

Youth Opportunity: The Lessons, Legacy and Impact on Community Practice

Hartford

In Brief:

- In 2000, Hartford was awarded a \$28 million Youth Opportunity Grant from the U.S. Department of Labor – Yo! Hartford.
- YO! Hartford targeted 7,000 young people ages 14-21 living in the city's most impoverished neighborhoods.
- Since opening its doors, YO! Hartford has engaged more than 2,700 young people in a broad range of workforce and education programs.
- YO! Hartford was highly successful in getting resource support from four of six youth-serving systems, including the school, juvenile justice, WIA, and welfare and child welfare systems.
- YO! Hartford's college prep program has helped nearly 300 out-of-school youth and youth involved with the juvenile justice system enter college.
- YO! Hartford has helped more than 650 young people earn valuable educational credentials (post-secondary degree, high school diploma, GED, or vocational skill credential); and another 1,822 stayed in school.
- YO! Hartford increased labor force participation by youth ages 16-19 by 3.4% from 2000-2004.

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The Youth Opportunity Story: Changing the Landscape For Youth in High Poverty Communities

In May 2000, the United States Department of Labor created the Youth Opportunity Grant Program (YO) as a national initiative to enhance the youth delivery system that originated in the Workforce Investment Act (WIA) of 1998. During the program's first year, the Department awarded YO grants to 36 high-poverty urban, rural and Native American communities. These communities were among the most economically distressed communities in the nation. In addition, they were experiencing high dropout rates, high youth unemployment rates, and greater incidences of juvenile crime, violence and gang activity.

Communities used the Youth Opportunity Grants – ranging from \$3.1 to \$43.8 million over five years – to establish a comprehensive approach to youth service delivery models and create:

- Comprehensive youth development systems, which offer skills training, basic education, work experience, committed involvement of caring adults and developmental opportunities aimed at assisting young people in the successful transition to adulthood and responsible citizenship.
- Youth Opportunity Community Centers to serve as safe and accessible places where youth develop and improve their educational and employment skills as well as receive long-term support services.
- Partnerships with public, private and nonprofit organizations to leverage resources and expand outcomes.

YO! Hartford provided many youth with resources and support.

One of the things I enjoyed was the support by YO! Staff finding necessary resources for me to pay for college and gaining the work experience I needed through internships while I was in school.

YO! Hartford Participant

At the heart of the YO story are the tens of thousands of youth whose lives have been changed as a result of access to opportunity, tools and resources they needed to prepare for successful futures.

Simply put, YO changed lives.

The Lessons: YO! Hartford

- Hartford developed customized software that enabled it to share information and link with a broad network of service provider agencies. Integrating this system with the school districts allowed Hartford YO's case managers to track participants' attendance and grades. This connectivity strengthened School Prevention Teams in several schools and created a real-time, comprehensive in-school youth database to track outcomes and goals. The Hartford system also allowed program management to identify which case managers were most successful at engaging youth in the activities that would help them achieve their goals.
- The site created a Diploma Plus program in cooperation with (and housed within) the Hartford Public Schools' adult education system. The program included internships and career work, as well as courses at Capital Community College.
- YO! Hartford established a Credit Retrieval program for out-of-school youth and those involved in the justice system. With adequate resources in place, it was able to refer these youth directly to a Youth Development Specialist who developed service plans for them and enrolled them in the most appropriate educational option – i.e. Credit Retrieval, Diploma Plus, Credit Diploma, GED or a return to school. The program provided youth involved with the justice system with invaluable workplace skills, work experience and jobs.

The Hartford Legacy

The YO! Hartford experience was similar to many of the other 36 YO sites across the country. The Hartford site served as an example of how collaborations and partnerships can increase educational options for under-credited, over-aged students and for those who have dropped out of school. Community leaders learned that with sufficient resources, strategic cross-systems planning and collaboration, adequately trained staff, and a broad service delivery network of colleges, universities, community-based, nonprofit, and business organizations they could improve educational and employment outcomes for out-of school youth and those most at risk of dropping out and becoming disconnected.

Many of the 36 communities that received federal funding through the YO program have continued to provide comprehensive youth services and support based on the YO model even after the grant period ended. Today, Hartford continues to use the best practices and lessons learned from YO in its strategic plan for systemic change in preparing 14-24 year olds to join the workforce. This initiative, the Future Workforce Collaboration, is working to expand programs and services that improve educational and employment outcomes for youth.

Addressing the Facts

In order to provide services and supports for all youth who would benefit, more funding is needed for programs that focus on removing barriers to employment, reducing dropout rates and providing support to youth disconnected from school and work. Communities must commit to finding the resources needed to provide these comprehensive services. In order to target these resources appropriately, communities must ascertain the underlying factors that contribute to unemployment and lack of education. Only a comprehensive and informed approach can make a significant difference in leveling the playing field and giving disconnected youth the support they need to become self-sufficient.

Consider the Facts:

- According to a recent report by the Center for Labor Market Studies at Northeastern University, the unemployment rates for youth in Hartford are highest among low-income youth, youth of color and those who have dropped out.
- From 2005-2007, the average unemployment rate for Black and Hispanic youth was 40% and 32%, respectively, compared to an unemployment rate of 6.3% for whites.
- The unemployment rate was 38% for youth ages 16-19 and 28% for youth ages 20-24.
- The 2005-2007 average unemployment rates for youth who did not complete high school were 50%, compared with 33% percent for high school graduates and 19% for college graduates.
- Youth with an annual household income under \$20K had the highest unemployment rate in the study (60%). This is 33 percentage points higher than the rate for those with household income of \$20-39K.