

THE WORKFORCE INNOVATION & OPPORTUNITY ACT:

A Better Approach to Serving Youth Facing Barriers to Employment

November 2015, Policy Advocacy Brief

The Workforce Innovation and Opportunity Act of 2014 (WIOA) changes the ways in which states and communities provide employment services to youth through the public workforce system. These changes include raising the eligibility age limit from 21- to 24-years-old and requiring that 75 percent of funds be used to serve out-of-school youth.

These older and out-of-school youth will likely face additional barriers to employment and have different service needs when compared with younger and in school youth. To effectively meet the employment needs of out-of-school youth, states and communities will need to change the type, intensity, and scope of the employment services they offer under WIOA.

There are lessons that workforce boards and their partners can learn from prior efforts to enhance and expand youth summer jobs programming to better serve at-risk, older, and out-of-school youth as well as community-based programs targeting youth who face serious and significant barriers to employment. This brief draws on some of those lessons to offer practical program design recommendations for enhancing WIOA youth services to better accommodate older and out-of-school youth.

HEARTLAND ALLIANCE
NATIONAL INITIATIVES

**WIOA PLANNING & IMPLEMENTATION
TOOLKIT**

Report Information

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Our national initiatives include:

The National Transitional Jobs Network (NTJN)

The National Center on Employment & Homelessness (NCEH)

Black Men Overcoming Barriers & Realizing Employment (B.MORE) Initiative

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Introduction

Like the Workforce Investment Act (WIA) that it replaces, the Workforce Innovation and Opportunity Act of 2014 (WIOA) is one of the principal vehicles through which the federal government supports employment services to youth and young adults. Key changes in the new law call for a dramatic shift in the way workforce boards allocate resources for youth employment services, most notably by requiring that 75 percent of funds now be used to target out-of-school youth, up from 30 percent under WIA.

The changes under WIOA present both challenges and opportunities to workforce boards, program providers, and advocates who wish to ensure that federal investments in youth employment reach those youth who are most in need of assistance in accessing the labor market. It is likely that the older and out-of-school youth that workforce boards will be targeting in response to WIOA will face more barriers to employment than in-school youth, such as low educational attainment, justice system involvement, unstable housing, poverty, and exposure to violence and other trauma. Effectively and appropriately serving these out-of-school youth will require that workforce boards and program providers make changes to the types of employment services they offer, the intensity of those services, and the ways in which those services are delivered.

Fortunately, there are lessons to be learned from enhanced summer youth employment programs, program models targeting chronically unemployed adult jobseekers, and intensive interventions developed by community-based providers that can be used to guide and inform the development of modified programming under WIOA to more effectively serve out-of-school youth.

I. Changes Under WIOA & Opportunities to Better Serve Opportunity Youth

WIOA strengthens the public workforce system’s mandate to serve disadvantaged youth including older and out-of-school youth. In addition to raising the upper age limit for eligibility and requiring that 75 percent of funds be used serving out-of-school youth, WIOA emphasizes “earn and learn” strategies and access to career pathways.

Signed into law in July 2014, WIOA updates the public workforce employment and training programs authorized by the Workforce Investment Act of 1998 (WIA). WIOA prioritizes vulnerable jobseekers, with a special emphasis on meeting the employment and education needs of youth facing barriers to employment.

WIOA significantly increases the share of funding required to be spent on services for out-of-school youth. Under WIOA, not less than 75 percent of available state-wide and local funds must be spent on workforce investment services for young people who are not attending school for reasons including that they are justice-involved, experiencing homelessness, or pregnant or parenting, among others.¹ WIOA also expands the age eligibility for out-of-school youth services from 16 to 21 to 16 to 24. Although older youth could seek services within the adult workforce system, they may be better served through youth-oriented programming that takes their developmental needs into account.²

To help young jobseekers facing barriers to employment earn income, gain real-world skills, and build an employment history, WIOA requires that youth activities include opportunities for summer jobs, internships, pre-apprenticeship programs, and on-the-job training. WIOA also requires that youth programs include additional services such as financial literacy education and entrepreneurial skills training, activities that can help youth manage income, build assets, and pursue their own business ideas. Finally, WIOA encourages the implementation of career pathway approaches to meet youth’s individual education and training needs, earn credentials, and advance their careers.³

WIOA prioritizes vulnerable jobseekers, with a special emphasis on meeting the employment and education needs of youth facing barriers to employment. The majority of available state and local WIOA funds must be spent on young people who are not attending school for reasons including that they are justice-involved, experiencing homelessness, or pregnant or parenting, among others.

