opportunity youth may not have completed high school or have a disability.<sup>4</sup>
- **The financial inability to secure more than minimum wage employment** because of a lack of education and skills. Opportunity youth often represent those from the lowest income households and communities. It is a factor that keeps the youth from supporting and changing the economic station of their families.
- **Housing insecurity/instability** that stem from financial and familial circumstances, which leave the youth transient or without transportation to their program or work site.
- **Familial responsibilities** as young parents or older siblings who are required to care of another. The youth will relay that these responsibilities leave them tired, missing appointments and work shifts. The end result is incomplete program requirements or the loss of a job.
- **Reintegration into society** after juvenile incarceration, which is another factor for some opportunity youth. Although research encourages workforce development as a strategy to develop critical skills and reduce recidivism, youth can still find it difficult to remain engaged in the programming.<sup>5</sup>



**BE MORE CONSIDERATE ...  
REALIZE THESE ARE ACTUALLY  
PEOPLE WHO ARE GOING  
THROUGH STUFF. AND TRAUMA  
IS DIFFERENT ON EVERYBODY  
AND A LOT OF PEOPLE DON'T  
UNDERSTAND THAT ... TRAUMA  
LOOKS SO DIFFERENT ON  
EVERYBODY AND MY TRAUMA  
DOESN'T LOOK LIKE OTHER  
PEOPLE'S TRAUMA.**



# REQUIRED WORKFORCE SKILLS FOR NOW AND THE FUTURE

The skills required of qualified workers include industry specific preparation and this is generally lacking thus leaving STEM and other higher salaried positions unfilled. A survey of employers across industries indicated that the needs for the future workforce will include technological knowledge, but it is the further development of soft skills that mentorship provides, which will play a larger part in youth preparation for employment.<sup>5</sup> In a current climate of instability, employers seek workers who are able to remain flexible and forge relationships that ensure that the tasks at hand are completed. Although there are hard skills (numeracy, literacy, technological) that remain important components of workforce development, opportunity youth must also demonstrate growth mindset, empathy, teamwork, and collaboration.<sup>6</sup>

Soft skills and socioemotional learning play a role in preparing for the acquisition as well as the transition into and for maintaining a job. These can be overlooked components of a youth's preparation and awareness when interacting with new people and situations. Employment can require one to communicate, problem solve, and demonstrate self-control all in a few minutes' time. This means youth through mentoring should practice to communicate and listen verbally and nonverbally. The management of self is an important skill set often overlooked. Additionally, the youth's socioemotional awareness can help them develop a healthy identity and manage their emotions whether in a professional or personal setting.



**COMMUNICATION, I THINK IS THE MAIN (SOFT SKILL), THE INTERPERSONAL LEARNING HOW TO RESPOND TO PEOPLE AND ACKNOWLEDGE PEOPLE ... LOOK THEM IN THE EYE AND BE ABLE TO WORK WITH PEOPLE, ESPECIALLY IN THIS STAGE OF YOUR LIFE.**



# BEST PRACTICES AND PROGRAM INCLUSIONS

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The best practices for an educational and work readiness program engaging opportunity youth often align with current workforce realities and labor needs of employers. Just as importantly is an understanding of the population that you are serving. This requires that you understand each individual youth and their needs, if you seek to successfully transition them into the employment pathway they desire.

In focus groups with opportunity youth, representing [Hopeworks](#) in Camden, New Jersey, and a Jūma program location in California, they indicated their reasons for persisting in their current workforce development programs. The youth shared the characteristics of the staff and the aspects of the programs that have made a positive impression on them.

**MENTORSHIP** (formal and informal). As youth transition into adulthood, a strong mentoring relationship can ensure that program participants return, even after personal setbacks. The mentorship found in informal and formal components of a workforce development program can develop many of the skills required in jobs. Program staff members or on-the-job leadership can provide supportive mentoring relationships.

The relationships that positively impact youth include demonstrations of:

- **Transparency and honesty** about what the youth needs to do and how they are doing in meeting their goals
- **Empathy and acknowledgment** that there may be setbacks but they can be overcome
- **Understanding and motivation to persist** even when difficult situations arise
- **Reflective listening** where the youth can share and be heard even without the interruptions of a solution or unsolicited comments

**COMMUNITY.** A new and influential community of other youth, including program alumni, who are supported by program leadership to reach individual and collective goals is something that a workforce development program provides. Additionally, connections with area businesses and the community at large offers thought partners and networks of people to serve as mentors, offer shadowing and internships, as well as insight into the local workforce. The community of support is an important component in modeling healthy adult relationships where youth can problem solve, collaborate, and learn from one another.



**I AM USED TO MAKING MY OWN SCHEDULE AND DOING WHAT I WANT. I AM HERE TO LEARN SKILLS ... SO BASICALLY, YOU ARE HERE FOR YOURSELF, YOU ARE SHOWING UP FOR YOURSELF EVERY DAY. I HAVE TO GET UP.**



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**INCENTIVES.** Extrinsic motivation to keep working and learning new skills can be perpetuated by monetary gain with paid employment and stipends for participation in programming. Youth earning a livable wage will feel compelled to continue learning and preparing for their future. The absence of paid employment while participating in a workforce development program can create a barrier, especially for those who have children or need assistance in meeting their own everyday needs. The participation in a program should not be either about work or learning. Mitigating the pressure of juggling jobs allow the youth to fully engage in the workforce development program and to spend time being mentored.

