CAMPAIGN FOR YOUTH

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Subcommittee on Income Security and Family Support
Hearing on Disconnected and Disadvantaged Youth

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by

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Linda Harris, Director, Youth Policy, Center for Law and Social Policy, Co-chair
Sally Prouty, President and CEO, The Corps Network, Co-chair

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Our Economy, Our Youth, Our Future:
A 10-point national investment strategy for reconnecting our nation's youth

The Campaign for Youth (CFY), a coalition of national organizations in the youth field, was established in 2002 in an effort to build a united voice for vulnerable and disconnected youth in this nation. CFY has been working collectively to bring visibility to the magnitude and challenges surrounding these young people and to advance strategic solutions for addressing this issue at the national level and on the ground in the communities that are most heavily impacted by the loss of this potential talent.

We appreciate this opportunity to submit our recommendations for the record to the House Ways and Means Subcommittee on Income Security and Family Support.

The Challenge

As a nation, we confront a challenge of tremendous consequence—a challenge that we cannot continue to ignore. Millions of youth are being left behind, disconnecting from the societal and economic mainstream, and falling into harm's way. Far too many young people are being lost to hopelessness, violence, and the lure of crime and the underground economy. We are losing a significant portion of the talent, brainpower, and manpower that we will need to fuel our economy and build our communities in the 21st century, in an increasingly competitive global market. **Solutions Exist!** This young potential can be harnessed and redirected by applying what we have learned from effective programming and practice. As national attention focuses on reforming our education infrastructure such that "no child is left behind," we must concurrently focus national attention on prioritizing and investing in those who have been and will continue to be left behind until these reform efforts take hold.

One in three youth who start high school will not graduate four years later.[1] More than half of youth of color in low-income communities will drop out.[2] In 2004, two-thirds of large school districts had four-year graduation rates of less than 60 percent.[3] However, this is not just an issue of race; nor is it simply an urban issue. Poor white youth and youth in poor rural areas face virtually the same bleak future.

The implications of this phenomenon are staggering—more than 540,000 students dropping out of high school each year.[4] Here are some of the stark realities:

- The United States is 17th among developed nations in terms of the percentage of youth that graduate high school.[5] U.S. dropouts' literacy skills are lower than those of most industrialized nations, performing comparably only to dropouts from Chile, Poland, Portugal, and Slovenia.[6] This does not bode well for our economic competitiveness.

- In an analysis of 2003-04 teen employment statistics, the Center for Labor Market Studies determined that teen employment was at its lowest level in 57 years.[7] It is predicted to drop again in 2007.[8]
- The situation is particularly dire in minority communities. For example, as few as 20 percent of black teens are employed at any time. About 50 percent of young black men ages 16 to 24 who are not enrolled in school are unemployed, and approximately one-third of all young black men are involved with the criminal justice system at any given time.[9]
- Three-fourths of state prison inmates are high school dropouts, as are 59 percent of inmates in the federal system. Approximately 16 percent of all young men ages 18 to 24 without a high school degree or GED are either incarcerated or on parole at any point in time.[10]
- The death rate for persons with less than 12 years of education is 2.5 times higher than for those with 13 or more years of education.[11]
- The earnings gap widens with years of schooling and formal training. In 2003, high school graduates earned 50 percent more than dropouts, and college graduates earned three times as much as dropouts. Also, male dropouts' earnings fell compared to earlier years.[12]
- If just one-third of dropouts were to earn a high school diploma, savings on food stamps, housing assistance, and Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF) would amount to $10.8 billion—more than enough to cover the cost of investing in these young peoples' education.[13]

Youth unemployment has been remarkably persistent. An estimated 3.8 million youth ages 18 to 24—roughly 15 percent of all young adults—are neither employed nor in school. Since 2000 alone, the ranks of these non-engaged young adults have grown by 700,000—a 19 percent increase. By 2010, the population of youth ages 16 to 24 is projected to grow by 3.6 million, or 10 percent, with the greatest increases in minority groups, in which for many youth English is a second language.[14]

Enormous talent, intelligence, and positive energy are being wasted as this national resource of young people is being left behind. Those of us who advocate for more opportunities have witnessed thousands of times the transformation of attitude, identity, skills, and aspirations that comes with the right set of opportunities and experiences.