For guidance on how to inform and influence the WIOA planning process, see our WIOA Planning & Implementation Toolkit.

WIOA's changes went into effect starting in July, 2015. Because state and local decision makers are chiefly responsible for the development and delivery of new or improved WIOA-funded youth programs in their communities, WIOA's implementation is a key opportunity to help meet the employment needs of youth facing barriers to employment by promoting the use of the employment strategies, best practices, and service delivery principles as described in our [Opportunity Youth Employment Toolkit](#) and by leveraging state and local planning processes to design programs and target services to youth most in need in communities.

State and local workforce boards and other decision makers should embrace the intent of WIOA to reach and serve the youth and young adults most in need of help accessing and succeeding in the labor market. Advocates, program providers, and other stakeholders can help influence the planning and implementation of WIOA at the state and local levels to make sure that the young people facing the greatest barriers to employment receive appropriate and effective employment services through the WIOA-funded system.

WIOA's implementation is a key opportunity to help meet the employment needs of youth facing the greatest barriers to employment. Advocates, program providers, and other stakeholders can help influence WIOA's planning and implementation to make sure these young people receive effective employment services through the public workforce system.

II. Summer Youth Employment & The Promise of Enhanced Service Models

Prior and existing efforts to enhance youth summer jobs programming to better serve older youth, out-of-school youth, and youth experiencing poverty and violence can inform WIOA implementation with promising and evidence-based practices.

The federal government has long supported states and communities in implementing subsidized summer youth jobs programs. As workforce boards look to engage and serve a higher percentage of out-of-school youth under WIOA, there are important lessons to learn from efforts to enhance and extend summer youth programs to better serve older youth, out-of-school youth, and youth facing more barriers to employment.

One Summer Plus: Reducing Youth Violence

New evidence shows that participation in a youth summer jobs program can reduce violent crime among young people from highly disadvantaged neighborhoods—even more than a year after the summer job has ended. Chicago’s One Summer Plus program offered eight weeks of subsidized, part-time summer employment and an adult job mentor to youth facing barriers to employment. A subset of participants also received Social Emotional Learning programming, which is based on the principles of Cognitive Behavioral Therapy and is designed to help youth manage thoughts, emotions, and behavior related to workplace success.

An experimental study evaluating One Summer Plus found that over a 16 month follow up period, violent crime arrests among youth who were offered summer jobs decreased by 43 percent compared to youth who weren’t offered summer jobs.⁴ These impressive results suggest that employment interventions for youth facing barriers can go a long way toward reducing young people’s risk-taking behavior, improving personal and public safety, and decreasing youth justice system involvement. A similar year-round program targeted at out-of-school youth in Chicago, Bridges to Pathways, is undergoing evaluation via the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services’ Subsidized and Transitional Employment Demonstration (STED).

Employment interventions for youth facing barriers can go a long way toward reducing young people’s risk-taking behavior, improving personal and public safety, and decreasing youth justice system involvement.

Subsidized youth employment programs that took place under the American Recovery and Reinvestment Act hold useful lessons for the expansion of out-of-school youth services under WIOA.