There are also non-monetary incentives that youth value in a program's offerings.

- **Opportunities to demonstrate growth and new skills** can be beneficial in allowing confidence to share what they have learned in the program. Public speaking, presentations, or as participants at leadership trainings, events, and community gatherings bolster a youth's sense of belonging.
- **Networking** additionally allows for practicing communication skills and meeting new people that may offer new opportunities.

**WRAP-AROUND SERVICES AND RESOURCES.** Many opportunity youths did not plan to disengage from education or previous job training programs. They share that there were life events that made it difficult to adequately prepare for an emerging adulthood where they would need to have specific skills that would enable them to live independently and potentially care for a family of their own. Therefore, a comprehensive youth-centered approach takes into account daily living needs and addresses them in supportive ways. These needs are holistic and considered not just education but provide resources for healthcare (mental and physical), nutrition, housing, childcare, and transportation.<sup>7</sup> These services should not be considered add-ons but rather required for a program focusing on opportunity youth. The services and resources must also continue to some degree in the early stages of the youth transitioning into the workforce, so that their growth is not impeded by setbacks, which they cannot independently solve.



**THE MOST LIMITING ACCESS POINT (TO PARTICIPATING) ... TRANSPORTATION.**



**I WANT TO BE A BUSINESS OWNER BUT I DON'T KNOW WHAT FIELD TO GO INTO BUT HERE I AM GAINING SKILLS AND GETTING RESOURCES ON THOSE THINGS...AND A MENTOR. IT IS WHAT IS KEEPING ME HERE BECAUSE I DO NOT HAVE MUCH, BUT HERE I HAVE MORE THAN BEFORE.**



# STRENGTHENING IMPACT

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Opportunity youth comprise a population who, without the acquisition of the skills and training that they may lack, could represent a segment of society with limited employment success, which leaves the economy without the workers needed for the twenty-first century. Therefore, when building out your program to address workforce development keep in mind the following, which can strengthen your impact and successes.

**UTILIZE POSITIVE YOUTH DEVELOPMENT.** Positive youth development, “engages youth along with their families, communities, and/or governments so that youth are empowered to reach their full potential. Positive youth development builds skills, assets, and competencies; fosters healthy relationships; strengthens the environment; and transforms systems.”<sup>8</sup>

When interventions and programs include in their structure a positive youth development lens effectiveness increases. The youth can find their sense of belonging and can focus and build on strengths they already possess but may be underutilized as they prepare to go off and care for themselves as independent young adults.

**FOCUS ON THE YOUTH VOICE.** The emerging young adult having a say in decision-making and problem-solving can strengthen your program. Shared decision-making with those you serve allows the programming to be individualized, meeting the diverse and ever-changing needs of the opportunity population. They may express in honest ways what they are looking for and you can in turn provide the support and methods that best help them achieve goals and master new skills. It is also providing the youth with an ability to demonstrate autonomy, decision-making, and communication skills, which are often the soft skills youths lack when they begin a program.<sup>4</sup>

**CONNECT OPPORTUNITY YOUTH WITH OTHERS (MENTORSHIP).** As a theme in the guide, we always return to the effectiveness of mentorship for your program models. It is because engagement is strengthened when youth make positive connections with others. Opportunity youth may have fewer opportunities to build skills and professional networks in educational, employment, or other spheres of their lives.<sup>10</sup> Disengagement happens when a youth feels isolated and when barriers make continuing a program or job difficult. The connections with mentors can help guide the youth through the stages of preparation, job acquisition, and any other challenges they face. As a program inclusion, mentorship is where youth make those connections that last even beyond the end of their formal program.



**YOU ASKING US (THE YOUTH)  
FOR OUR OPINION MAKES US  
FEEL A LITTLE MORE VALUED.**



# CONCLUSION

In this guide, we have provided a resource that encourages models of workforce development, which promote mentorship and holistic development to reengage opportunity youth who seek support to reach new heights. Providing mentorship and support, as a safety net, that extends even past traditional program timelines are a need for youth that require connections to remain engaged. Workforce development is a useful method to change the lives of many young adults who need gainful employment but lack skills that will ensure they can maintain their jobs. Employers are seeking assistance in identifying those prepared to fill jobs that require specific industry requirements but, just as important, they also seek those who are malleable and adjust to change. As you create and adjust your programs, remain aware that the network of resources which you provide are meant to build both the youth participants' skills and that of the labor market. If you provide mentoring, it should allow you to learn from the strengths of the youth, build on those positive traits, and inform you of emerging needs that you can address to build strong, prepared workers and contributors to the community.



## RESOURCES

<sup>1</sup> Measure of America of the Social Science Research Council (July 2021). A Decade Undone: 2021 Update. <https://measureofamerica.org/youth-disconnection-2021/>

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<sup>3</sup> MENTOR (2021). National Mentoring Project: 2020–2021 Summary. <https://www.mentoring.org/campaigns/career-readiness/>

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