

Executive Summary

There are more than 6.7 million young people (ages 16 to 24) in the nation that are both out of school and out of work, and, therefore, are not in positions to create self-sufficient lives and become assets to their communities (White House Council for Community Solutions, 2012). These youth, known as "Opportunity Youth" (OY), are a source of untapped potential. In order to better understand the landscape of OY in Denver, Colorado this report was commissioned by Rose Community Foundation and the Denver Opportunity Youth Collaborative (OY Collaborative). The following is a summary of the findings included in the full-length report.

Who: Opportunity Youth face multiple significant challenges *and* have high aspirations for overcoming them. In Denver County, there are approximately 73,508 youth, ages 16 to 24 (U.S. Census, 2010). Applying Burd-Sharps & Lewis' estimate of a 13.4% disconnection rate, there are an estimated 9,850 OY in Denver. To supplement this profile, researchers heard directly from opportunity youth. In focus groups, it was clear that the barriers from each individual's past affected their success in education, employment stability, and relationships (e.g., involvement in the criminal justice system, lack of skills, parenting responsibilities). Despite these challenges, OY expressed aspirations for completing education, attaining employment, and improving relationships with families and children. When asked what is holding them back from success, approximately 40% said parenting, 30% said criminal record, and 25% said that getting help is too hard.

Where: Denver's OY are diverse and found throughout the city. Opportunity Youth are found geographically across Denver, with discrete pockets of concentration of large numbers and/or large percentages of youth aged 16-19 in census tracts across the city. While data do not address the 20–24 year olds that are OY, they show where outreach and engagement should focus. This also highlights the difficulty of using current data for this purpose (i.e., census age brackets are not connected through age 24 and the data collected herein cannot fully determine *where exactly* OY are in Denver—this is a mobile population). In addition, particular youth "subgroups" are key for identification and outreach purposes, as they are more at risk of becoming OY (i.e. youth currently/formerly in foster care, homeless youth, immigrant youth, youth currently/formerly in the juvenile/criminal justice system, LGBT etc.).

How: Pathways to education for Denver OY exist but increased access and quality are needed. The "pathways schools" at Denver Public School (DPS) are an alternative model for youth to attain a high school diploma or General Educational Development certificate (GED), and in some cases, begin technical career training. However, the formal K–12 education system limits access to students after age 20; as a result, OY aged 21+ pursue other options to finish their K-12 education, such as institutions (e.g., Emily Griffith Technical College, Community College of Denver), community-based organizations (e.g., Mile High Youth Corps) or government agencies (e.g., Office of Economic Development).

Why: Pathways to employment for Denver OY are limited. Another critical stage for OY is securing stable employment. OY often face added barriers to their entry into the workforce

(e.g., education levels, lack of work experience, social/personal challenges such as learning disabilities). The pursuit of middle-skill jobs (jobs that require more than a high school diploma but not a four-year degree) with a high likelihood of job openings in the next decade (e.g., electricians, nursing assistants, licensed practical nurses, vocational nurses) is one promising pathway (National Skills Coalition, 2011). While many organizations address the employment needs of OY, the pathways linking these groups to OY are not strong enough to ensure or secure OY employment. A current gap is the lack of “formal connection” between those serving OY and employers and apprenticeship programs. This finding was also discovered by Jobs for the Future, which visited Denver in January 2014 to conduct an “asset map” for the OY Collaborative (The Aspen Institute, 2014). It is imperative that Denver providers to OY also provide wraparound services, including OY’s need for connections to caring adults (e.g., mentors, counselors) and other support services (e.g., housing, transportation, mental health care, obtaining identification).

Future Action: Creating networks and systems for service providers promises to enhance the quality, continuity and efficacy of available supports. The environmental scan identified more than 180 organizations that serve Denver OY through education, workforce development and/or other basic services. However, despite the fact that these organizations address the many needs of OY, no system exists to coordinate services. Therefore, there is both a significant opportunity *and* a critical need to nurture a system that fully addresses the challenges of working with this population. While many of these organizations were not created to address OY, the needs of OY are central to their work, as seen by the fact that 68.6% of surveyed organization believe that “working with OY is a direct part of their organization’s mission and goals.” The following recommendations are based on the findings of the environmental scan and include:

- (1) Create an OY provider network that develops multiple points of entry into a single system and builds formalized linkages through interagency agreements;
- (2) Develop a shared vision for the OY network of the ultimate outcomes as well as metrics and measures of success to advocate for policy measures to support OY*;
- (3) Connect youth to "satellite hubs" via engaged staff with an OY-centered focus;
- (4) Strengthen connections for OY to the workforce*
- (5) Assemble sustainable financing for the system; *
- (6) Build the capacity of OY-serving organizations;
- (7) Establish a mechanism to collect ongoing youth input and create processes for incorporating this input into ongoing program improvement*; and
- (8) Advocate for policy measures that support OY.

Based on the research presented herein, there is strong reason to believe that creating partnerships among organizations that work with OY, and supporting connections among services through a “collective impact” approach, may best harness the exceptional existing services, while helping to ensure that more OY in Denver reach their full potential.