American Recovery and Reinvestment Act Post Summer Youth Employment Initiative

The changes in WIOA related to youth employment services parallel some aspects of the expansion of subsidized youth employment that took place under the American Recovery and Reinvestment Act of 2009 (ARRA). Like WIOA, ARRA sought to specifically engage out-of-school youth and extended the upper age limit for eligibility from 21- to 24-years-old. ARRA allocated an additional \$1.2 billion to states for WIA youth employment activities, which many states used to significantly expand subsidized youth employment programming in the summer of 2009. ARRA also allowed states to extend subsidized employment for out-of-school youth aged 18- to 24-years-old for up to six months beyond the summer period. The experiences of these post-summer subsidized employment programs hold useful lessons for the expansion of out-of-school youth services under WIOA.⁵

An evaluation of post-summer youth employment programs under ARRA found important differences in effective employment service delivery for older and out-of-school youth compared with the majority of in-school youth served by typical summer youth employment initiatives. Employers, providers, and participants all found value in the extended period of subsidized work, which allowed for stronger relationship building and skill development. Older out-of-school youth also benefited from a focus on matching participants to private-sector opportunities in growth industries that aligned with their career interests.⁶

There are important differences in effective employment service delivery for older and out-of-school youth compared to most in-school youth served by typical summer youth employment initiatives. For example, older and out-of-school youth benefit from an extended period of subsidized work and being matched with opportunities that align with their career interests.

III. Program Design Recommendations for Workforce Boards & Providers

There are a number of lessons from enhanced summer jobs programs, community-based employment programs serving opportunity youth, and programs serving chronically unemployed adults that can be applied to WIOA services for out-of-school youth.

Enhanced summer jobs programs and community-based employment programs serving opportunity youth or chronically unemployed adults yield a number of best and promising practices in employment services for individuals facing barriers to employment. These lessons can be applied to WIOA services for out-of-school youth.

Provide Paid Employment Experience

Offering paid work experience is an important component of serving out-of-school youth for a number of reasons. For youth with little or no prior work experience, a subsidized job offers an opportunity to build a work history and references, develop successful workplace skills and behaviors experientially, practice and model the lessons of work-readiness training in a real work environment. For older out-of-school youth, the subsidized work experience can be a means of establishing a relationship with an employer with the goal of transitioning to a permanent position. Moreover, since many out-of-school youth come from low-income households, earnings from subsidized employment can be an important supplement to their household's basic needs and stability. Finally, the promise of earned income can be a powerful engagement and recruitment tool for youth who would not otherwise voluntarily seek out services.⁷

Extend Subsidized Work Opportunities Throughout the Year

Older and out-of-school youth need access to employment and earned income year-round, not just during the summer. By extending subsidized employment opportunities to be offered throughout the year, communities can ensure that young out of school jobseekers have the opportunity to work whenever they are ready and in need of employment. Providers also find that engaging young jobseekers for a longer period

To learn about designing and implementing effective subsidized employment programming for jobseekers facing barriers to employment, see our [Transitional Jobs Toolkit](#), which includes guidance on how to ensure that transitional jobs offer [experiential learning and skill development](#) in addition to earned income and a recent work history.

gives them time to develop more skills, develop trust in program staff, and build stronger relationships with employers. Moreover, offering year-round subsidized employment presents an additional value to prospective employer partners who likely have labor demands or job openings at other times of year in addition to summer.⁸

Targeting a higher percentage of out-of-school youth will likely result in a greater need for a range of supportive services to help those youth succeed in employment.

Provide Individualized Employment-Focused Supportive Services

Older and out-of-school youth often face more barriers to successful employment than in-school youth, such as poverty, justice system involvement, or unstable housing. Workforce boards and service providers should prepare for the likelihood that targeting a higher percentage of out-of-school youth will result in a greater need for supportive services such as transportation, child care, work clothing, financial literacy, and counseling, among others. This may require building or strengthening partnerships with agencies that have the capacity to deliver those services as needed.

Align Subsidized Work Experiences With Participant Interests and Employer Needs

Older and out-of-school youth need more than a temporary opportunity to earn pocket money—they need connections to real work experiences that will lead to permanent, unsubsidized employment and a path toward a living wage career. Matching participants with subsidized work opportunities in sectors that align with their interests and have the demand for new workers is more important for out-of-school youth than it is in traditional summer youth employment programs.⁹ This may require engaging new employers in new sectors, and developing new approaches to educating employers about the value of hiring youth as subsidized workers.

