

# LAUNCH: AN INNOVATIVE APPROACH TO REACHING OPPORTUNITY YOUTH

A field scan prepared by the Forum for Youth Investment

February 2020

## About this Scan

In spring 2018, the Massachusetts Department of Housing and Community Development (DHCD) began funding Launch, an innovative approach to reaching opportunity youth (OY); namely, using state-subsidized housing as a mechanism for identifying, engaging, and connecting OY to education and career pathways. By targeting youth who are in subsidized housing, Launch is addressing the housing instability of many OY. This is a new way for DHCD, and other housing agencies, to think about economic stability. As part of DHCD's ongoing evaluation efforts of Launch, it was interested in how this new approach to supporting OY fits into broader efforts to support this population. As the evaluation partner for Launch, the Forum for Youth Investment conducted this field scan in the winter of 2020. Data sources for this scan included research on opportunity youth, housing-related programs, and cost-benefit analysis, as well as internet-based research on evidence-based programming. Inquiries were made of federal staff in the Departments of Labor and Housing and Urban Development and Mathematica (which provided a review for the evaluations of [Performance Pilot Program](#) sites).

### WHO ARE OPPORTUNITY YOUTH?

Nationally, opportunity youth (OY) are identified as 16- to 24-year-olds who are not employed and not in school or training. These youth are seen as disconnected from the usual supports and opportunities for development. There are plenty of reasons for youth disconnection – including societal, familial, financial, educational, or personal. Often, OY have experienced public systems such as child welfare, juvenile justice, or behavioral health. Many have experienced multiple traumas.

The target population defined by Launch is a subset of these youth. For Launch, these include 18- to 24-year-old youth living in subsidized housing who are disconnected or under-connected (part-time or intermittently) to the workforce or education.

The scan is organized into three sections:

- An overview of the Launch initiative
- The evidence base that investing in programs to support OY can lead to positive outcomes for youth and for society
- Key features of interventions to support OY in the context of Launch

## Overview of Launch<sup>1</sup>

The goal of Launch is to disrupt intergenerational poverty by increasing awareness among 18- to 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. The program model brings together leading community-based organizations –Jewish Vocational Services (JVS), the Boston Private Industry Council (PIC), and the Lynn Housing Authority and Neighborhood Development (LHAND) – to provide coordinated coaching and college and career navigation services, job search assistance, and placement services for those participants who need immediate employment. United Way of Massachusetts Bay and Merrimack Valley (United Way) is the coordinator and convener of Launch, managing data collection, professional development, and learning, and serving as a liaison between the program partners and DHCD.

The Launch model consists of outreach, referral to coaches, and getting clients on a path toward education and/or employment. Specifically, outreach workers knock on doors, conduct phone calls, and send out mailings where they know there are 18- to 24-year-olds within a subsidized housing household. The outreach workers offer the young people space to talk about Launch and what is possible from the comfort of their own home or property. A component of the outreach strategy is to target specific developments and neighborhoods to create good relationships with property managers and tenants, setting up a desk at the location so they can have a visible presence at the site—Launch calls this its “saturation model.” Launch workers are also doing outreach to Section 8 participants by having an intern placed at Metro Housing Boston who is calling all households with 18- to 24-year-old members to tell them about Launch and invite them to connect in person with the outreach team. The outreach team provides an initial connection between potential clients and their coaches, either in person at the coach's office, at the potential client's home, or via text message—this is referred to as the “warm handoff.”

Once a warm handoff has been made, coaches conduct an intake interview with each client to better understand what they want and need, then help the client set short- and longer-term goals, identify possible barriers that could get in the way of accomplishing those goals, and offer continued support once a placement to education/training or employment has been made.

At every step of the way, youth voice is part of the approach. During intake, clients determine what they want to work on and at what pace, rather than the coaches making decisions for them. Client interviews are conducted individually to allow clients space to share their experience with the program and offer their insights on how to improve and market Launch. Launch Ambassadors are clients hired to work with partners, develop a personal project, conduct outreach in their own communities, and gain workplace experience.

