

Building Ecosystems Statewide for Thriving (BEST) Youth Initiative

An Initiative of the Forum for Youth Investment



INVITATION TO APPLY

Application Deadline: May 3, 2024

The Forum for Youth Investments and its national partners are pleased to invite state teams to apply to participate in the inaugural cohort of the Building Ecosystems Statewide for Thriving (BEST) Youth Initiative pilot, a collaborative learning approach to make lasting change for youth.

CALL TO ACTION

The current youth-serving ecosystem is comprised of a multitude of systems that are designed to address problems or provide opportunities to the same young people and families. While many states are engaged in efforts to coordinate and collaborate across this ecosystem, too often agencies are focused only on the issues that fall within their mandate. As a result, the burden is placed on young people and their families to try to access, sequence, and coordinate the various supports they need that are provided by multiple systems, rather than the systems aligning up-front to holistically meet the needs of youth and their families. None of these siloed systems can be effective in improving outcomes for youth without the services and opportunities provided by the others, resulting in all systems falling short of their larger aim: supporting young people to achieve their highest potential in education, work, and life.

Now is the time for states to create the enabling environments for true systems alignment that comprehensively and equitably meet the needs of youth and their families. Through the BEST Youth Initiative, the Forum and its national partners will convene state teams representing leadership across systems, youth and families, and other stakeholders to work together to create a shared vision for transformation.

PARTICIPATING STATE TEAMS WILL RECEIVE

Dedicated team of Forum staff & consultants to provide tailored consultation, strategic solutions, and advice through State Action Labs to help catalyze systems transformation and remove barriers for strategy implementation.



All expenses paid to attend in-person Initiative-wide Peer Learning Community convenings.



Compensation and childcare for youth and family members/caregivers with lived experience to participate in state teams and national events.



Opportunity to participate in national initiative that will raise the visibility of your work and help influence decisionmakers in Washington, D.C.



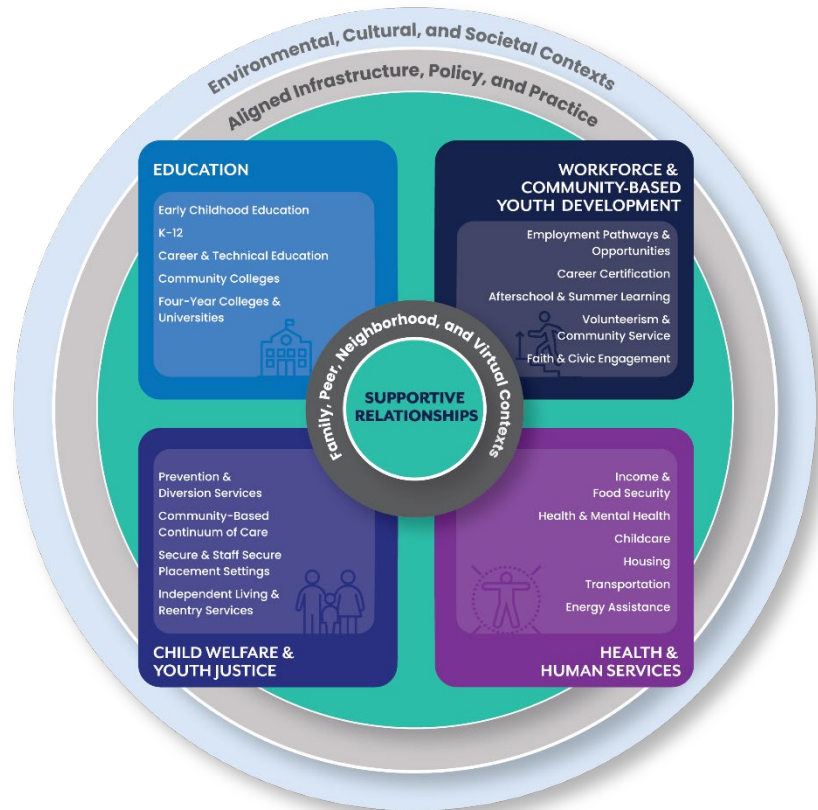
Connections with peers engaged in cross-system collaborations, a National Steering Committee, and relevant subject matter experts and thought leaders.

