



**LAUNCH: AN INNOVATIVE APPROACH TO
REACHING OPPORTUNITY YOUTH**
Executive Summary to the Final Evaluation Report
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Executive Summary

In Spring 2018 the Massachusetts Department of Housing and Community Development (DHCD) selected the United Way of Massachusetts Bay and Merrimack Valley (United Way) to lead Launch, a network of community-based providers in five Boston-area communities that would collaborate to create a coordinated system of providing outreach, connection and referrals, as well as education, training, and job placements to opportunity youth ages 18-24 living in subsidized housing in Greater Boston. The goal of Launch was:

To disrupt intergenerational poverty by increasing awareness among 18-24-year-olds living in state subsidized housing of available education and career pathways, and improving their access to opportunities for upward economic mobility through a coordinated network of service providers.

Two features set Launch apart from other opportunity youth initiatives: (1) *it used subsidized housing as a vehicle to help young adults get and stay on a pathway toward prosperity* (2) *data efforts attempted to define and assess the relationship between “dosage” (the frequency and duration of participation in Launch) and client outcomes.*

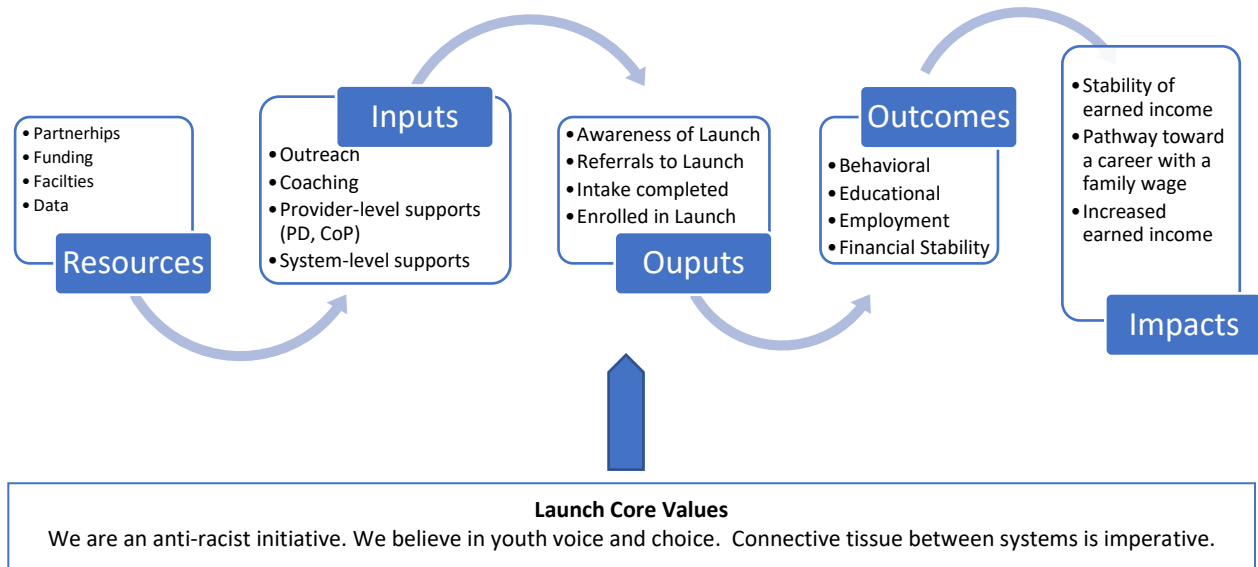
Using subsidized housing as a vehicle for identifying and working with disconnected or under-connected 18-24-year-olds (commonly referred to as opportunity youth) was new and uncharted territory for an opportunity youth initiative but DHCD believed there were two benefits to this approach. First, the target population of Launch, sometimes referred to as *opportunity youth*, are by definition disconnected or under-connected to systems and services and therefore are likely not visible to organizations and agencies poised to offer education and career pathways services. Knowing that a sub-population of opportunity youth live in subsidized housing elevates their visibility as potential participants in Launch. Secondly, research indicates that employment of disconnected youth is linked to housing stability. Since Launch clients experience housing stability through their subsidized housing status, they are likely better poised to reap the benefits of participation than opportunity youth who do not have stable housing.ⁱ

Central to the Launch model was an attempt to define dosage and assess the relationship between dosage and outcomes. While many opportunity youth interventions that have specific participation expectations track length of time in the intervention, a national scan conducted by the evaluation team revealed that most opportunity youth evaluations do not examine dosage and those that do examine dosage focus on duration (length of time in the intervention), not intensity (level of engagement with coaches).ⁱⁱ Launch attempted to do both.