### YOUTH VOICE AND LAUNCH

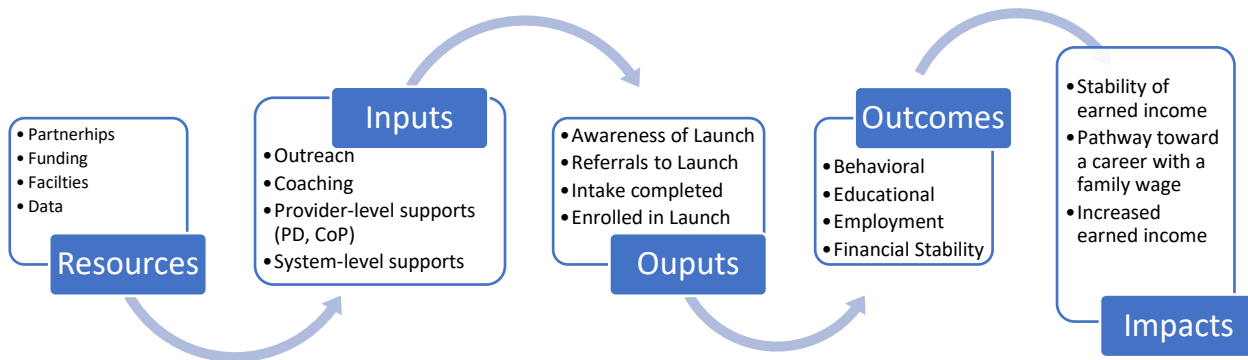
*Every time we talk, he's [coach] got answers. He always says 'let me know' when proposing things. He always has a way to make progress in person and offline. He understands my speed. He's very affirming, like 'you been coming and you're trying hard'. I don't feel like just another number. He understands my highs and lows and how to respond.*

Launch Client

<sup>11</sup> This scan was conducted prior to March, 2020 when the COVID-19 pandemic started. As such, it describes the model prior to its onset. For an updated description of Launch in 2021, See the [Launch Final Evaluation Report](#), April 2021.

Fifteen months into the initiative, 211 clients have enrolled in Launch, 92 of whom have met at least three times with a coach. 37 clients have enrolled in some form of education or training (high school, GED, or postsecondary) and 53 have been placed in a range of jobs including retail, food service, non-profit, and health care. By the end of the initiative in early 2021, Launch intends to serve 360 clients. Below is a simple framework for Launch. See Appendix A for more details.

## A Framework for Launch



## What Can Interventions Such as Launch Hope to Impact?

Using subsidized housing as a vehicle for identifying and working with OY is new and uncharted territory. Thus, there is no research that makes an explicit connection between the Launch approach and youth outcomes. The majority of housing-related programs identified for this scan were designed to respond to the housing needs of OY first, and then attend to other basic needs, academic supports, or employment options. This makes sense because an OY is unlikely to be able to participate in a program such as Launch without some sort of housing stability. Because Launch is unlike other housing-related programs that support OY, this scan looked at the evidence base for interventions that work with OY independent of housing status. It also presents social science research that uses predictive modeling to determine the costs of not intervening with OY over time.

Overall, the evidence suggests that specific interventions do lead to positive workforce-related outcomes, but there are no longitudinal studies of specific interventions to know if the outcomes persist over time. We do know, however, that the opportunity and societal costs of not investing in OY are substantial and accrue over time.

The research scan is divided into two parts: a review of outcomes associated with workforce interventions in programs that serve OY and research on the overall benefits of interventions to society.

## Investments in Opportunity Youth Benefit the Youth

A 2016 review of evidence-based youth and young adult workforce initiatives conducted by Abt Associates identified several initiatives that included an OY population and demonstrated effectiveness through rigorous evaluation.<sup>1,2</sup> Below is a summary of some key findings, all of which point to the promise of OY interventions contributing to a set of positive outcomes.