WHY THE BEST YOUTH INITIATIVE?

The Building Ecosystems Statewide for Thriving Youth Initiative (BEST Youth Initiative) is designed to help states move away from the current paradigm from one where youth and families navigate disparate systems, including **education, workforce development, human services, behavioral health, child welfare, and juvenile justice**, to one where these systems are integrated and leveraged to provide cohesive opportunities to improve outcomes for young people that no one system can achieve alone.

The BEST Youth Initiative utilizes a youth and family-centered approach, engaging and amplifying the voices of youth and families with lived experience navigating multiple siloed systems. By including those with direct experience and knowledge of these systems, the solutions will be more effective, and the progress more enduring. (See [“Partnering with People with Lived Experience in Systems Change”](#).)

The Initiative will incubate and scale strategies based on sound policy and practice for achieving cross-systems alignment and integration at the state level while building and strengthening a [youth-serving ecosystem](#) that holistically supports young people so they can thrive.



ABOUT THE BEST YOUTH INITIATIVE

The BEST Youth Initiative is a three-year effort to facilitate state-based, cross-system, cross-sector collaboration to improve outcomes **for youth ages 5–24 in up to five states**. Teams from selected states will co-design and implement a data-driven, outcomes-based plan to generate cross-systems reforms and innovations towards a more equitable, effective, and nimble youth development ecosystem, while informing policymakers about how to create a supportive policy environment to advance and sustain these efforts.

Each State Team will be supported by a two-person Forum Team comprised of Forum staff and an allied consultant. The Forum Team will provide assistance to the State Teams throughout the analysis, planning and implementation stages of the Initiative, as well as in measuring progress and making any needed mid-course modifications.

The Forum Teams will be assembled based on the subject-matter expertise and capacity needs of each state. Experienced at engaging and partnering with youth and families with lived experience, Forum Teams will support leaders in advancing a positive youth development approach that thinks

BEST YOUTH INITIATIVE OVERARCHING GOALS

Youth, families, system leaders and practitioners will work together to achieve collective impact – each stakeholder working towards a common solution to a problem that none could achieve alone, using a structured form of collaboration.

✱

System leaders will know what reforms are needed, how to develop an actionable plan to advance them, and how to effectively implement them to create change.

✱

System leaders and practitioners will be prepared and empowered to address the needs of all youth.

✱

Policymakers at the state and federal levels will know what policy changes are needed to enable the youth ecosystem to improve outcomes for youth.

holistically about young people beyond the doors through which they enter public systems. Forum Teams are proficient in supporting leaders working within a systems-change context, with skills and experience in facilitation, strategy development and implementation, program improvement, policy development and alignment, research synthesis, and data integration in a cross-system context. Importantly, Forum Team members have participated in systems change efforts directly and are knowledgeable about promising and successful reforms and innovations across the country. Forum Teams will also leverage the policy, program quality and measurement expertise of other Forum staff, as well as the Initiative's National

Steering Committee (NSC) for Thriving Youth. (See NSC description below under Initiative Support.)

INITIATIVE SUPPORT

The Forum for Youth Investment

Founded in 1998, The Forum for Youth Investment (Forum) is a national nonprofit, nonpartisan “action tank” with a vision that all young people reach their fullest potential – in education, work, and life. The Forum achieves its vision by advancing equitable youth opportunities and outcomes through high quality, customized capacity-building, convening, and relationship-building, as well as policy action across systems and sectors that comprise the youth development ecosystem.

With over two decades of working with local and national leaders to help communities implement positive youth development approaches serving children and youth more efficiently and effectively, the Forum has a deep knowledge-base and practical field-tested tools to support system leaders to plan and partner for impact, improve and align policies, and strengthen programs and adult practice across all settings where young people spend time.

The Forum is the Best Youth Initiative's sponsor responsible for its design, implementation, and oversight.

The National Steering Committee for Thriving Youth

Comprised of youth and family/caregiver representatives and leaders from key national public sector associations, the Forum has convened the National Steering Committee (NSC) for Thriving Youth to advise, guide, and serve as ambassadors for the Initiative. NSC members are integral to the BEST Youth Initiative in their capacity to provide a depth of experience, subject matter expertise and thought partnership, while also being resources for State Teams and brokering relationships with philanthropy and thought leaders across the youth-serving ecosystem.

