



**RECRUITING OPPORTUNITY YOUTH:**  
UNLOCKING THE FULL POTENTIAL OF NATIONAL SERVICE

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## ABOUT THE ASPEN INSTITUTE IMPACT CAREERS INITIATIVE

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The Impact Careers Initiative is a research program that seeks to determine how to most effectively empower the Millennial generation to solve the world's greatest challenges.

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## INTRODUCTION

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Service to the Nation is an exceptionally powerful force for good. Service helps to improve our nation's communities, to better the lives of those who serve and are served, and to develop leaders who are more committed and equipped to tackle our nation's greatest challenges. National service was first introduced in 1933 when Franklin Delano Roosevelt launched the Civilian Conservation Corps (CCC) as part of the New Deal effort to re-invigorate the nation during the Great Depression. Through the participation of 3 million young men, the CCC preserved the United State's most valuable forests and natural assets, provided employment to those struggling in a time of national challenge, and advanced the country's moral spirit by deepening the ideals of citizenship and collective responsibility.

In the spirit of the Civilian Conservation Corps, the U.S. government created and continues to sponsor AmeriCorps. AmeriCorps currently has programs that build capacity, develop leaders through residential and team-based service, and support local service programs that are already functioning in various communities. AmeriCorps is certainly the most centralized service program, but there are countless local service programs unaffiliated with AmeriCorps as well.

Frequently, however, the benefit of participation in national service does not reach those who would benefit most: Opportunity Youth. Opportunity Youth are young adults in struggling communities who are disconnected from education and employment. This paper documents techniques that are working for national service organizations that recruit this subset of talent into their programs, as well as recommendations for furthering this recruitment effort. We use the term "Opportunity Youth" to describe 16-24 year-olds who, while disconnected from more formal systems, have knowledge, skills, and abilities that are needed in service work and come from the communities in which these programs operate. We conducted interviews with practitioners, representatives from national service organizations, organizers, and service participants in order to understand the methods that are working, key challenges to recruitment, and ideas for new approaches.

National service has proven to be a uniquely effective pathway to education and employment for Opportunity Youth. Even more importantly, it has provided an opportunity for deepening the self-activation, dignity, self-respect, and grit that are so essential for living a meaningful life. It is a well-supported fact that serving early propels youth into lives of service—building a cadre of more engaged citizens, safer communities, and a stronger nation. Not only do Opportunity Youth have much to gain from participation in service, but they also have an incredible amount to contribute. Opportunity Youth possess a wealth of skills and experience that can increase the success of service work. These skills include the ability to effectively operate in the communities in which service organizations are based by fostering the restructuring of systems of injustice with sensitivity, adeptness, and engagement that cannot always be replicated by outsiders. Opportunity Youth are uniquely positioned to engage with service in ways that are an enormous benefit to communities.

Though FDR's original national service corps aimed to include Opportunity Youth, over time some national service programs have largely strayed from this aim, losing the advantages of engaging the 6.7 million Opportunity Youth in the United States today. It is important to note, however, that some programs have remained true to their original aim of incorporating Opportunity Youth, including the Service and Conservation Corps, which grew directly out of the Civilian Conservation Corps, and Youth Build, which grew out of the Anti-Poverty Program. Yet, be it because of funding challenges, policy realities, negative perceptions, or a lack of shared strategies, many organizations have struggled with or altogether abandoned the effort to engage Opportunity Youth in their work. On the other hand, many are succeeding with remarkable results. This is a unique moment in the service movement. The conversation about national service has been renewed—from The Aspen Institute Franklin Project to President Obama's My Brother's Keeper Initiative to new start-ups dedicated to reinventing national service for the millennial generation. Many of these efforts are explicitly targeted at engaging Opportunity Youth and have identified promising strategies for doing so.

Our ambition is not that every young person in service to the nation comes from challenging backgrounds. Our vision is that young people from all backgrounds serve the nation and collectively solve important public problems together. We believe Opportunity Youth are essential to the mission and success of service organizations, and that their underrepresentation in national service is a loss not only for Opportunity Youth but also for service organizations and the communities in which they serve. We firmly believe that the barriers to successful recruitment and retention of Opportunity Youth are surmountable on the organizational level.

Our objectives in this paper are to:

- 1 present organizational practices that are essential for engaging Opportunity Youth,
- 2 provide tactical strategies for recruiting Opportunity Youth to national service, and
- 3 share effective practices for retaining and activating Opportunity Youth in service programs.

We hope that these recommendations will be useful for organizations seeking to strengthen their engagement with Opportunity

## OPPORTUNITY YOUTH & NATIONAL SERVICE

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Given the many advantages of service programs, it might be asked why more Opportunity Youth are not already enrolling in them. One reason is that Opportunity Youth are often disconnected from recruiting pipelines and learn about service programs mainly through word-of-mouth. In fact, this group has often been referred to as “disconnected youth.” Service may not appear to be the most obvious path to reengagement when these youth face family responsibilities, the need to earn money to support themselves, or the need return to school. The Great Recession and slow economic recovery have exacerbated disconnection among youth. Currently at least 6.7 million youth ages 16-24 are disconnected from school and work—one in six young people in the U.S.<sup>1</sup> Though often well connected on social media and in their communities, those Opportunity Youth who are deeply disconnected are often unreached by service program recruiting efforts.