The program model brought together leading community-based organizations – Roca, JVS-Boston, the Boston Private Industry Council (PIC), the Lynn Family Success Center, and Chelsea CONNECT¹ – to provide coordinated coaching and college and career navigation services and/or job search assistance and placement services. An additional program design feature included integration with financial coaching services available at three of the partner sites or through a referral arrangement. United Way served as the convenor of Launch, coordinating partnerships, supporting professional development, and supporting a management information system.

¹ As will be described in this report, after six months of implementation, partners were streamlined, but at the outset of Launch, there were five partners.

The Launch model, depicted below, was created out of the work, research, and best practices developed by the Boston Opportunity Youth Collaborative, and remains closely connected to the work of other opportunity youth serving organizations and programming across Greater Boston.



After a six-month planning process, implementation of Launch began in September 2018. Shortly thereafter, the Forum for Youth Investment was engaged to conduct a one-year process evaluation to better understand implementation, and then to continue conducting evaluation to feed continuous improvement efforts and to better understand success.

Evaluation results confirmed that Launch is a promising approach to connecting 18–24-year-olds living in subsidized housing to college and career pathways and it merits further investments to better understand implementation and impact in the Boston area.

Key Client Outcomes

The evaluation looked at several self-reported client characteristics including: gender, race, ethnicity, dependent status, housing status, and prior work or education experience. Of all the characteristics examined, two client characteristics had a statistically significant impact on goal attainment—housing type and the presence of dependents. The evaluation also examined the relationship between dosage and goal attainment.

- **Launch clients who had medium and high dosage scores (i.e., those that, on average, had more frequent interaction with their coach) were more likely to achieve their goals compared to clients who had less frequent interaction with their coach.** While the variables examined in the data set could not shed light on what it was about dosage that seemed to matter most, partners reported several factors including length of disconnection, vulnerability, family dynamics in the home, workplace discrimination, and lack of money for clothing, supplies, and transportation, and mental health issues, that inhibit or promote goal attainment.
- **By November 2020, 32 percent of clients had achieved a goal they had set.** To put this finding in perspective, national data suggests that despite young people’s aspirations to advance and secure family wage jobs, make connections in civic engagement, and improve their communities, once they have experienced disconnection from school and work, it’s very unlikely they will be able to meet these aspirations, with only 1 percent of youth who have been disconnected ever earn an associate’s degree or higher, compared to 36 percent of the

general population.ⁱⁱⁱ That a full third of the Launch clients achieved a goal that puts them on a pathway toward economic mobility appears to be a promising finding that demonstrates the potential of Launch to alter the trajectory of many of its clients.

- Clients with dependents were significantly less likely to achieve their goals than those without dependents.

Key Partner Benefits

Partners reported that participation in Launch:

- Helped them be more intentional about “meeting clients where they are”;
- Improved their ability to cultivate meaningful relationships that supported each individual’s goals;
- Enabled stronger relationships among the partners;
- raised awareness in their organizations of the importance of supporting opportunity youth.

Notable Launch Milestones

Launch evolved in an unprecedented national context of the dual pandemics of COVID-19 and structural racism awakening. The story of its evolution signals a commitment of the partners – United Way, providers, and DHCD – to make the course corrections necessary to ensure that Launch remains true to its core values of meeting youth where they are, working to dismantle systemic racism, and be one stop on a young adult’s journey toward economic prosperity. The evolution of Launch was punctuated with key milestones that shaped the journey, including:

An unanticipated planning time for partners to work out some of the kinks in the model and in their relationships. While it was anticipated that Launch would begin implementation in Spring 2018 when the partner contracts were signed, several factors necessitated a six-month planning phase in order to work out some key aspects of the model. The planning phase was also viewed by Launch partners as an opportunity for United Way to “get its sea legs” in terms of managing a multi-partner initiative.

Adjusting enrollment targets to better match the level of effort on the part of outreach workers and coaching staff needed for effective engagement with Launch clients. The original target metric for Launch was to enroll 400 young adults in year 1 (September 2018-August 2019). After a year of implementation, Launch partners, United Way, and DHCD all found this target to be overly ambitious. Collaboratively, the target metrics for Launch were adjusted so that by the end of February 2021, Launch would enroll 360 young adults in coaching services. This adjustment was determined based on an assessment of realistic client caseloads, by establishing estimates of how many clients coaches could manage in the five stages of behavioral change (from pre-contemplation to contemplation to planning to action to maintenance).