Because there are not enough such opportunities, a substantial proportion of our young people are unprepared to meet the needs of employers or the challenges of higher education. Most young people without a high school diploma lack the requisite skills for success in even entry-level employment. According to a report by Public/Private Ventures, "nationwide, 15 million people between the ages of 16 and 24 are not prepared for high-wage employment. Inadequate education or training is a major reason."[15] A patchwork of second-chance programs are succeeding against the odds in transforming the future for the youth they touch. However, federal disinvestment in funding for such programs has been substantial.[16]

The time between age 16 and age 24 is an important developmental period for young people, as they are preparing for adult responsibilities. This is the time to lay the foundation for successful labor market participation and civic responsibility, through exposure to work and learning, career options, training, community service, leadership opportunities, access to postsecondary education, and progressively responsible employment experiences. We are losing ground internationally in terms of the skill levels young Americans bring to the workforce. Thus, it is against our national interest to allow millions of young people to spend this critical period only marginally attached to the labor market; increasingly reliant on the underground economy for their livelihoods; disconnected from social supports and constructive guidance; and learning their survival skills from the streets instead of from the classroom, the workplace, and adult mentors.

Current school reform efforts, while much needed and long overdue, most likely will not touch this group of youth who are no longer on the school rolls, are too old for traditional school settings, lack academic skills and credits, and are in need of much greater supports.

Addressing the needs of this population of youth requires a different kind of reform. Public youth-serving systems must engage with education, business and industry, and the community to structure programs and pathways that support the transition of these young people from the streets to the classrooms, to hands-on learning and service environments, to college campuses, to leadership opportunities, to apprenticeships and internships, and ultimately to opportunities in the workplace that lead to economic success and lifelong citizenship.

The National Investment Strategy

The Campaign for Youth advocates a national policy and national movement that will catalyze all levels of government and sectors of the community to engage in an effort to reconnect our youth. We advocate for building on the good work that has been done and the lessons learned about creating pathways for these youth, and we advocate for connecting the systems and resources in communities to make this happen. This national movement should be fueled by a federal investment strategy that builds on the following key components:

1. Make reconnecting our youth a national priority. This would require activating the Federal Youth Development Council (FYDC) and setting goals and benchmarks aimed at getting youth off the streets and couches and into the classrooms, training programs, colleges, and workplaces. The council would serve as "the place" to coordinate multiple responses, break down silos, and promote interaction among program streams. It would require setting national benchmarks and challenging state and local communities to establish benchmarks related to improving the education and labor market status of vulnerable youth, increasing the postsecondary participation of traditionally underserved populations, and closing the disparity gap in education and labor market outcomes for minority and immigrant youth—and to monitor progress against these benchmarks. The federal government would need to provide not only the leadership in this area but also the resource support for research and development, technology, and technical assistance.

2. Create a locus of responsibility. Leadership at the local and state levels needs to be supported to create a locus of responsibility for out-of-school unemployed young people. At present, nobody is in charge of or accountable for youth who leave school

prematurely or fall between the cracks as they transition between systems. Communities need to be supported in undertaking aggressive efforts that produce real change on the ground in the ways public systems work with community-based and faith-based providers, the business community, and private foundations to create a comprehensive and coherent youth service-delivery system.

3. Build the delivery capacity in communities of high youth distress. In order to address this issue at a scale sufficient to make a measurable difference in education and labor market outcomes, communities will need to rethink and realign the ways in which systems and resources come together to support vulnerable youth. In communities where one-third to one-half of youth leave school prior to graduation, these systems are under considerable strain in terms of both resources and the regulatory environments that govern them. It is a tremendous undertaking to marry systems that may have clashing cultures and complicated governance and protocols. However, this must be achieved if we are to change the landscape of youth service delivery and, ultimately, the outcomes for youth. Though its funding was short lived, the Youth Opportunity program, which provided communities with federal funding to do just that, had a tremendous impact, helping many communities to realign their delivery systems. It had considerable success in engaging youth and connecting them to work experiences, post-secondary options, training, and employment.

4. Create on-ramps and pipelines connecting youth to high-skill opportunities. Communities with high levels of youth failure need assistance to assume accountability for the large segment of educationally disengaged youth and to program accordingly. Our objective is to work with the private sector to create pathways that will lead to post-secondary credentials, skills that are marketable in the emerging economy, and supports that will help them navigate in a complicated labor-market environment. This will take leadership and cross-system capacity building to construct more flexible learning environments that incorporate contextual learning, innovative instructional technologies, alternative methods of awarding and retrieving credit, and alternate vehicles for financing education. The educational profile of these youth run the gamut from well below sixth-grade literacy level to levels just short of high school diploma or GED, with most falling on the lower end. There is considerable documentation of the attributes of quality alternative programming that has been successful for at-risk and out-of-school populations. Communities will need resource support to design and implement a menu of options, drawing from best practice that is appropriate for their youth population and labor market area. They will need support to work with the state and the business community to ensure that these programs bring young people to the level of proficiency needed to succeed in all postsecondary endeavors.