In addition to the difficulties of reaching and recruiting Opportunity Youth to service, there are a number of additional systemic and organizational challenges that lead to program policies unintentionally excluding Opportunity Youth. These include dollars tied to retaining Opportunity Youth in national service programs, requirements for full-time service in order to gain education awards, and additional resources and support systems needed to effectively integrate Opportunity Youth into service programs. It is also important to note that there is inadequate funding for national service despite the passing of the Edward M. Kennedy Serve America Act, which calls for increasing AmeriCorps positions in stages to 250,000 by 2017. According to the New York Times Editorial Board (2014), “...the authorized ramp-up has not occurred...This year, fewer than 80,000 positions were funded; the goal is 200,000.”<sup>2</sup> While this report focuses specifically on increasing the number of Opportunity Youth in national service programs rather than strategies for increasing support and funding, it is key to note that this remains a significant barrier to fully including all of America’s youth in service.

Despite these barriers, we remain optimistic about the potential for reconnecting Opportunity Youth through service. Though Opportunity Youth are disconnected, they have an enormous desire to reconnect and better their lives through opportunities for advancement. It is for this very reason that a recent wave of advocates has called for a shift in vocabulary away from the previously accepted “Disconnected Youth,” a label that emphasizes the problem, and toward “Opportunity Youth,” a label that emphasizes the potential. Opportunity Youth are indeed being noticed more and more for their potential and enthusiasm for attaining success. According to Bridgeland and Milano (2012), almost three quarters of Opportunity Youth are “very confident or hopeful” that they will be able to “achieve their goals in life” despite hardship, and only 7% say they are worried or pessimistic.<sup>3</sup> An overwhelming majority (86%) value having a good family life and most say they want to make a difference in the lives of others.<sup>4</sup> When asked what they wanted to be when they grew up, they shared big dreams for their future careers including police officers, teachers, doctors or joining the military.<sup>5</sup> More than half are actively seeking full-time work, and nearly two-thirds eventually obtain a diploma or GED, both indications of the vast proportion of Opportunity Youth who attempt to reconnect.<sup>6</sup>

1 White House Council for Community Solutions (2012), “Our Priorities,” <http://www.serve.gov/?q=site-page/white-house-council-community-services>.

2 New York Times Editorial Board (2014), “Broken Promises on National Service.” *The New York Times*. <http://www.nytimes.com/2014/08/31/opinion/sunday/broken-promises-on-national-service.html>.

3 John Bridgeland and Jessica Milano (2012), “Opportunity Road: The Promise and Challenge of America’s Forgotten Youth,” Civic Enterprises & America’s Promise Alliance, 3.

4 *Ibid.*, 4.

5 *Ibid.*, 3.

6 MDRC (2013), “Building Better Programs for Disconnected Youth,” [http://www.mdrc.org/sites/default/files/Youth\\_020113.pdf](http://www.mdrc.org/sites/default/files/Youth_020113.pdf).

In addition to confidence and hopefulness for the future, Opportunity Youth overwhelmingly take ownership for their future and success. Over three quarters believe that getting an education and a job is their responsibility and that their future depends on their own effort. Despite the many obstacles they face, only 23% blame the social challenges outside of their control.<sup>7</sup> Perhaps most surprising is the fact that these youth do not view themselves as “disconnected.” As the White House Council for Community Solutions (WHCCS) states, “They have energy and aspirations, and are eager to work with local leaders to develop solutions that improve their lives, benefit their community, and help youth nationwide.”<sup>8</sup> The 2010 PACE report “Civic Pathways Out of Poverty and Into Opportunity” explains further: “Young people from low-income and historically marginalized communities have the interest and passion to serve and to commit to a life of engagement in their communities, particularly where that engagement involves issues impacting them directly and is of intellectual interest.”<sup>9</sup> Opportunity Youth are ready and eager to engage in the work of improving their lives and the lives of those around them, and we are confident that with the right support Opportunity Youth will be able to attain the success they are seeking.

While institutional barriers remain, dedicated actions on the organizational level can be particularly effective in responding to the challenges Opportunity Youth face; waiting for the perfect system to be in place before taking action would deprive communities and organizations of the opportunity to begin to engage our youth to make a difference.

## RECOMMENDATIONS

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In interviews with participants, practitioners, and policy makers in the service field, three key areas emerged that organizations should concentrate on in order to reach and engage Opportunity Youth: organizational structures, recruitment strategies, and retention strategies. While we initially set out to document recruitment strategies alone, it became clear that there are key practices that make effective outreach more plausible. For example, keeping youth engaged beyond their initial application and participation is contingent upon a carefully cultivated culture of respect that exists from the first interaction.

While many of the following recommendations are aimed at local organizations with a community focus, there is a role for national organizations to play as well. In particular, national groups can aggregate best practices and tools – including funding opportunities – to share with their affiliates. Organizations working at the policy level can secure resources while promoting the programmatic flexibility that is needed in order to work with Opportunity Youth. Last, funders have a role in providing incentives to accelerate the uptake of these strategies, including the sharing of best practices and peer learning.

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<sup>7</sup> BridgeLand and Milano (2012), 4.

<sup>8</sup> White House Council for Community Solutions (2012), “Our Priorities.”

<sup>9</sup> PACE: Philanthropy for Active Civic Engagement (2010), “Civic Pathways Out of Poverty and Into Opportunity,” 11.