A breakthrough in defining and measuring dosage. After a thoughtful process of engaging all Launch partners, the evaluation team developed an initial methodology for counting dosage in May 2020. Specifically, a measure of program dosage was calculated that represented a weighted count of the number of contacts between client and coach, averaged into a weekly dosage score. Clients were categorized into three groups based on their average weekly dosage score representing low, medium, and high levels of dosage. Analyses then examined whether clients’ goal achievement differed by dosage group.

Solidifying Launch's core values. The summer of 2020 was a summer of racial reckoning for Launch partners. The COVID-19 pandemic had exposed gross inequities in many of the systems that Launch clients interacted with and depended on. Launch partners, especially the direct service team who was seeing firsthand how the pandemic was disrupting already marginalized young adults' efforts to move toward economic prosperity, felt that Launch was at a critical juncture where it needed to "put a stake in the ground" about what Launch stood for so they formalized a set of values to guide the work moving forward: a commitment to anti-racism, centering youth voice and choice in the client experience, and embracing a pathways approach to supporting young adults which acknowledges Launch as a "stop along the way" not a destination.

Adding mental health support into the model. From the outset of implementation there was ongoing discussion among partners about how, and how much, mental health support to provide clients. Many clients were experiencing, or had experienced, trauma, systemic racism, and structural inequities that left them feeling disconnected and without a sense of future self. Evaluation findings after a year of implementation made it clear that coaches were not going to become mental health experts (nor should they) but additional support on how to identify needs and be aware of and connect to services continued to be raised as an issue that would improve overall client outcomes. Understanding the significant barrier that mental health issues was playing in Launch client's ability to engage, particularly as a result of COVID-19, the Boston PIC (using re-purposed Launch funds) contracted with a mental health organization staffed by people of color.

Key Lessons Learned

Dosage is an elusive but important measure for program planning and accountability. Knowing how much of an intervention is necessary to achieve results is important for planning staffing, and accountability. However, since client life circumstances and experiences vary there is no prescriptive path or sequence that fit all and therefore no "one size fits all" dosage. There is a tension to be managed between setting data targets for engagement and outcomes, and acknowledging the challenging life circumstance of this kind of initiative's target population. Launch managed this through an iterative process of listening to partners, analyzing data, and keeping its core values at the center of its decisions.

Often clients need "lifeboat" jobs as a step toward "lifetime" jobs. Launch client journeys affirmed getting young adults on a pathway toward economic prosperity may begin with "for now," or "lifeboat" jobs. Many clients' circumstances are such that they are balancing very real and immediate economic circumstances and need to find a job, any job, immediately. While many lifeboat jobs do not lead to opportunities to earn high wages or advance, some will allow young people to develop workforce skills that are transferable to other occupations and are needed for their future long-term careers.^{iv} However, to promote the level of individual and systemic change needed to get on a pathway toward economic prosperity, young people must be able to access long-term, "lifetime jobs," which pay a family-supporting wage and help young adults build a secure foundation.

Virtual engagement efforts appear to be an effective approach for working with 18-24-year-olds. When face to face contact was limited in March 2020 due to the COVID-19 virus, direct service staff moved all contact to text, email, phone, and, slowly, zoom or other video conferencing. Coaches reported that this manner of engagement has been beneficial in important some ways: it reduces

client anxiety coming to the office, allows more flexibility for when to communicate for both the client and direct service staff, and appears to fit the lifestyle of clients better.

Launch is one stop on a pathway of supports needed to achieve economic mobility. While there is no single definition of a “pathway” in the field of opportunity youth, there is a shared understanding that pathways for this population should consist of a portfolio of options that can help young people enroll in a postsecondary education or training that leads to meaningful credentials with value in the labor market, and ultimately enter a career that offers a family-sustaining wage. These options should have multiple on-ramps and off-ramps—opportunities to start, pause, and reengage—in order to meet young people’s needs and respond to their assets, skills, and challenges.^v Launch embraced this approach and its partners over time strengthened and expanded relationships with other community organizations and public agencies to introduce clients to opportunities, organizations, and systems that can support them in the long term.

The main lesson learned about a multi-partner initiative is the critical role of an intermediary to act as the navigator for the pathways ecosystem. A pathways ecosystem refers to the many partners and stakeholders that coordinate and collaborate to create, scale, and sustain pathways that connect young adults to education and workforce systems. While there is no “one-size-fits-all” intermediary, they tend to perform a set of functions that help partners work better together. In the context of Launch, this role was played by United Way which served as a convenor that managed the partnerships, supported professional development, and managed the data collection efforts. Early on, United Way identified that partner organizations had different cultures, different ways of interacting with young adults, and different data cultures. Over the course of the initiative, United Way helped partners see themselves as more similar than different, working collaboratively with partners to come to consensus on key aspects of the model as well as promote a common approach to getting and using data to inform programming.