**American Conservation Service Corps (Youth Corps):** Youth Corps programs are operated on the local level by government agencies and community-based organizations. The program's goals are to improve the communities in which they operate, as well as the education and employment outcomes of participants, known as Corps members. The exact programming varied by location but generally included educational services, occupational training, and employment services. In addition, a stipend was provided while participants engaged in community service activities (roughly 32 hours a week). The target population includes youth not in school, including opportunity youth. The program was designed to be six to 12 months. Evaluation after three years indicated a short-term positive impact on wages after 18 months, with a cost benefit of \$1.60 for every \$1.00 invested.

**National Guard Challenge:** The National Guard Youth Challenge program targets youth 16 to 18 years of age. The program's mission is to target at-risk youth and equip them with the skills and training to have successful adult lives. Eligible participants dropped out of or were expelled from school, are unemployed, not drug users, and not heavily involved in the criminal justice system. Total participation lasts for 17 months and includes a residential phase in a military-like environment during the first 22 weeks. Once the residential phase ends, participants are placed in a job or educational or military program and continue to receive mentorship. Participation entails a two-week Pre-Challenge Phase, a 20-week Residential Phase, and a yearlong Post residential Phase. In the evaluation with a three-year follow up, 72% of participants received their GED as compared to 56% of the comparison group. Further, the treatment group had higher weekly and hourly wages and were more likely to be employed three years out.

**Year Up:** The Year Up program targets 18- to 24-year-old young adults from urban, economically disadvantaged communities, including opportunity youth. The selection process is competitive with only one in six applicants selected. It is designed to help them begin careers in information technology or financial operations. Accordingly, participants receive six months of vocational training followed by a six-month internship. In addition to technical subject matter, training also includes communication skills, networking, and other skills needed to function in a work environment. Participants receive stipends during both training and internship phases as well as mentorship and other social services. The program lasts for one year. In a longitudinal study, the treatment group had higher average earnings and were more likely to be in a permanent job placement after three years.

**JOBSTART:** JOBSTART was a late 1980s program designed to assist high school dropouts aged 17 to 21 with poor reading skills. The program provided educational skills, job training, and support services. It was evaluated between 1985 and 1989 using an RCT design. The evaluation found that the program significantly affected high school diploma/GED attainment with 42% of treatment group members receiving a GED or high school diploma (compared to

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<sup>1</sup> Review of Evidence-Based Youth and Young Adult Workforce Initiatives. MEMORANDUM PREPARED BY ABT ASSOCIATES FOR THIRD SECTOR CAPITAL PARTNERS, INC. February 3, 2016. <https://www.thirdsectorcap.org/wp-content/uploads/2016/02/Review-of-Evidence-Based-Workforce-Development-Initiatives-Abt-Associates.pdf>

<sup>2</sup> Rigorous evaluation was defined as a randomly controlled trial, having positive workforce-related outcomes, targeting youth or young adults including OY, and evaluated within the past 20 years.

only 29% of control group members) four years post-randomization. No significant overall differences in earnings, employment, or welfare receipt were found at the end of the follow-up period.

In sum, there have been a number of studies, including some employing rigorous methodologies, on workforce-related programs that support the opportunity youth population. Those that have shown reliable outcomes have shown some increase in employment, earnings or both, but the three- to four-year time frames for the evaluations do not provide insights into the long-term sustainability of outcomes. However, even short-term impact provides a positive experience for youth and gives them another successful experience to build upon. As the discussion below on “now jobs” suggests, early positive experiences in the workforce can set the foundation for longer term success.

### Investments in Opportunity Youth Benefit Society

While evaluations of specific interventions provide insights into potential short-term impacts of investing in OY, social science research sheds light on the long-term costs of not attending to this population in terms of the increased use of social services, in lost revenue, and in the loss of their contributions to civic society. A 2018 report released by Measure of America found that on average an OY would generate \$11,900 per year for the federal government in tax revenue if they remained in school or work. With the estimated population of 4.6 million OY nationwide, that is projected at \$55 billion in revenue each year. This is in addition to the estimated lifetime cost to society of more than \$900,000 per OY.<sup>3</sup>

That same report examined the costs of not attending to OY, focusing on five key factors: education, earnings, homeownership, employment, and health.<sup>4</sup> Results indicated that the biggest differences in those five key factors occur not while opportunity youth and those engaged in work and school are in their teens and twenties, but instead 13 to 15 years down the road, when they are in their thirties. See graphic below:

	After roughly 14 years, compared to young people who experienced youth disconnection, those who remained connected:
<b>INCOME</b>	Earn \$31,000 more
<b>HOMEOWNERSHIP</b>	Are 45% more likely to own a home
<b>UNEMPLOYMENT</b>	Are 42% more likely to be employed
<b>SELF-REPORTED GOOD HEALTH</b>	Are 52% more likely to report excellent or good health

<sup>3</sup> Two Futures: The Economic Case for Keeping Youth on Track. New York: Measure for America, Social Science Research Council, 2018. <https://www.MEASUREOFAMERICA.org/psid>

<sup>4</sup> Ibid.

In their latest updated Benefit-Costs estimates on Workforce Development programs that support a wide range of youth, not exclusively opportunity youth, Washington State Institute for Public Policy asserted that career and technical education academies showed the highest net benefit of \$10,015. Job search and placement effort showed a cost benefit of \$1,834.<sup>5</sup>

Together, these research studies affirm that initiatives to support OY such as Launch have the potential to improve the long-term economic well-being of society as a whole. While no single initiative can claim specific attribution, the cumulative effect of supporting OY appears to contribute to improved long-term overall trajectories. Launch, therefore, is one in a constellation of supports needed to help OY get and stay on a positive pathway toward economic stability.

## Key Implementation Issues of Interventions to Support OY

This scan revealed four implementation issues faced by many OY initiatives, including Launch:

1. How to assess the frequency, intensity, and length of the intervention;
2. The trade-offs in the kind of job placements that OY are connected to;
3. How to conduct a warm handoff in the context of a multi-partner support effort; and
4. How to manage a multi-partner OY initiative.

Launch's approach to addressing each of these issues is described below, contextualized within the findings of the scan when possible.<sup>6</sup>

### How to Assess Dosage, Frequency, and Duration

Of interest in examining what works in programs that impact OY is the dosage of services in both their intensity and the duration. This has been a topic of much discussion among Launch staff. Questions discussed include, "How do you count "touches"- is it every text? Even unanswered ones? What should be the criteria for youth to formally exit the program? When they have a job or enroll in an education program? After six months, 12 months, any defined period?" While relevant questions for any program, these are particularly perplexing when dealing with this population. Opportunity youth are often slow to engage or may be non-responsive for weeks but can still come back and become fully engaged. This ability to reengage even after "disappearing" for a period of time has been noted by Launch clients to be very important to them as they continue to connect to education and employment.

In a scan of potential programs or evaluations, finding specific descriptions of dosage, either for intensity or duration, was a challenge. When there was detail, it was more often on duration. Rare was the program that explicitly stayed connected with a youth past two years. It was more frequent to find periods of active engagement of six to 18 months. Even in looking at research studies, most that were evaluating a specific program looked at results in the three-year range, with some variance in either direction.

Initial attempts to track specific dosage of services proved elusive in the early months of Launch for exactly the questions raised above about what constitutes a "dose." To work around the definitional challenge of dosage, the Launch program team developed an approach to

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<sup>5</sup> Benefit-cost methods last updated December 2019 Workforce Development. Washington State Institute for Public Policy. <https://www.wsipp.wa.gov/BenefitCost?topicId=10>

<sup>6</sup> Information for this section of the report includes data collected by the Forum for Youth Investment as part of its ongoing formative evaluation of Launch.

documenting the “stages of change” as a client transitions from outreach to placement.<sup>7</sup> In this approach, coaches track how much time, on average, they are spending with clients in each stage of change from pre-contemplation to contemplation to planning to action to maintenance. Tracking client interactions through stages is used as a proxy for dosage and helps coaches predict their caseloads in terms of how much time they are spending with clients in each stage.

## Trade-offs in Connecting to Career Pathways vs “Now Jobs”

One of the strategies prevalent in workforce efforts with youth has been a focus on career pathways. This approach is focused on connecting a youth with a particular employment trajectory through a sequential set of activities and training. These activities can include health, transportation, or other basic needs in addition to education, training, and employment. In the scan, the evidence of long-term success of a “pathways” approach for OY shows mixed results.