ORGANIZATIONAL STRUCTURES



## ORGANIZATIONAL STRUCTURES

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To ensure Opportunity Youth are not only identified and recruited, but are wholly engaged, interviewees repeatedly pointed to certain conditions that should be in place:

### EMPLOY STAFF WHO REFLECT THOSE YOU WANT TO RECRUIT

While not every staff member of an organization needs to come from the community served or from a background that includes struggle or disengagement, it is extremely helpful if a good portion of the staff does fit the profile of the youth you want to recruit. In one interviewee's words, "If you have community-based staff who live in the community or are from the community...then recruitment is easy."

Staff from the community are more likely to know where Opportunity Youth socialize, which organizations are working with them and how, where Opportunity Youth are most likely to hear about service programs, and how to gain the trust of youth who have often been let down by the very systems with which national service can be associated. This not only helps with recruitment, but also builds organizational credibility in the community and increases the likelihood Opportunity Youth will perform and stay in their new roles. This is particularly true if they feel represented on an organizational level. As one interviewee put it, "The first thing you have to be accountable to is making sure that you build a diverse team at every level—from the executive level down. That's what communities see and respond to, and partners get excited about."

To further this point, interviewees cited internal benefits of having staff from the community. Approximately 83% of nonprofits that partnered with Public Allies last year reported that the ally's background alone helped them improve their services. One interviewee noted that, "relevance is a huge core capacity that a lot of nonprofits miss. I define that as having people who directly understand the issues from their families, lives, and neighborhoods, the issues you work on, the problems you're trying to solve, and the people you serve." There is power in building a staff that reflects the composition of a community.



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## OFFER A LONG-TERM VALUE PROPOSITION

Opportunity Youth may not always respond to the language of “service.” Many of these youth have had to grow up far too young, and are burdened by present economic and other urgent concerns. The message must be one that provides a compelling value proposition. What’s more, a long-term vision of their future is key to acquiring their buy-in. A value proposition that includes a GED or high school diploma, future employment opportunities with family-sustaining pay, and access to programs for further education and skills development, allows youth to connect service to their immediate needs while allowing them to tap into their desire to make a difference in the lives of others. This message should be what organizations lead with, not simply the short-term opportunity to receive a stipend and/or educational award. Jason Patnosh, Associate Vice President, Partnership and Resource Development at the National Association of Community Health Centers pointed out that,

- ☞ The appeal that becomes the biggest draw is number one, mobilizing the program as an entryway into a longer-term career and job. Do a year of service, and yes, we’ll provide you with a stipend and some educational money, but you can then use that for the local Community College and get your certification, and potentially have a job here after. That window of opportunity for the young people is what draws them in the most.

Another described the importance of long-term opportunity differently,

- ☞ When a disadvantaged youth comes to one of our programs, they come because they think they can get an education and learn some job skills or earn something while they’re doing it. They don’t come because they want to do national service. After they have been there, they understand that that’s the real important part, and a lot of them go into public service jobs and non-profit jobs. Most say they want to do careers that help people, but that’s not why they come.



A VALUE PROPOSITION that includes a GED or high school diploma, future employment opportunities with family-sustaining pay, and access to programs for further education and skills development, allows youth to connect service to their immediate needs while allowing them to tap into their desire to make a difference in the lives of others.

## ENSURE INCLUSIVE VALUES IN GOVERNANCE

Before outreach to Opportunity Youth begins, it's imperative to the success of all programs targeting Opportunity Youth to ensure the board and leadership understand the inherent value of including Opportunity Youth and are fully supportive of their inclusion. Dorothy Stoneman, Founder and CEO of YouthBuild pointed out that,

- ☞ Communities want to help themselves. They don't want people to just parachute in from the outside and come and think that they have the answers and they're coming and giving charity and helping them, and they're not of them. The outside folks want to help, but they don't live there and aren't really familiar with the culture. When you empower people in the community both to get paid and to make things better in their own communities - not only through work but through implementing their own ideas - there's a tremendously positive unifying response. There's no downside to it whatsoever.

Ensuring that organizational leadership, boards, and funders are fully on board with this sentiment will lead to greater success in recruiting and retaining Opportunity Youth.

## LEARN FROM EFFECTIVE PRACTICES

Whenever possible, and especially for organizations who have not yet begun to recruit and involve Opportunity Youth, going on site visits and working closely with organizations who are already doing this well can be a great way to see best practices in action. Steve Patrick, Executive Director of The Aspen Forum for Community Solutions at the Aspen Institute, as well as the co-founder and former Executive Director of the Rocky Mountain Youth Corps (RMYC), based in Taos, NM stressed, "It's really worth doing a set of site visits if you want to do this. I would not start working with Opportunity Youth until you get a sense of what that entails and who's doing it well...We didn't start until we saw the best of the best in the corps world."

Many of those interviewed for this paper mentioned the lack of coordinated spaces for sharing what works well at the local level. They stressed the importance of creating more opportunities to share and learn, especially when it comes to reaching and working with Opportunity Youth. Some go as far as finding financial support to do that—another role the national groups can play. One interviewee noted,

- ☞ We try to push all of our corps to program for this population, so to the extent that a corps is not serving Opportunity Youth we sometimes run grant programs that help them start these kinds of activities within their own programs. That's a good way to do it because they already have the network, the back room, the financing, the HR. So current programs moving into this area is a good way to do it, and in that case best practices are important because they haven't worked with this population before.