The NSC will meet quarterly providing opportunities for relationship building across national public sector associations, updates on progress and challenges during the various stages of the State Action Labs, as well as substantive discussion pertaining to Initiative implementation issues, policy implications and shared learning.

THE BEST YOUTH INITIATIVE PHASES

- National Launch & Team Formation: In-person convening to launch the BEST Youth Initiative and its Initiative-wide Peer Learning Community. Cultivating team relationships and team building.
- State Action Laboratories: Customized consultation, advice and support in the discovery, strategy design and implementation phases of state innovations/reforms.

National Launch

The BEST Youth Initiative will launch with a two-day in-person convening in Washington, D.C., on July 30-31, 2024. Participants will include representatives from each BEST Youth Initiative State Team; the National Steering Committee; the Forum Teams; and other key stakeholders. This will be an opportunity to:

- 1) Cultivate relationships with system leaders transforming systems in other jurisdictions.
- 2) Share State’s proposed reforms, elevating leading-edge innovations.
- 3) Launch the Initiative-Wide Peer Learning Community and connect states to their teams.

State Action Laboratories

At the heart of the Initiative are the State Action Laboratories (Action Labs), wherein State Teams will co-design a strategy and implement a data-driven, outcomes-based plan to create cross-system reforms and innovations around an identified problem that can only successfully be addressed across multiple systems. State Teams will be comprised of multiple public sector system leaders, youth and family members/caregivers with lived experience, and other stakeholders (e.g., employers, children’s cabinets, philanthropy, educators, nonprofit providers, and advocacy networks.)

In order to inform the Action Lab process with a diversity of experiences, an Advisory comprised of people with lived experience (PWLE) will be established. This Advisory will serve as a brain trust for the Forum Teams, create a dedicated space for capacity building, and act as ambassadors to other PWLE. (See [“Roles for People with Lived Experience in BEST Youth Initiative”](#)).

All processes will be structured to build relationships and understanding, while building the

NATIONAL STEERING COMMITTEE MEMBERS

Youth with Lived Experience
✦

Family/Caregivers with Lived Experience
✦

American Public Human Services Association (APHSa)
✦

Council of Juvenile Justice Administrators (CJJA)
✦

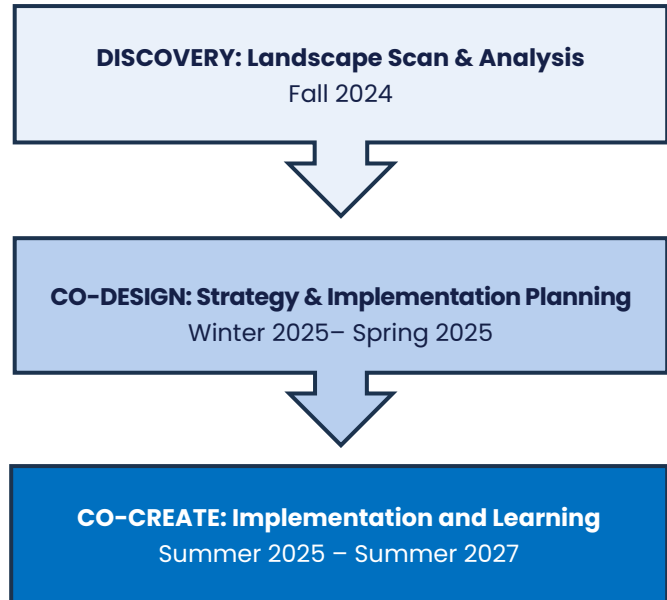
Education Commission of the States (ECS)
✦

National Association of State Mental Health Program Directors
(NASMHPD)
✦

National Association of State Workforce Agencies (NASWA)

infrastructure and culture of collaboration and the “muscle memory” for strategic and data-based problem-solving within and across youth-serving state systems. The Action Labs involve a three-stage process that states will move through based on where they are in the innovation cycle (identifying, building/refining, scaling). The process will be both structured and flexible – employing proven approaches to actionable strategy development.