Communities need a sufficient number of 18–24-year-olds living in subsidized housing to warrant the investment. A baseline criterion for an initiative that aims to use subsidized housing as a means of recruitment is that a community has a large enough pool of 18-24-year-olds living in subsidized housing to warrant the investment. The full Launch model —outreach, coaching, professional development, and data collection and analysis — costs about \$5000 per client, yet when asked if there were parts of Launch that were “nice but not necessary,” partners assert that it is the full constellation of inputs that renders Launch a high-quality initiative and distinguishes it from other efforts to support the client population.

Rent waivers are a necessary cost of the Launch model. To address intergenerational poverty, Launch offers time-bound rent waivers so that income earned by Launch clients is not considered part of household income for rent purposes. Partners believe this is an important component for recruitment, goal progress, and overall agency of the clients served by Launch. They perceive that the impact of the rent waiver while a client is enrolled in Launch gives them a sense of financial stability, the chance to build a job history and explore career options, alleviates potential conflict between household residents, thus allowing clients to choose the steps that are best for them without the additional pressure related to contributing the household income to make rent payments.

The Future of Launch

Based on the lessons and experiences of Launch, DHCD made a commitment to fund Launch 2.0 beginning in March 2021. The essence of the Launch model remains the same, with some important modifications based on evaluation findings and experience.

- *Launch 2.0 will be focused on young adults ages 18-24 living in subsidized housing in Boston only.* an initiative such as Launch needs a large enough potential pool of clients to make the investment worthwhile. Given that the estimate of 18–24-year-olds living in subsidized housing in Boston is approximately 3400 and Launch reached 390 clients in its first iteration, there is more than a sufficient potential client pool.
- *To reach that large client pool of young adults living in place-based and Section 8 housing, Launch 2.0 will have a two-pronged approach to outreach.* The Boston PIC will be the outreach lead responsible for the outreach strategy and maintaining partnerships with the Boston Housing Authority and property management companies; Metro Housing Boston will have a Launch Outreach Specialist focused on outreach to Section 8 households.
- *Launch partners, the PIC and JVS, will be responsible for identifying and solidifying three to four priority employment partners* in sectors that are of interest to Launch clients that are interested in and able to hire Launch clients, to address challenges regarding connecting opportunity youth to employers who understand and are responsive to opportunity youth.
- *United Way will implement a new management information system, Salesforce, with a revised approach to tracking client dosage over time.*

Conclusion

Using subsidized housing as a vehicle for identifying and working with opportunity youth is new and uncharted territory. The first three years of implementation have offered a proof of principle that Launch may be a promising strategy to engage disconnected and under-connected 18–24-year-olds in education and career pathways, using subsidized housing as a vehicle for identification of and outreach to potential clients. Early outcomes suggest a positive relationship between sufficient participation in Launch and client goal attainment. It is anticipated that Launch 2.0 will collect more and better data to deepen the understanding of how it is contributing to the economic prosperity of young adults in subsidized housing, including how the deep and caring connections with Launch staff support the social and emotional competencies essential to long-term economic prosperity.

ⁱ Slesnick, N., Zhang, J. & Yilmazer, T. Employment and Other Income Sources Among Homeless Youth. *J Primary Prevent* **39**, 247–262 (2018). <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10935-018-0511-1>.

ⁱⁱ Little, P. & Pasti, L. (2020). *Launch: An innovative approach to reaching opportunity youth, a field scan*. Washington, D.C.: Forum for Youth Investment. <https://forumfyi.org/knowledge-center/launch-an-innovative-approach-to-reaching-opportunity-youth-a-field-scan/>

ⁱⁱⁱ <https://aspencommunitysolutions.org/who-are-opportunity-youth/>

^{iv} Hoffman, N., Murphy, L. & Seaton, G. (2020). *How intermediaries can help Black and Latinx develop a strong occupational identity*. Boston, MA: Jobs for the Future. Retrieved from <https://www.jff.org/resources/intermediaries-help-black-latinx-youth-develop-occupational-identity/>

^v Rennie Center for Education Research & Policy. (2019). *Career Pathways for Boston's Opportunity Youth*. Boston, MA: Rennie Center for Education Research & Policy.