An organization increases its chances of retaining Opportunity Youth by leveraging existing resources and taking advantage of external support.



A close-up photograph of a person's hands wearing brown, textured work gloves. The hands are positioned to hold a wooden handle, which is visible at the bottom left. The person's face is partially visible in the background, looking downwards. The text "RECRUITMENT STRATEGIES" is overlaid in white, uppercase letters, centered horizontally and slightly above the middle vertically. A thin white horizontal line is positioned directly below the text.

**RECRUITMENT STRATEGIES**



## RECRUITMENT STRATEGIES

Once the elements above are in place, recruitment becomes “easy,” in the words of one interviewee, as mentioned earlier. While potential strategies should be discussed and decided upon with staff from the community, and ideas generated with the assistance of participants and alumni for each unique program, some key strategies did emerge in terms of where, who, and how to reach Opportunity Youth.

It is important to note that the term “service” can have a negative connotation amongst Opportunity Youth. It is often associated with punishment—as in community service following an interaction with the criminal justice system—and can dissuade involvement. When thinking about recruiting Opportunity Youth, it is worth focusing on outcomes and goals and to be especially sensitive of the language used.

Chris Gates, President of Sunlight Foundation and former Executive Director of PACE, Philanthropy for Active Civic Engagement described it well:

- ☞ ‘Service’ can be a problematic word...Some of the young people we talked to said then they hear the word ‘service’, their first reaction was to say ‘what did I do wrong, why am I being punished?’ We’re not going to change it right away, but it is worth noting and being aware that it is a struggle. If some people view service as a punishment like community service, and others view it as a big noble thing, it’s probably going to be tough to create a movement around that word.

Similarly, the word “volunteering” can have different meanings amongst different populations. As one interviewee pointed out,

- ☞ All the research says that what some people call volunteering, other people – and particularly in the African American and Latino community – people call it ‘living life the way you should live your life.’ When you help out your neighbor or your family or look after your neighbor’s child, you don’t call yourselves volunteers, you call yourselves people who are leading a good life.

It is important to have a sense of which language works best for specific audiences. It signals the organization knows and has a place for those they are attempting to recruit.

### GO WHERE OPPORTUNITY YOUTH ARE

Many of those interviewed mentioned the importance of physically being where Opportunity Youth spend their time. This includes recreation centers, One Stop Career Centers (which have been designed to provide a full range of assistance to job seekers under one roof), middle and high schools, and other organizations working with Opportunity Youth, including soup kitchens, halfway houses, etc. The idea is to make sure Opportunity Youth see representatives from the program regardless of whether they are looking for an opportunity to serve. Community leaders associated with , a network of enterprising black male leaders, hold a 300-man march every Friday evening during the summer through the streets of Baltimore so that community members, youth, and young men in particular, can see that there is a presence of people who care about them their community. Similar efforts could be made to reach out to Opportunity Youth in communities across the country.

### USE WORD-OF-MOUTH AND TRADITIONAL ADVERTISING METHODS

Above all, we heard from almost every interviewee that word-of-mouth is the number one way to recruit Opportunity Youth. In the absence of Opportunity Youth alumni, however, we heard from both participants and those successful at recruiting Opportunity Youth that conventional advertising methods (e.g., billboards) also work well. This can include radio and newspaper ads, which are seen not only by Opportunity Youth, but also by their families who are influential in their lives. Social media was also mentioned, and in particular social media events or Twitter chats around a specific event, cause or holiday that resonate with Opportunity Youth. One participant mentioned that if resources allowed, a billboard advertisement would be a helpful way for youth who are not connected to traditional media to get a sense of the opportunity to be had.

On-site application assistance was suggested as a way to guarantee that youth feel engaged and supported from the get-go. By eliminating the extra step of having to find the application online or at the program offices, organizations guarantee themselves a wider pool of Opportunity Youth.



### BUILD STRATEGIC COMMUNITY PARTNERSHIPS

Finally, connecting with key partners in a community is essential for locating and reaching Opportunity Youth; in particular, judges, probation officers, lawyers and other members of the juvenile justice system. Youth groups and organizers have access to youth who are already engaged. Former staff and alumni who still work in the community are great resources as well. Interviewees emphasized the trust needed to build these relationships. One noted that, “this is about connectivity – building relationships with individuals within partner organizations. It’s important to know that a young person won’t be demoralized when you connect them to another group.”

Public schools are an especially salient part of Opportunity Youths’ lives, but can be difficult for organizations to partner with even when catering to the very same students. Leila Bailey Stewart, Managing Director of National Recruitment at City Year, Inc. mentioned,

- It’s becoming more difficult for our high school partners to promote service because they’re more focused on getting students into college. The value of a service year between high school and college isn’t as clear to schools even though they have evidence that folks will continue in school after they complete their service.

With the growing focus on college as the ultimate goal for youth, compounded with families’ view of education as the “way out” of bad neighborhoods or poverty, it is becoming more difficult to convince educators and parents that service can be beneficial to youth. Continuing to communicate the benefits of service to community partners is important in order to maintain both strong relationships and trust that youth will only benefit from participation in a service program.



**RETENTION**

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## RETENTION

Many of the strategies for retaining Opportunity Youth in service programs will begin with a thoughtful organizational structure and respectful recruitment practices as described above. However, there are some key interactions and practices that are good to keep in mind in order to maximize the success of Opportunity Youth involvement in any organization. As Charlie Rose, Senior Vice President & Dean at City Year, Inc. told us, “It’s not just about recruiting, but about making sure that they can succeed in our program.”

