

a call to action



Creating New Opportunities for
Baltimore City's Disconnected Youth

February 2016

The **Baltimore Workforce
Funders Collaborative**
Partnering to Build a Stronger Workforce

**BALTIMORE'S
PROMISE**

JOTF **JOB OPPORTUNITIES TASK FORCE**
ADVOCATING BETTER SKILLS, JOBS, AND INCOMES

Acknowledgements

This document summarizes key findings and recommendations from two reports:

- *“Expanding Sector Employment Opportunities for Young Adults in Baltimore”* prepared by Kingslow Associates
- *“Connecting Baltimore’s Opportunity Youth to Careers”* prepared by Field Guide Consulting

The reports can be found at www.jotf.org, www.abagrantmakers.org and www.baltimorespromise.org.

Those reports and this executive summary were produced collaboratively by the Job Opportunities Task Force, the Baltimore Workforce Funders Collaborative and Baltimore’s Promise, with funding support from the Annie E. Casey Foundation, the Baltimore Metropolitan Council, the National Fund for Workforce Solutions and the Corporation for National and Community Service.

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ECONOMIC OPPORTUNITIES

for young people of color

In the spring of 2015, people across the nation and around the globe watched Baltimoreans take to the streets. The tumult was a passionate reaction to longstanding challenges confronting the city's lower-income African American communities. In particular, the unrest revealed the urgent need to create more economic opportunities for young people of color. In Baltimore, far too many youth drop out of school or graduate without the basic academic skills needed to secure family-supporting jobs. For those seeking work, entry-level jobs with a career path are difficult to find or hard to reach. With few realistic employment options, many young people in Baltimore resort to illicit activity to earn a living. Those who become involved in the criminal justice system face an added layer of difficulty in gaining mainstream employment.

These factors have left Baltimore in a challenging position: home to one of the nation's highest proportion of young people ages 16 to 24 who are neither in school nor working. Consider these sobering statistics:

MORE THAN **1 in 5**

young people ages 16-24 in Baltimore City are disconnected from work and school.

This is ~18,000 young people



38%

of "disconnected youth" lack a high school diploma or GED. On average, these youth have a 7th grade reading level and 5th grade math ability.



79%

are African-American, compared to the citywide African American population of 64 percent.

Drifting away from school and work during those early-adult years can leave deep scars. These youth and young adults fail to build workplace experience and employer relationships and miss out on the chance to explore jobs and careers. Over time, this disconnection tends to cripple a person's lifetime earnings potential; and research shows that disconnected youth will end up costing society more through criminal justice, social service and other types of public spending.

Despite these challenges, this population of young adults is also known as "opportunity youth," a recognition that they represent an enormous opportunity for helping to meet the employment needs of regional Baltimore employers. These young people have talents, dreams and goals for their lives and stand ready to be important assets to their families, local employers and the community. With the right assistance and support, they can contribute deeply to Baltimore's future.

To begin to fulfill that opportunity, Baltimore's civic leaders, including foundations, elected officials, community leaders, business groups, workforce development entities and others nonprofits, must recognize the critical need to do more to re-engage disconnected youth. A new concerted strategy and expanded resources will be required.

A BETTER APPROACH

to reconnecting opportunity youth

Connecting opportunity youth to jobs can be a complicated challenge. Workforce programs for adults are often not fully equipped to serve people younger than 24, a population that tends to need additional supports and a youth-focused approach that allows participants to learn, explore and build confidence while gaining work experience. A number of Baltimore nonprofits and public agencies are focused on providing those kinds of services—with mixed results.

Three prominent nonprofit organizations, the Baltimore Workforce Funders Collaborative (BWFC), Job Opportunities Task Force (JOTF) and Baltimore's Promise have renewed their focus on developing and fostering the implementation of strategies to improve the city's approach to re-connecting opportunity youth. These three organizations represent a broad array of civic leaders. BWFC brings together several leading funders focused on improving workforce development, while Baltimore's Promise is a partnership of key stakeholders, including foundations, universities, business groups and educational institutions.

In 2015, these organizations commissioned two studies about the city's approach to opportunity youth, with a particular focus on workforce training. BWFC commissioned Marcia Kingslow

of Kingslow Associates, an experienced workforce consulting firm, to prepare a report titled ***“Expanding Sector Employment Opportunities for Young Adults in Baltimore.”***

The report provides guidance on developing a strategy for opportunity youth focused on specific workplace sectors and makes suggestions on improving the city's opportunity youth infrastructure. JOTF and Baltimore's Promise commissioned Chris Seals and Field Guide Consulting, which has done several studies of workforce issues in Baltimore, to produce a report titled ***“Connecting Baltimore's Opportunity Youth to Careers.”*** This report examines national best practices and offers guidance for Baltimore on how to reframe programming to help opportunity youth overcome barriers and enter paths leading to work and careers.

The two reports, which relied on interviews, literature review and analysis, work in tandem to provide a fresh analysis of the city's efforts to create jobs and careers for young people who are disconnected from work and school. This document summarizes the key findings from these two reports and offers a set of unified recommendations. These recommendations provide a roadmap for a range of key stakeholders looking to strengthen programs for opportunity youth.