Reasons for mixed results include OY’s lack of experience with the world of work, either by themselves or through their family. This limits their knowledge of job choices and exposure to the broader world. Launch coaches and career navigators have reported that youth coming to them most often just want “a job,” with a primary interest of getting an income while not necessarily ready to explore career choices.

In the work of a pilot cohort of sites by the Annie E. Casey Foundation, there is an emerging focus on “now jobs.” “Now jobs” help connect young adults to employment that addresses immediate income needs, provides them with valuable work experience, and improves their social capital by connecting them to networks of employed adults. A “now job” strategy builds an interim employment step into the continuum of workforce development services that prepare young adults for long-term career opportunities. A critical factor in whether a “now job” will be a good employment experience for a young adult is the degree to which an employer is invested in providing that experience.<sup>8</sup>

There is some past research from longitudinal data sets in the 1970s and 1980s — the National Longitudinal Survey of Youth, the National Survey of Adolescent Males, and the National Education Longitudinal Study — that show work experiences during high school years lead to higher employment and stronger wages, especially during the two to three years after young people graduated high school. Christopher Ruhm utilized data from the National Longitudinal Survey of Youth to estimate the long-term effects of youth work experiences seven to ten years after high school. This research confirms that the positive effects of youth work experiences do persist seven to ten years post-graduation.<sup>9</sup> This finding affirms that “now jobs” for OY can be important early experiences that lead to better employment and higher wages in the long term.

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<sup>7</sup> A stages of change approach is used to explain an individual's readiness to change their behavior and is commonly used to promote healthy decision-making. At each stage the intervention is customized to meet the client’s readiness to change. For more information on stages of change:

<https://www.ruralhealthinfo.org/toolkits/health-promotion/2/theories-and-models/stages-of-change>

<sup>8</sup> NOW JOBS in Young Adult Workforce Programming. The Aspen Institute Workforce Strategies Initiative. Ranita Jain & Amy Blair. June 2018. <https://www.aspeninstitute.org/publications/now-jobs-young-adult-workforce-programming/>

<sup>9</sup> Research on these studies is summarized in: The Workforce Innovation and Opportunity Act: Investments in Youth Work Experiences. Thaddeus Ferber, Alex Sileo. July 9, 2019.

<https://forumfyi.org/knowledge-center/wioa-case-study/>

This idea of “now jobs” fits with some of the feedback from Launch coaches and navigators who express that youth are more often intent on getting a job immediately for the income and are initially less interested in engaging in career or workforce conversations. Staff have also noted the value of their having positive relationships with employers. This helps them connect OY to good job opportunities and manage bumps in the road for the youth with the employer. The Boston PIC, one of the Launch partners, is engaged in an effort to build the capacity of employers to support OY in their job placements as one effort to help OY secure, retain, and advance in employment.

## Warm Handoffs Across a Multi-Partner Initiative

In clinical settings, the “warm handoff” is seen as a best practice for patients. In essence, it involves the transfer of care or responsibility between two members of a team. In a warm handoff, this transfer occurs in the presence of the client and/or family. This creates transparency and better allows the client to develop trust and engagement with the next member of the team.<sup>10</sup>

Establishing a warm handoff is a signature part of Launch. This warm handoff consists of the outreach worker introducing the client to the coach in person. This personal touch is important since it reinforces in a tangible fashion the trust the youth have given to the outreach worker as the youth has engaged in the process. Initially in Launch, this warm handoff took place primarily in the home of the youth. As partners have refined the process, it now may take place in the office. When appropriate, this helps speed up the intake process and alleviates travel time for coaches to homes.

An important change in the warm handoff is the use of texting and social media to conduct the handoff. Outreach workers include the prospective coach from a partner agency in texts with the youth as the engagement process takes hold. This early introduction to the coach gives the coach the ability to communicate with the youth early on in the process, which has helped ease the transition process. Launch partners report that the use of social media is a significant positive change to the model and one that may have implications for how other OY interventions facilitate transitions from outreach workers to coaches, particularly when those roles are housed in different agencies.