It is important to note that similar to any segmented group of the population, there is a continuum when it comes to Opportunity Youth. Opportunity Youth are not a monolithic block, nor will they conform to a one-size-fits-all solution. Programs need to decide what level of support they are able to provide and move forward with the best services they can offer. For example, an organization with little or no access to counseling and social work services, or tutoring and educational support for GED and diploma attainment, should probably not seek to recruit youth coming out of the juvenile justice system. Similarly, organizations that are equipped, such as YouthBuild programs or Service and Conservation Corps, should perhaps be pointing youth who are, in the words of one interviewee, “ready for acceleration,” towards the higher academic-level service programs such as City Year or Public Allies. We will talk more about this continuum and how to better take advantage in the next section on collective impact.

In all cases, it is important to think of the experience of each participant from his or her first interaction with a program. As mentioned earlier, Opportunity Youth are often treated with little respect by the systems they have previously been exposed to. It is vital to reinforce a sense of worth and importance, not only to the organization, but also to their communities and society at large.

### TREAT OPPORTUNITY YOUTH WITH RESPECT

Respect must permeate the process from the first interaction to the last with Opportunity Youth. Dorothy Stoneman put it, “They’re used to being disrespected. Whether that’s in their high school, through the criminal justice system, or if they’ve simply been home taking care of a child – they often don’t feel welcome and respected by the mainstream of society.”

Staff at every level of the organization should believe deeply in this sentiment and treat youth as people deserving of attention and esteem. This respect extends beyond the organization as well. One interviewee pointed out that,

- ☞ A lot of Opportunity Youth have never had an opportunity to affect people or places positively, so they can feel good about something that they did. That it’s in their own community, and that their own community can see them do it is particularly great...Many of them have been told all their lives that they’re troubled, they’re unappreciated, so to be able to do something that is recognized as positive and appreciated is really something that is exciting for them.

### INTERVIEW FOR CHARACTER

When asked what they look for in successful service candidates, interviewees listed several characteristics that extend beyond academic requirements. For example, one interviewee noted that, “You have to evaluate character and credibility more than credentials. For us, we’re looking at their passion and desire, commitment, work ethic... The key thing is that credentials are helpful, but they’re not the driver.” While some interviewees felt constrained by their mission and goals to focus on those already enrolled in college or looking to complete a gap year before heading to college, many mentioned that standards should focus on intention, dedication, and long-term passion to serve. As Leila Bailey Stewart pointed out, “We’re looking for diverse groups, so experience working with kids, working on teams or in a team environment. We’re looking both for a desire to serve students and experience to be empathetic; people who are passionate about impacting change.”

A college education and various experience levels are becoming equivalent in value when one is seeking certain jobs. The world of service has an opportunity to validate this equivalency by embracing and continuing the experience of Opportunity Youth.



## IMPLEMENT A THOUGHTFUL ORIENTATION PROCESS

A clear orientation program is a crucial step in ensuring that Opportunity Youth understand the depth of the commitment they are entering into, as well as the depth of respect and support they will receive in the program. As Jason Patnosh asserted,

- Any of our sites will tell you up front that it's a big challenge during orientation. [Opportunity Youth] have to show up on time as a training requirement, they have to learn how to dress properly, how to interact with others—in particular those who haven't been in a professional setting before. It doesn't always work out from the start. Those who figure it out from the beginning are more successful.

Orientation is also a way to level the playing field. As one interviewee who runs a program with both college grads from within and outside the community, as well as Opportunity Youth, noted,

- We've had issues among college grads who feel training is too remedial. The argument we make back is: then you're not getting the program because if you want to be an inclusive leader, it's not about you, it's about the group. If other people need more of something you already have, then your job in that group is to be a support and guide, not a complainer who already knows how to do that and 'this is beneath me.' If you feel that way, you're going to have a really hard time working in communities throughout your life. There's a lot you probably don't know that somebody's going to have to get remedial on you for.

## DEVELOP ADAPTIVE PROGRAMMING

Programs should be responsive to the needs of all participants. While some federal funding imposes strict standards and programming requirements, to the extent possible programs should put feedback systems in place in order to adapt and respond to requests, ideas, and complaints offered by participants. While this seems simple, many interviewees struggled with implementing changes under strict federal restrictions. Conversely, some participants felt that there were not adequate systems in place to ensure that feedback was welcome and heard, and that it would be handled and treated with sincerity. One participant remarked that,

- The biggest thing these organizations can do would be to hear the feedback from people working for them, including using a suggestion box if you can't do one-on-one...If people know they won't get reprimanded or punished for sharing opinions, and if they see actions being taken as a result, then [it would] make it easier for people to get through the year.

Adaptive programming also applies to the length of service programs. Ten months of full-time service is not feasible for every program participant. While some interviewees managed to figure out how to piece together multiple funding sources and opportunities, this remains a barrier for many Opportunity Youth. Finding ways to not only vary service commitment lengths, but types of service available strengthen an organization's ability to respond to participants. For example, one practitioner noted that while they have a demand for other types of vocational work, including car mechanics, their funding restricts them to construction work. They have worked and successfully found other sources of funding because they have seen much greater success with Opportunity Youth when they can offer a range of service and job training opportunities.