KEY FINDINGS

on the state of Baltimore's youth



- Baltimore has a large and urgent need to re-connect opportunity youth to **education, training and jobs**, as well as to experiences that can lead to entrepreneurship.
- A range of factors, **including concentrated poverty, institutional racism and disinvestment**, contributes to the city's large population of disconnected youth.
- A number of nonprofits are doing good work to serve disconnected youth. However, a **major, cross-cutting response is needed** to better address the needs of Baltimore's large population of young people who are neither in school or employed.
- **City agencies and nonprofits involved in serving opportunity youth** should examine their internal processes and practices, revamp strategies to enhance collaboration and effective service delivery and implement better approaches.
- Increased investments are needed to **expand high-quality and well-coordinated services** that assist opportunity youth throughout Baltimore City.
- Using industry sector-focused strategies that are **developed with the specific needs of young adults in mind**, the potential exists to connect many more of Baltimore's opportunity youth to careers.
- Re-engaging these young people will result in **significant economic benefits** for youth, employers, society, and taxpayers.
- Given the renewed interest in better serving opportunity youth, **Baltimore can and should take bold action** to give young people a better chance to gain work and build careers.

RECOMMENDATIONS

for better serving opportunity youth

1) Expand Baltimore's industry-based workforce development programs to more effectively serve opportunity youth

- Incorporate positive youth development principles into Baltimore's industry-focused workforce programs.
- Work in partnership with respected community-based organizations, including youth-led organizations and others who understand how to work with youth.
- Integrate proven strategies for connecting youth to careers including earn and learn options, support from caring adults and positive role models of working adults, mentoring, peer networks and youth-oriented bundled services.
- Expand paid work experience opportunities for youth and young adults.
- Introduce more contextualized numeracy and literacy learning approaches that connect to and augment industry-based workforce programs.

2) Build on Baltimore's existing youth-oriented career resources to better serve opportunity youth

- Encourage and create incentives for organizations serving opportunity youth to work collaboratively to reduce fragmentation and duplication of programs for opportunity youth.
- Coordinate services so that providers communicate with each other to better maintain services for youth.
- Make information about services easily accessible to young people.
- Map entry-level career pathways that fit with the assets and interests of young adults as well as the local labor market.

- Adopt a trauma-informed approach with a focus on enhancing the well-being and resilience of young people. As part of an integrated set of academic and career services, screen for the prevalence of trauma and mental health issues and expand treatment and other mental health resources to better address needs of opportunity youth.

3) Expand collaboration and partnerships citywide in any build-out of a youth-focused sector strategy in Baltimore

- Convene stakeholders with sector-based workforce development programs and organizations serving opportunity youth.
- Build capacity within organizations and across the system, with a focus on increasing youth employment and managing successful partnerships between workforce and youth-serving organizations.

4) Engage and work with Baltimore youth to develop new approaches to serving opportunity youth

- Develop ways to include youth voices in the conversation and help plan systemic and programmatic changes.

5) Build system-wide data collection and data sharing capacity

- Identify and implement improved ways to track and share data for youth participating in a full range of programs.
- Explore linking information from a unified database system serving opportunity youth to the Maryland Longitudinal Data System.

6) Build a culture of evaluation, learning and continuous improvement

- Build the capacity of workforce providers to use data and engage in ongoing self-assessment to improve performance and outcomes.
- Shift the measure of success from job placement and short-term retention in a job to long-term retention in the labor market and career advancement.

7) Expand funding opportunities to effectively connect opportunity youth to sector-based training

- Develop new ways to braid different funding streams, particularly public sector resources, to increase the overall impact of each.
- Develop a dedicated funding source to pay for expanded sector-based workforce programming for opportunity youth.
- Develop strategies for opportunity youth in sector-based workforce training; recognize the higher costs needed to effectively serve this population.

8) Develop systemic interventions to address basic math and reading deficiencies

- Create, rebuild and expand community-based literacy programs.
- Pilot evidence-based models that enable opportunity youth to obtain high school diplomas and GEDs, such as adult high schools or other intensive, cohort-based models.

9) Engage more employers and proactively improve perceptions of opportunity youth

- Assess the value of advertising or outreach efforts to improve employer perceptions of Baltimore's population of opportunity youth.
- Identify employer champions who will advocate for creating new opportunities for disconnected youth and young adults.

10) Assess and enhance Mayor's Office of Employment Development (MOED) programs for opportunity youth

- Assess MOED's youth programs to determine effectiveness and actions needed to take advantage of emerging opportunities.
- Identify resources needed to help improve and modernize systems.

LOOKING AHEAD to Baltimore's future

This document lays out a range of strategies that can help address Baltimore's urgent need to do more to create new opportunities for the city's large population of disconnected youth. Together, these recommendations provide a path forward. But achieving these goals will require strong leadership, new resources, expanded collaboration and a fresh examination of the city's approach to serving youth and young adults. It will require sustained attention from private and public funders, workforce development providers, youth-serving organizations, youth-led community groups, elected officials at all levels of government, employer groups and other civic leaders. Working together, we can indeed create real and lasting opportunities for the city's disconnected youth—and rewrite the narrative about Baltimore.

Baltimore's Promise is a city-wide collaborative, composed of public, business, higher education, nonprofit and philanthropic leaders, that serves as a catalyst for coordinating strategy, identifying quality programs, supporting alignment activities, establishing shared measures for meaningful results, building public will and advancing policy on behalf of Baltimore City's youth.

The Baltimore Workforce Funders Collaborative (BWFC) is a public/private partnership hosted by the Association of Baltimore Area Grantmakers (ABAG). BWFC is dedicated to advancing the labor market prospects of unemployed and underemployed Baltimore City residents while meeting the needs of our region's employers for a skilled workforce.

The **Job Opportunities Task Force** works to increase the skills, job opportunities and incomes of low-skill, low-income workers and job seekers in Baltimore City and across the State of Maryland.