5. Take successful programs to scale. There is a need for federal investment in enabling communities to replicate and take to scale those existing programs of demonstrated effectiveness for which there is great demand. The tremendous resource, talent, and infrastructure that exist in the current youth delivery system must be built upon and strengthened. Those national and local programs that attract waiting lists of disconnected young people and achieve good outcomes in education, job

placement, personal responsibility, low recidivism rates, community service, and/or civic engagement should be expanded as a matter of basic public policy, to reach the goal of reconnecting all youth.

6. Greatly expand programs for work experience and civic engagement. Work skills and work ethic are not learned in classrooms. They are learned in the early years through the experience of parents and other family members and in the teen years through hands-on experience. In communities where youth are afforded fairly limited exposure to work, there is little opportunity to develop the skill set for success. For years, the federal summer jobs programs provided this experience. More recently, YouthBuild, service and conservation corps, and workforce development programs in the workforce system have provided this much-needed exposure. However, the standalone summer jobs program has been eliminated, and the federal resources for the other opportunities are inadequate to meet the demand. If we want young people to exhibit appropriate work skills and behaviors as adults, we must provide access to paid work experience, internships, apprenticeships, community service, and on-the-job training—and we must take successful work based programs to scale.

7. Increase business engagement. Young people can't aspire to be part of occupations, industries, or work environments of which they are unaware. Expanding these youth's horizons and their understanding of the opportunities that are available—and the ways to access them—are key to transforming their future. Providing such access and exposure will require aggressive business involvement far beyond a role as advisors. Business participation is needed as communities strategically design their delivery systems, to ensure the pathways that are built and skills sets that are imparted are aligned with industry needs and standards. Business and industry representatives will be needed in classrooms, to provide relevant training and exposure. More workplaces will be needed to serve as learning environments, and supervisors will be needed to serve as mentors.

8. Expand funding for knowledge development, incubation, and dissemination. As states and localities take on this challenge, it is important that vehicles be put in place to seed innovation; nurture new development; provide for research and evaluation to identify and document promising practice that currently exist; and provide resources for the technical support that communities will need to support the development of leadership, management, and direct delivery skills that will be needed for success.

9. Support the development of diverse and sustainable funding mechanisms. The unfortunate history of youth programming in communities is that programs grow and fold with the vagaries of federal funding. Communities lose considerable talent and delivery capacity as trained staff move on and capable providers close their doors. It is imperative that we find more stable funding vehicles for programming for youth in high-risk situations. Ultimately, successful federal investments should be maintained and taken to scale, deliberately leveraging state and local funds. In the

meantime, communities need assistance in developing sustainability plans that include creative leveraging of existing funding streams, accessing foundation funding, generating new revenue streams, fundraising, and creating other income-generation vehicles. It is important that such sustainability planning begins at the start and not at the point when funding is running out.

10. Ensure program quality and accountability. It is important not only to increase the quantity of programs for young people who need them but also to ensure that they are of high quality. Research by the Next Generation Youth Work Coalition found that youth workers are paid half of what teachers are paid—resulting in high turnover and often in low quality. We know what works: the National Academy of Sciences has identified the features of positive developmental settings for youth, and the National Youth Employment Coalition has identified a set of quality standards for youth programs—the Promising and Effective Practices Network (PEPNet)—rooted in research and practice. We also know how to *measure* what works: the High Scope Educational Research Foundation's Youth Program Quality Assessment meets rigorous scientific criteria. It is imperative that the federal government create an overarching program quality assessment for federal youth programs. Alignment and an increase in federal research, data collection, training, and technical assistance efforts are essential for program improvement.

We need a national vision for youth anchored in the belief that all youth should have equitable access to the promise and prosperity that America has to offer. This belief should guide our priorities, our policies, and our actions as individuals in a caring community and as a nation. It should resonate across all levels of government and at the grassroots of community service delivery. There must be a commitment to actualize that vision by making the investments at the scale needed until we eliminate the education and labor market disparities for poor and minority youth. It is not just about funding. It is about rethinking systems, policies, relationships, and collective responsibility. Leadership on this issue begins with acknowledging that the situation that exists—millions of youth being left behind—is unacceptable and that solutions must be bold, systemic, and collaborative. Every sector of the community and every youth-serving system should be mobilized to be part of the solution.

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