## SUPERVISE AS A MENTOR

Mentorship as a style of supervision is a promising strategy for Opportunity Youth retention and overall success within service programs and beyond. This can include developing a personal relationship, or be as simple as providing extra attention where they may not usually receive it. One interviewee noted that she often has to train site supervisors to adapt to this need,

- Some of the stuff is really at the level of check-in's and support they'll need beyond executing a work plan. You need to provide a variety of experiences, for example technology and writing skills. Supervisors need to be side-by-side to assess what support [Opportunity Youth] will need. There are additional skills and technical support to get them to capacity to execute. Even then, things will fall through the cracks, [so supervisors need to learn] how to sit down and check in with them.

## ASSEMBLE MIXED TEAMS

For programs **not** working with Opportunity Youth at the beginning of the career/skill continuum, interviewees stressed the strength and success of programs that employed a mixed team strategy, combining Opportunity Youth with college graduates from both within and outside the community. As one interviewee put it,

- Because Opportunity Youth work hand-in-hand with college grad peers constantly, they realize they're just as smart as the grads, and that their ideas are just as good or better. They know things the others didn't and they realize they're just as smart as the college grads. It demystifies college and advancement....People really work together and build relationships and trust. You get the chance of sparking something different in people and for people to really see themselves not as less than or below, but as equal to and the rest. That's why hybrids are a helpful model.

Along similar lines, one participant noted that it was important to include members from the community because, "Having somebody who's from the community who still lives there, gives the other corps members validation as well. [The volunteers or staff] face a lot of push back and adversity otherwise." Furthermore, it is "critical," in the words of one interviewee, for the community that, "It is not always the affluent delivering services to these lesser advantaged communities, but that these communities are allowed to help themselves, and deliver services within their own communities."

Diverse teams are good for all participants, including those not from the communities in which they are serving. For example, Jason Patnosh pointed out that site managers, "realized that they had to teach the college grads that they couldn't come in and save the world in one year. We've been here longer, and we're going to be here tomorrow when your service stops. We want you to come in and not teach our community, but be a part of our community." It is an important lesson to learn for anyone who wants to work in local communities in their future careers.



INTERVIEWEES STRESSED the strength and success of programs that employed a mixed team strategy, combining Opportunity Youth with college graduates from both within and outside the community.

## “THREAD THE NEEDLE”

Opportunity Youth need additional support and often require supplemental training to fully engage in certain service programs. The challenge, as one interviewee put it, is to “thread the needle,” or in other words, to strike the balance between supporting Opportunity Youth and empowering them as leaders who make valuable contributions to their corps

and communities. While additional support is necessary, it is crucial that Opportunity Youth feel empowered versus less-than their college graduate or more privileged counterparts. Examples of additional support run the gamut from transportation access, educational support, case management, leadership development and soft skills training—including developing relationships, timeliness, and conflict resolution. If Opportunity Youth are to be successfully integrated into service programs, it is essential that the mantra of respect extend to how additional services are provided.

### NURTURE AN ADAPTIVE CULTURE

Perhaps most importantly, organizations must be willing to adapt and change once youth are more fully incorporated into their programs. One interviewee noted that her organization was so focused on engaging older participants that they failed to respond to the evolving needs and interests of youth. In particular, they have learned to reach out to participants' families when planning any events in order to secure the attendance of younger participants. Additionally, showing sensitivity to the external and ever-changing landscape of work, service, education and the relationship they may play in the future would allow for a more proactive rather than reactive response within an organization.

### INCLUDE OPPORTUNITY YOUTH IN GOVERNANCE STRUCTURE

Organizations can benefit from incorporating Opportunity Youth at decision-making levels. From hiring decisions (e.g., participating in interviews of potential staff) to weighing in on program and policy decisions, the more Opportunity Youth are incorporated, the higher an organization's retention rate of Opportunity Youth will be. As one interviewee remarked,

- ☞ We have to encourage [the staff] to not let the young people make decisions about just entertainment and punishment, but about policies and hiring procedures, and include them in the hiring of staff because you'll get better staff if the young people have interviewed them in advance. It's a constant process for us to train the adult staff to appreciate and use the input of the young people.

Similarly, several interviewees spoke of giving Opportunity Youth "real power." For example, guaranteed youth spots on the organization's board.

In a final note on retention, several interviewees warned about the over-reliance on retention as a measurement of success when it comes to Opportunity Youth. There is a tension in the national service arena between the mission of increasing national service success and engaging Opportunity Youth. This tension often manifests in mission versus metric. It is from the metric of retention that the dollars flow, but the mission should be to provide the best outcome for each participant. For example, should it be considered a failure when a previously unemployed or homeless participant leaves the program early because he or she has been offered a job, especially a job that provides a sustainable income for his or her family? Many we spoke with feel that is a success, even if that participant did not finish his or her year of service. As Chris Gates put it,

- ☞ If you're going to serve opportunity youth, you actually need to build in a recruitment budget, you need to build an expectation of dropout, you need to tier your program so that maybe the first level of success is somebody who could start and finish a three month program, and then start and finish a six month program, but if the criteria is who can start and finish a 12 month program, then you're only going to have certain kind of people providing service, and we thought that was a huge miss.

