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TRANSITION BRIEFING & RECOMMENDATIONS

**Youth, Equity, and the Power of Now: Our
Collective Responsibility**

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Introduction

About half of Americans are millennials, Gen Z, or younger. They number 166 million and are larger than the combined Gen X, baby boomer, and older populations. As the most racially diverse generation of the nation, they have experienced immense social and economic instability—from recessions, mass shootings, public lynchings and visible police brutality to growing income inequality and a once-in-a-century global pandemic. Young people have also disproportionately borne the economic burden of the pandemic and recession—as youth unemployment has skyrocketed—while also facing tremendous mental health stress and financial strain before and during the pandemic. But the roots of this crisis are structural and include the racism and xenophobia that young adults of color face in school, at work, and in their communities. Young people are directly affected by innumerable policies relating to health and mental health, employment and economic security, education and career pathways, justice and safe communities, and child care—but public policy has consistently failed them and has not centered them in decision-making.

Why We Can't Wait: Young People Are Facing a Catastrophic Crisis, But We Can Take Action

- Young adults are one of the poorest groups in this nation, and young people of color are more likely to live in poverty than white young adults.¹
- Even as the nation enjoyed record low unemployment rates between 2016 and early 2020, young people experienced unemployment rates twice as high as the national average. During the pandemic, young people of color have experienced brutal unemployment rates over 45 percent.² And over 90 percent of unemployed young people reported not being able to access any income.³
- Millions of young adults are drowning in student loan debt, which reinforces the racial wealth gap and threatens economic stability well into their lifetimes.
- The COVID-19 pandemic has caused youth disconnection rates to spike dramatically. Experts estimate that the number of Opportunity Youth—young people 16-24 who aren't enrolled in school or working—will easily top 6 million and could swell to almost one-quarter of all young people.⁴
- Two in three young people expressed that they were feeling down, depressed, or hopeless during the pandemic, while uninsured rates for young adults increased.⁵
- Well before the current uprisings for racial justice, too many young people were not safe in their communities. Young people of color have been at the forefront of sustained global protests calling for racial justice and an end to police brutality as one of the most-impacted groups. For example, Black young men are most likely to die because of law enforcement intervention; and young Black women comprised 13 percent of public stops by police but made up 38 percent of young women arrested.⁶

This transition paper proposes four categories of specific actions that add up to a bold cross-cutting vision for youth and young adults, centering young people of color and lifting up the leadership of young people themselves:

1. Make urgently needed investments in youth and young adults in the next coronavirus response package.
2. Take immediate executive action to respond to the pandemic and recession crisis among youth and young adults.
3. Transform the narrative about youth and young adults, using the bully pulpit, new structures, and personnel appointments to keep up the momentum for policy change.
4. Commit to an ambitious legislative agenda and restore progress building on these immediate actions with a focus on equity, healing, and justice.

Make urgently needed investments in youth and young adults in the next coronavirus package

Major immediate investments are crucial for young people and for the nation's future. If we fail to act in better supporting young adults of color, the after-effects of the underlying inequity and the recession that has amplified it will devastate the future prospects of young people, the next generation of families of color, and our overall social and economic fabric.

All Americans—and particularly youth and young adults—need an [array of provisions](#) to mitigate the pain caused by this public health and financial crisis. Among those provisions are:

- Extending Unemployment Insurance enhancements from the Coronavirus Aid, Relief, and Economic Security (CARES) Act, including Pandemic Unemployment Assistance (PUA), and ensuring accessibility for youth and young adults;
- Permanently removing time limits in the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) for unemployed childless adults age 18-49, also called Able-Bodied Adult Without Dependents (ABAWDs) and urging states to suspend any work requirements they impose as a condition of eligibility; and
- Extending the [paid leave provisions](#) in the Families First Coronavirus Relief Act and expanding its coverage to ensure more workers are eligible for the program.

Given the financial and employment crisis facing far too many youth and young adults, we recommend the following:

- ***Create a massive Works Progress Administration (WPA)-style permanent national youth subsidized jobs program in the immediate COVID relief package, and work with Congress to champion it.*** This program should prioritize Black, Indigenous, and People of Color (BIPOC) youth and young adults and those who have historically been economically marginalized, while also strengthening the economic and workforce infrastructure in communities and for workers. The [Connecting Youth to Jobs Act](#) introduced by Representatives Marcia L. Fudge and Marcy Kaptur provides a good starting point for structure and implementation.
- The Biden-Harris Administration must also urge Congress to provide ***additional funding to states to support youth outreach and navigation*** in partnership with community-based organizations, educational institutions, and other programs that serve or have relationships with young people. While many young people were eligible for earlier stimulus payments and

these programs, they faced difficulties navigating overwhelmed and overburdened public systems. Community-based organizations have stepped in with little or no resources to help youth access these programs. Congress must also provide ***flexible funding directly to youth-serving systems and programs*** to support youth who may not qualify for financial assistance otherwise and to keep them connected through virtual and in-person programming (should it be safe). Youth programs have stepped in over the past several months using philanthropic funds and innovative resources to support the food, transportation, and other cash needs of youth. Congress can support this work through set-aside funding to localities and direct funding to non-profits and federal programs, for example under the Workforce Innovation and Opportunities Act (WIOA), Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention Act (JJDP), Runaway and Homeless Youth Act, and Corporation for National and Community Service (CNCS).