The Discovery and Co-Design stages will include: creating shared language and understanding of the identified problem; conducting a state and systems landscape and data analysis to create a comprehensive picture of the opportunities and challenges to inform identification or refinement of strategies, goals and benchmarks for progress on the problem; developing an implementation and actionable measurement/learning plan; and identifying a collaborative infrastructure needed to build and sustain cross-system reforms/innovations. The bulk of the Action Labs – the Co-Create stage – will be supporting State Teams during implementation with as-needed coaching, facilitation, and analysis, structured learning opportunities, and assisting with mid-course corrections as needed.



The following are examples of cross-system innovations that are currently underway in some states. State Teams might consider any one or more of these, or other cross-systems innovations:

- Reimagined Funding Streams. Cross-systems efforts to leverage a system-specific funding stream to fund other supports/services needed for multiple systems to be successful.
- Data Collaboratives & Integration. Multiple systems building on the data infrastructure of one system to create a more comprehensive picture of the impacts of their efforts to inform service delivery, program design, and policy changes.
- Capacity-Building for Partnering with Youth, Families and Caregivers. Improving the ability of state systems to authentically engage and partner with youth and family members/caregivers with lived experience. (See “[Partnering with People with Lived Experience in Systems Change](#)”)
- Service Integration Across Systems. Two or more systems that create a seamless integration of services for shared beneficiaries.
- Innovative Approaches to Procurement and Contracting. Providers contracted by one system to address needs and outcome measures that fall within another system.

Initiative Wide Peer Learning Community

The Forum and its national public sector partners have heard from state system leaders that there is a need for a platform to meet, share ideas and brainstorm challenges related to working across systems. To address this need, an Initiative Wide Peer Learning Community will be convened throughout the BEST Youth Initiative that will include virtual meetings, in-person convenings, and

BEST YOUTH INITIATIVE METRICS

Percent of participants who report relevant and actionable learnings from peer-learning communities.

✱

Quantitative and qualitative insights on promising practices or innovations adopted by system leaders advancing a positive youth development (PYD) approach.

✱

Number of equitable youth development ecosystems built, shaped, and strengthened.

✱

Quantitative and qualitative data on co-designed and co-created innovative solutions implemented to improve youth outcomes.

✱

Funds invested or re-invested in outcomes-based efforts to improve the life prospects of youth.

informal opportunities to build relationships within and across states. The convenings will be structured and facilitated opportunities to learn from and support one another, as well as identify policy changes/innovations needed at the state and federal levels to support their work. True to the essence of a peer learning community, the State Teams will drive the focus of the Initiative Wide Peer Learning Community. Additionally, opportunities for informal learning as well as an online community will be created to allow State Teams to communicate and provide mutual assistance at key inflection points throughout the Initiative.

Customized Technical Assistance

In addition to the support and subject matter expertise of the Forum Teams and National Steering Committee members, customized

technical assistance is available for each State Team throughout the Initiative. State Teams will be encouraged to identify TA or capacity building needs during the Action Labs and Initiative Wide Peer Learning Community work. To provide just-in-time assistance, Forum Teams will have dedicated resources to garner or deliver the needed technical assistance. The Forum Teams will assemble a curated “bench” of technical assistance providers with expertise specific to the innovation of the State Teams to augment their expertise.

INVITATION TO APPLY

This Invitation to Apply and its attachments are available online at www.forumfyi.org/best. Only one application per state will be accepted.

Eligibility

To be eligible to apply, State Teams must:

- Include at least three agencies within the ecosystem, including education, workforce development, human services, behavioral health, child welfare, and/or juvenile justice. At minimum, there needs to be one upstream system that affects all youth, such as education and workforce development.
- Include at minimum four individuals with lived experience, including at least one youth with lived experience from each represented system and a family member/caregiver from one of the systems. (Youth and family member/caregiver’s time, transportation costs and childcare expenses will be reimbursed for all virtual and in-person meetings.)
- Have as system representatives state leaders who have decision-making authority – either directly or by proxy.
- Propose reforms/innovations that target youth ages 5-24.

- Demonstrate a track record of partnering with people with lived experience or make developing this capacity an explicit goal of the project. (See [“Partnering with People with Lived Experience in Systems Change”](#) and [“Roles for People with Lived Experience in BEST Youth Initiative.”](#))
- Provide evidence of State Team members’ commitment to participate in the Initiative. (See [“Letter of Participation”](#).)