This is worth examining as discussions of requirements for national service programs continue. When developing metrics for any organization in the spirit of measuring effectiveness, it is important to consider various outcomes within the purview of "success." Outcomes are typically viewed in two ways: behavioral-based and results-based. When considering organizations that attempt to impact behavior change it is difficult to gain insight from results-based outcomes. Metrics need to be designed to show positive behavior-based outcomes, like the volunteer who left their year of service early because they were offered a job. It is important that metrics are developed that show the full scale of growth of participants, including where a person begins, where they end up, and the impact made along the way.



A person wearing a dark hoodie is seen from behind, standing in a dense forest. Sunlight filters through the tall, thin trees, creating a hazy, atmospheric effect. The overall color palette is a mix of deep blues and greens, with a bright light source at the top center.

## COLLECTIVE IMPACT AND NATIONAL SERVICE

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## COLLECTIVE IMPACT AND NATIONAL SERVICE

“Collective Impact” is a promising approach to social change that has been put forward in recent years. It suggests that those who seek to solve major social challenges must engage in extensive collaboration with others who share related missions and serve the same population. As John Kania and Mark Kramer argue, “There is scant evidence that isolated initiatives are the best way to solve many social problems in today’s complex and interdependent world. No single organization is responsible for any major social problem, nor can any single organization cure it.”<sup>10</sup> The movement from isolated impact to collective impact is a recommendation supported by strong consensus in Opportunity Youth literature, and we believe provides a powerful path toward strengthening national service efforts serving Opportunity Youth. This strategy should be applied within service efforts at the community level and in the national service movement as a whole.

This is not a novel idea to those in national service. Paul Schmitz has been a leader in this effort. He explains,

“I came to the Collective Impact approach through my own work over two decades working with hundreds of nonprofits across the country. I saw so many organizations achieving great results for the people they were serving and replicating their programs. But I did not see change. Communities were still experiencing the same problems.”<sup>11</sup>

He and others have pushed the national service movement to embrace this theme. Service is included in the work of The Aspen Institute Forum for Community Solutions. According to Executive Director Steve Patrick,

“In most communities, people and systems are doing their own thing. Probation officers are telling young people they have to work or go back to jail, then the K-12 or postsecondary system isn’t advocating for school as work. And there are other disincentives. A national service effort that made those connections and linkages would be powerful. It could have a huge positive effect on reducing recidivism and/or creating greater access to opportunity for young people who have historically been left out.

National service has a strong track record of collaboration, perhaps born of the need to band together to defend AmeriCorps funding and advocate for expansion. Service Nation, VOICES for National Service, the Save AmeriCorps Coalition, and The Franklin Project stand out as examples.<sup>12</sup> Applying this spirit of collaboration to build a collective focus on recruiting Opportunity Youth could be transformational.

Success takes more than embracing these ideas. Creating strong collectives is no easy task. In The Stanford Social Innovation Review, Kramer and Kania put forward five keys to success in building collective impact, which are worth restating here:

1. Common Agenda
2. Shared Measurement System
3. Mutually Reinforcing Activities
4. Continuous Communication
5. Backbone Support Organizations<sup>13</sup>

Other efforts to assist communities in developing strategies for collaboration also exist. The “Community Collaboratives Toolbox,” developed by Bridgespan and FSG, aims to help communities learn from one another and build “cross-sector collaboratives” with the help of case studies in America’s cities.<sup>14</sup> The White House Council for Community Solutions recommends building cross-sector “success networks” in communities to convene young adults for decision-making and community planning.<sup>15</sup> It emphasizes the importance of asking youth for input and connecting them to trusted mentors in their communities.<sup>16</sup> These resources will prove helpful to those who seek to promote collective impact.

10 John Kania and Mark Kramer (2011), “Collective Impact,” Stanford Social Innovation Review. [http://www.ssireview.org/articles/entry/collective\\_impact](http://www.ssireview.org/articles/entry/collective_impact).

11 Paul Schmitz (2012), “The Real Challenge for Collective Impact,” Huffington Post. [http://www.huffingtonpost.com/paul-schmitz/collective-impact\\_b\\_1920466.html](http://www.huffingtonpost.com/paul-schmitz/collective-impact_b_1920466.html).


12 The Franklin Project is also a project of The Aspen Institute, where the Impact Careers Initiative is also housed.

13 Kania and Kramer (2011).

14 Willa Seldon, Michele Jolin, and Paul Schmitz (2012), “Community Collaborative Toolkit,” The Bridgespan Group. [http://www.serve.gov/sites/default/files/ctools/CommunityCollaborativeToolkit\\_all%20materials.pdf](http://www.serve.gov/sites/default/files/ctools/CommunityCollaborativeToolkit_all%20materials.pdf).

15 White House Council for Community Solutions (2012), “Fact Sheet,” [http://www.serve.gov/sites/default/files/ctools/11\\_0628\\_whccs\\_factsheet.pdf](http://www.serve.gov/sites/default/files/ctools/11_0628_whccs_factsheet.pdf).

16 White House Council for Community Solutions (2012), “Final Report: Community Solutions for Opportunity Youth,” 28. [http://www.serve.gov/sites/default/files/ctools/12\\_0604whccs\\_finalreport.pdf](http://www.serve.gov/sites/default/files/ctools/12_0604whccs_finalreport.pdf).



NO SINGLE ORGANIZATION  
is responsible for any major  
social problem, nor can any  
single organization cure it.