## How to Manage a Multi-Partner Initiative

There is abundant research on the importance of collaboration and partnership being instrumental in addressing complex problems such as employment for this population.<sup>11</sup> That research indicates that effective multi-partner efforts require a convening or organizing function. These are often conducted by an intermediary or backbone organization who is responsible for managing the partnership, communications, funding, logistics, data, governance, planning, and other key functions necessary to create a productive path towards achieving outcomes. As a multi-partner effort, Launch was designed to include just such an entity from the outset, The United Way of Massachusetts Bay and Merrimack Valley. As the grant recipient from DHCD, the United Way manages the contracts for the lead partners, and their role goes beyond contract management to include: building the capacity of the partners to work effectively with opportunity youth; facilitating peer learning; managing data collection, monitoring, and reporting; and

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<sup>10</sup> Central New York Care Collaborative (CNY Cares) Conducting Warm Handoffs. <https://cnycares.org/training/conducting-warm-handoffs/>

<sup>11</sup> See **Community Tool Box: Chapter 1. Section 3**; <https://ctb.ku.edu/en/table-of-contents/overview/model-for-community-change-and-improvement/building-capacity/main>



managing internal and external communications about Launch. Launch partners affirm that the role the United Way plays is essential in ensuring a coordinated partnership effort that benefits the OY clients.

## Conclusion

This scan places Launch in the national context of supporting OY by connecting them to education and career pathways. It also reveals that Launch stands out among these efforts for its use of subsidized housing as a mechanism for identifying, engaging with, and connecting OY to a path toward economic stability. While it is still too early in the implementation of Launch to examine outcomes, Launch has demonstrated that it is addressing some key implementation issues that make the initiative responsive to clients, partners, and the Boston-area OY landscape. It is clear from the research that no single initiative can do this alone. Collectively, communities can offer many opportunities for OY to get and stay connected. As Launch's DHCD program officer stated: "*Launch is one stop along the way, helping clients at a moment in time to introduce them to opportunities, organizations, and systems that can support them in the long term.*" While it is too early to understand the long-term impacts of Launch, this scan indicates that Launch fits within national efforts to support OY and has potential to contribute to longer-term positive trajectories for its clients.

## About the Authors

This field scan was conducted by Larry Pasti and Priscilla M. Little, both senior consultants with the Forum for Youth Investment. The Forum for Youth Investment is a national nonprofit, nonpartisan "action tank" committed to changing the odds that all children and youth are ready for college, work, and life. It provides ideas, services, and networks that leaders need in order to make more intentional decisions that are good for young people. The Forum helps leaders increase their capacity to more effectively make the case for and manage the collaborative efforts that are needed to change the odds for youth; improve the alignment and appropriateness of child and youth policy agendas and investments; and strengthen programs' and practitioners' capacity to create environments in which youth thrive, across all the systems and settings where young people spend time.

## Additional Resources on What Works for Engaging Opportunity Youth

- *Final Report for AmeriCorps Opportunity Youth Evaluation Bundling*. Submitted: January 16, 2018. North Bethesda, MD: JBS International, Inc.
- *Reimagining Employer Engagement: A Toolkit for Providers*. Reimagine Retail Chicago. 2016. <https://www.reimagineretailchicago.org/>
- *Recommendations to Increase Opportunity and Decrease Poverty in America*. National Council of Young Leaders. March 2018.
- *What Works in Career and Technical Education: Evidence Underlying Programs and Policies that Work*. Results for America and MDRC
- *Opportunity Works Four Ways to Help Young Adults Find Pathways to Success*. JFF, Aspen Institute, Forum for Community Solutions. January 2019

- *Clearinghouse for Labor Evaluation and Research*. <https://clear.dol.gov/topic-area/opportunities-for-youth>
- Career and technical education academies. Workforce Development, Benefit-Cost estimates updated December 2018. Literature review updated December 2016. Washington State Institute for Public Policy

# Appendix A: Launch Theory of Change

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