Contextualized instruction or sector training combined with subsidized employment can help young jobseekers develop the skills they need to enter into occupation- and sector-specific training.

Focus on Skill Development and Access to Career Pathways

Older and out-of-school youth often need connections to education and training in order to meet the needs of the labor market. Training in occupation- and sector-specific skills can help connect out-of-school youth to increased wages and access to benefits,¹⁰ but many lack the basic skills to qualify for entry. Opportunities to acquire basic skills while working, such as contextualized instruction or sector training combined with subsidized employment, show promise in helping young jobseekers develop workplace skills and academic skills simultaneously. In addition, out-of-school youth typically need to develop “soft skills” such as punctuality, personal presentation, and cooperation with supervisors, which can be supported through worksite monitoring and communication with employers as well as through classroom training.

Provide Support for Retention and Advancement

Out-of-school youth, like other jobseekers with limited experience in the labor market, often need assistance not just with securing employment but also with keeping it. Retention supports such as follow-up calls, retention incentives, alumni groups, and extended supportive services can help new workers remain engaged with program staff and connected to services.

Our Opportunity Youth Employment Toolkit contains a number of case studies of employment programs serving youth facing significant barriers to employment that use these promising practices and principles in their service design and delivery.

In turn, this engagement allows program staff to intervene if a situation arises that could result in a separation from the job. Maintaining open lines of communication with employers can help in this regard as well—be sure to let employers know that program staff members are available to act as intermediaries in the workplace or offer additional coaching or services if necessary.

Implement Promising Program Features for Serving Opportunity Youth Facing Barriers to Employment

As described in our [Opportunity Youth Employment Toolkit](#), there are a number of additional promising practices and program design features currently in use by community-based employment programs that target youth with significant barriers to employment such as homelessness, justice system involvement, and extreme poverty. While not all of these program features are likely to be affordable or necessary for every WIOA-funded youth employment initiative, they all have been identified by a range of expert providers to be effective in serving youth and young adults facing serious and multiple barriers to employment. These program features include:

Extended program engagement:

Building trust, developing relationships, acquiring skills, and addressing barriers all take time. Many successful programs engage youth for longer periods of time compared with adult programs in order to accommodate young people's developmental needs.

Chances to fail and try again:

You can't necessarily expect a young person to be successful in work on their first try. Expecting and planning for mistakes, and creating a structured path for re-entry to services and employment increases the chances of long-term success.

Supportive peer and adult relationships:

By all accounts, a supportive adult relationship is the cornerstone of successful outcomes for disadvantaged young jobseekers—this should inform staffing and professional development. Likewise, facilitating peer support through cohorts, job clubs, and support groups can impact success as well.

Therapeutic approaches:

Using [motivational interviewing](#), trauma informed care, and change theory in an employment context has given employment providers the necessary tools to understand young people's readiness for change, "meet them where they are" with regard to their ability and willingness to work, and help them overcome ambivalence and commit to employment.

Graduated stress and responsibility:

Youth with little or no prior work experience may benefit from gradually increasing levels of responsibility as they acquire skills and learn the expectations of the workplace. Some programs start youth working in a social enterprise or work crew setting in which the work environment is more supportive and controlled, and then move them on to positions with private sector employers as they demonstrate work readiness.¹¹

Conclusion

The consequences of youth unemployment are severe and can impact the rest of a young person's life. The changes in WIOA intended to better serve youth who are not engaged in work or school are timely and necessary. As states and communities plan to dedicate 75 percent of their WIOA resources to out-of-school youth, it is critical to understand the ways in which services will need to look different in order to provide true opportunity.

States and communities need to make meaningful changes to the way in which young jobseekers are served by public systems by identifying evidence-based and promising practices and making a commitment to implement them—not just to comply with the requirements of the new law, but to accept their imperative to ensure that all young people have the opportunity to access quality work to support themselves and participate fully in a prosperous economy.

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