### AT WHAT LEVEL?

The first question service organizations may ask is, “Which organizations should we collaborate with?” Collective Impact could be implemented at many different levels. We recommend starting with other organizations serving Opportunity Youth in your community including, but certainly not limited to, schools, community colleges, and for- and non-profit organizations. Reaching out past your geographic sphere is a more complicated, but an intuitive second step. Organizations banding together bring light to shared missions. Combined numbers and pooled resources can increase the faith of funders where single organizations may have been less successful. Many opportunities can be unlocked with collaboration between organizations at this level. Perhaps this would lead to a collective recruiting effort, or a unified retention program? It is hard to say, but a collective effort has the potential to reap powerful results.

One case study to point to is the “Got Your Six” campaign, an initiative of Be The Change. As Rob Gordon, President of Be the Change states, “Got Your 6 is an example of how organizations can come together under an umbrella of six different planks, discuss what each other is doing and how each can help to move the needle on those planks and have an overall aggregate effect that is larger than the parts separately.” Veteran organizations came together around shared goals and measurements, and have built a collective to achieve greater success.

National service is powerful in part because of the ability to tailor service to the unique challenges of a community. However true power is only unlocked when national service is unified with a coherent strategy.

## CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS FOR FURTHER RESEARCH

Organizations that use the strategies outlined in this paper can increase their ability to recruit and retain Opportunity Youth. This will improve outcomes for service organizations and Opportunity Youth alike, and help unlock the full potential of national service.

In the course of researching this paper, we heard some argue that Opportunity Youth cannot provide key services, and saw examples of organizations that have moved away from utilizing the talents of Opportunity Youth in their work. This trend is concerning. As new models emerge that utilize college-trained “professional” talent, funders and movement leaders must ensure that others are building innovative programs that engage Opportunity Youth. Leaders committed to serving Opportunity Youth must also challenge the assumption that Opportunity Youth cannot be part of solutions to complex problems. We have repeatedly seen, from education to disaster relief, that Opportunity Youth can move the needle in meaningful ways. Any transition to a less-diverse corps should be challenged.

While we have shared strategies in this paper for engaging Opportunity Youth in national service, we have also identified areas where more research and inquiry would be valuable. These include:



**AmeriCorps Policy:** More work should be done to develop policies that help AmeriCorps better serve and engage Opportunity Youth. We read and heard many ideas—from tying more dollars to diversity statistics to allowing Opportunity Youth to devote more time to education—which warrant additional analysis and discussion.



**State and City Innovation:** Innovation should be explored at the state and city level, where national service budgets may be less restricted in their application. The Franklin Project has pushed forward with this idea and agrees there is much more to be done.



**Digital Engagement:** Opportunity Youth are “disconnected” in many ways, but not digitally. They use networks and services that older generations do not. Work must be done to determine how new services (e.g., Vine) can be leveraged for recruitment and retention.

Asking and empowering Opportunity Youth to solve problems in their own communities is key to countering disconnection. If these millions of young people are engaged effectively we can build a nation of problem-solvers who step up to global challenges.

The goal of this paper is not to encourage organizations to employ Opportunity Youth at the risk of not obtaining the necessary skills an organization or position require. Instead, we implore organizations to look beyond the current standards and certifications (e.g., a college degree) that may automatically preclude Opportunity Youth from service. Organizations should take the initiative in their communities to investigate whether someone who fits the profile of Opportunity Youth does, in fact, have the skills and abilities needed. More effort and energy is required on the side of the organization to embark on this endeavor, however, the diversity and influence that Opportunity Youth can add to an organization is paramount.



## LIST OF INTERVIEWEES

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Allie Harris  
Charlie Rose  
Chris Gates  
Dorothy Stoneman  
Jason Patnosh  
Leila Bailey Stewart  
Markus Brantley  
Martin Johnson  
Mary Ellen Sprenkel  
Melissa Bradley  
Monica Cordova  
Paul Schmitz  
Rob Gordon  
Rodney Foxworth  
Steve Patrick  
Whitney Parnell

*The following interviews were referenced, but conducted as part of a prior report:*

Ami Dar  
Becca Knight  
Bethany Henderson  
James Weinberg  
Mark Kramer  
Public Ally Participants (Focus Group)  
Rafael Lopez  
Tony Woods

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## ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

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**The Aspen Institute Forum for Community Solutions.** Resources.

(<http://aspencommunitysolutions.org/resources/>)

The Forum for Community Solutions offers background reports and toolkits on the value of Opportunity Youth/Opportunity Youth and solutions for re-engaging them.

**Bridgespan.** Needle-Moving Collective Impact.

(<http://www.bridgespan.org/Publications-and-Tools/Revitalizing-Communities/Community-Collaboratives/Needle-Moving-Collective-Impact-Three-Guides-to-Cr>)

Bridgespan has developed three guides to creating effective community collaboratives.

**Community HealthCorps.** Tools for Current Programs.

(<http://www.communityhealthcorps.org/ToolsforProgram%20Staff.cfm>)

Community HealthCorps offers a range of tools for program administrators, including sample trainings and presentations for staff and participants, guidance documents, and member resources.

**Corporation for National & Community Service.** Fact Sheets.

(<http://www.nationalservice.gov/newsroom/marketing/fact-sheets>)

CNCS offers fact sheets on its various programs.

**FSG.** Collective Impact.

(<http://www.fsg.org/OurApproach/CollectiveImpact.aspx>)

FSG has been a leader in developing and evaluating Collective Impact models. Their website offers a range of resources including case studies, background information, and evaluation tools.