SELECTION CRITERIA & PROCESS

Based on the written applications and virtual visits, the Forum will score applications according to the selection criteria below. NSC partners will then review applications and provide feedback.

Criteria

The BEST Youth Initiative is a pilot. As such, it seeks to select a group of states and proposed reforms/innovations that will provide broad learnings for the field as well as consider geographic and political diversity. Selection criteria are:

- **Experience and/or plan for engaging/partnering with People with Lived Experience.**
- **Receptivity and willingness** to dedicate time and political capital towards innovation and reform.
- **Capacity** to develop and implement cross-system, cross-sector solutions.
- **Level of need** for the youth in the systems involved in your proposal.
- **Strategic alignment/strength** of proposal for reform/innovation.

Process

Proposals will go through a multistage assessment process as follows:

- Review to ensure applications meet eligibility criteria.
- Applicants who have met eligibility criteria will be invited for a 60-minute virtual visit to discuss their proposed reform/innovation with the Forum Team and NSC partners. This will be an informal conversation that will allow state teams to better understand the Initiative’s components and expectations, and for the Forum Team to learn more about the State Team and the issues at the center of their proposed cross-system reform/innovation.
- The National Steering Committee reviews applications and provides feedback.
- The Forum and its national public sector partners will invite **up to five states** to participate. States will be notified by June 28, 2024.
- The BEST Youth Initiative will be launched at an in-person convening on July 30-31, 2024, in Washington D.C. Selected State Teams, including a person with lived experience from each represented system, will be invited to attend the National Launch. **We request that applicants take the necessary steps to make team members available on these dates to attend in person, in the event their state is selected to participate in the BEST Youth Initiative.**
 - Travel and lodging expenses will be covered for up to 7 members to attend the

National Launch and three additional in-person convenings of the Initiative Wide Peer Learning Community throughout the Initiative.

- The Forum will also provide compensation to participating youth and family/caregivers and cover childcare costs related to their in-person and virtual engagement.

APPLICATION INSTRUCTIONS

All applications are due by 8 p.m. EST, May 3, 2024. Proposals may be entered directly into the [Forum application webform](#) or submitted via email to: BESTYouth@forumfyi.org. Complete applications are comprised of a:

- Cover Page* (Access [Here](#))
- Application Narrative
- Letter of Participation* (Access [Here](#)). Please list the participants on your State Team. While the size of the team and total number of participants is at the state's discretion, the team should demonstrate a cross-agency alignment strategy in its composition and identify all people with lived experience.

**Note: The Cover Page and Letter of Participation documents can either be downloaded and filled out electronically or printed and completed manually. For those using the application webform, the Cover Page is integrated into it and does not require separate completion.*

Application Narrative.

Application narratives should be no more than 10 pages, 12-point font, 1-inch margins. (If an applicant chooses to include additional documents, such as data summaries, letters of support etc. they will not count towards your narrative and should be included as appendices).

Please organize the application narrative in the following sections. Please pay special attention to the questions designated with a 🌟; they are particularly important in assessing your proposal against the selection criteria referenced above.

- 1) **Executive Summary.** Describe the collaborative and proposed reform/innovation. (300 words or less)
- 2) **Issue Statement and Target Population.**
 - A. What is the system alignment issue(s) you are proposing to work on?
 - B. If you have identified a reform/innovation to address this problem, please describe.
 - C. What's the target population?
 - D. Describe your state's need for this project.
 - i. Please provide data on youth outcomes aligned with key performance indicators for the age group targeted in the systems involved in your proposal. 🌟
 - ii. Explain challenges in the past with cross-systems collaborations, including capacity or expertise limitations that have impeded progress. 🌟
- 3) **Project Goals and Objectives.**
 - A. What are the goals and objectives for the project?
 - B. What capacity and cross-system collaborative infrastructure does your effort plan to develop or strengthen? 🌟

- C. Describe how your project will address creating equitable opportunities and any disproportionate representation in systems. How will you work towards eliminating structural barriers? ★
- D. If successful, how will outcomes for the target population improve over the long term?
- E. If developing/improving the capacity of your state systems to authentically engage and partner with youth and family/caregivers with lived experience is an explicit goal of your project, please describe what success would look like. ★

4) **Project Description.**

- A. Please highlight the issue you focus on and describe the stage of innovation for your project:
 - Identifying/Scoping – a problem has been identified that needs multiple systems to address it.
 - Building/Refining – a strategy to address the problem needing multiple systems is in development, or a strategy is in early implementation and needs refinement.
 - Scaling – a cross-system innovation has been successfully implemented at the local or regional level or with a subset of state systems, and assistance is needed to take the reform/innovation statewide or expanded to impact youth in more systems.
- B. How does the project align with strategic priorities of the participating state team member agencies, as well as state leadership (e.g., governor, legislature)? ★
- C. What are the perceived risks to implementing the transformative change you are seeking? How will you mitigate these risks?
- D. If successful, how is your state positioned to sustain the cross-system collaboration developed or enhanced through the BEST Youth Initiative? ★

5) **Capacity and Readiness.**

- A. We are looking for your understanding of your strengths and areas for growth. On a scale of 1 to 5, where 1 is strongly disagree, 2 is disagree, 3 is neutral, 4 is agree, and 5 is strongly agree, please assess your Lead Agency/State Team partners' capacity indicating the level of agreement with the following statements.

Statement 1	Lead Agency/State Team partners are committed to cross-systems, cross-sector work.
Statement 2	Lead Agency/State Team partners are experienced in cross-systems, cross-sector work.
Statement 3	Experienced in engaging and partnering with people with lived experience. (See "Partnering with People with Lived Experience in Systems Change" and "Roles for People with Lived Experience in BEST Youth Initiative.")
Statement 4	Able to collect and analyze agency level data to inform decision-making for program improvements.
Statement 5	Able to collect and analyze cross-system data to inform state policymaking.
Statement 6	Able to measure and disaggregate outcome data in youth-serving systems.

- B. Describe the Governor/Cabinet level support and expectations that key agency leaders and staff have committed to implementing cross-systems, cross-sector strategies to improve youth outcomes. For State Supervised, County Administered systems, how are counties included for implementation? ★
- C. If relevant, describe any other cross-systems, cross-sector systems change efforts underway in your state, and any existing formal and/or informal collaborative planning infrastructure that supports or could support ongoing cross-system efforts. ★
- D. Describe your experience partnering with a diversity of people with lived experience, or the extent to which developing this capacity is an explicit goal of the project. If applicable, identify those members of your team that come to the work with “dual expertise” – a combination of lived and professional experiences.
- E. Describe how you engaged with and the level of involvement of people with lived experience in the process of developing this proposal. Share how you will identify, support, and engage additional PWLE to participate on the PWLE Advisory. ★
- F. Describe challenges and gaps impacting success (e.g., state’s climate for reform, legislative changes, etc.)
- G. What types of technical assistance would be most valuable to move this work forward?
- H. Describe any circumstances not listed above that could have an impact on your project’s success. This could include the state’s climate for reform, champions that could accelerate innovations, recent legislative changes that impact youth that could be leveraged, etc.

INFORMATIONAL WEBINAR FOR APPLICANTS

An informational webinar will be held at 1 p.m. EST on April 8, 2024, to review the Invitation to Apply, outline the BEST Youth Initiative’s goals, and answer questions from potential applicants. Attendance is encouraged but not required; you can [sign up here](#). A recording of the webinar can be reviewed at www.forumfyi.org/best until the closing of this application process.

Additional questions can be submitted to BESTYouth@forumfyi.org. Responses will be posted on the Forum’s BEST Youth Initiative website (www.forumfyi.org/best) and will be updated regularly.

KEY DATES	
Invitation to Apply Released	March 26, 2024
Informational Webinar (1:00 p.m. EST)	April 8, 2024
Written Applications Due	May 3, 2024
For Eligible Applicants, Virtual Visits with State Teams to Discuss Application	May 20-29, 2024
BEST Youth Initiative States Selected	June 28, 2024
BEST Youth Initiative National Launch	July 30-31, 2024

Forum Contact: Feel free to contact BESTYouth@forumfyi.org with any questions.