Take immediate executive action to respond to the pandemic and recession crisis among youth and young adults

- ***Reinstate the Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals (DACA) program*** and work with Congress to pass the ***American Dream and Promise Act*** to ease the pathway to citizenship for immigrant youth and young adults and protect young immigrants who are vulnerable to deportation.
- ***Take executive action to [cancel student debt](#)***. This will help all student borrowers but will greatly reduce the wealth gap and income inequality among young adults of color and, in particular, Black youth.⁷
- Direct the Council of Economic Advisors, National Economic Council, Domestic Policy Council, and Office of Management and Budget to work with federal agencies to ***develop immediate and long-term youth-centered policies and investments*** and produce a public report within 90 days. The report should include recommendations for robust funding levels based on youth need, programs, and best practices to address devastating unemployment and underemployment rates, high prevalence of mental health issues, health care access, food and housing insecurity, and the consequences of mass incarceration among youth. Long term, these federal offices and agencies should also conduct a review of data collection systems across the Departments of Labor, Education, Agriculture, Interior, Health and Human Services (including the Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration (SAMHSA) and the Centers for Medicare and Medicaid Services (CMS)), Justice, and Housing and Urban Development, Transportation, along with the Corporation for National and Community Service and others. This review of data systems will help policymakers better understand how programs are serving young people, who they are serving (including by race, gender, disability and other key demographic information), and the structural issues they face.
- ***Codify and make permanent changes to telehealth regulations*** that maximize flexibility in licensing requirements for telehealth providers, originating sites, currently available and future forms of technology, and reimbursement parity. ***Provide robust funding for implementation*** to states in partnership with human services providers and youth-serving organizations.
- ***Ensure health coverage of former foster youths from other states***.⁸ Issue an Executive Order to require all states during the COVID-19 public health emergency to provide Medicaid to former foster youth through age 26 who have aged out of the system in a different state. Provide an enhanced federal match to states that exercise the option to cover youth from other

states before the deadline of January 1, 2023, as required by the 2018 Support Act, so they can avoid gaps in coverage for a significant proportion of youth experiencing homelessness.

- ***Investigate the U.S. Department of Justice’s rescinded guidance*** related to [youth justice, which will reduce housing discrimination and racial discrimination in education](#), and issue new guidance with updated research and input from diverse stakeholders including young people, educators, practitioners, and civil and human rights groups.
- Redesign education strategies to keep young people engaged and [reengage those who](#) are out of school while also dismantling carceral school discipline policies and practices. Doing so will help eliminate the pathway to prison.
 - Direct the U.S. Department of Education to ***reinstate guidance and accompanying funds to incentivize state and local education agencies on school climate and discipline*** and alternatives to suspensions and expulsions. Also, direct the Department of Education to remove school resource officers and law enforcement in schools.
- The Administration must work with Congress [to mitigate food insecurity](#) among college students and ensure they are not excluded in the next stimulus package. One immediate action the Administration can take to support college students with low incomes is to direct the Department of Agriculture’s Food and Nutrition Service (FNS) to grant waivers of the student restrictions under SNAP. Thirty states and the District of Columbia have requested such a waiver, recognizing the burden many students faced in working 20 hours per week to maintain their SNAP eligibility as campuses shut down and the retail and restaurant industries where many worked were particularly impacted. On April 10, 2020, FNS issued a blanket denial of the requests from states to waive the SNAP student eligibility restrictions during the COVID-19 pandemic and economic crisis. FNS should grant the requested waiver of student restrictions and encourage states to adopt it. This would financially support students who were largely left out of COVID-19 stimulus relief. After granting the waiver, FNS should lift up examples and best practices from states that have implemented the waiver and publicize any available data on how students have benefitted from the policy change.

Transform the narrative about youth and young adults—using the bully pulpit, new structures, and personnel appointments—to *place young people front and center* and keep up the momentum for policy change

In discussions CLASP has facilitated with young women and men of color, they speak directly about their lack of opportunity. They share the difficulty of navigating complex life situations, which we know arise from structural issues like poverty, lack of income, and [systems of power](#) like racism and patriarchy. These young people call for investments in whole communities, recognizing the interconnected nature of both the structural barriers they face and the outcomes they shape across race, gender, and generation. In the historic 2020 presidential election, young people of color [supported the Biden-Harris ticket](#) by overwhelming margins. In this time of unprecedented crisis, we desperately need leadership that acknowledges systemic and pervasive racism in law enforcement, the criminal legal system, immigration, and income inequality—and that addresses the economic and psychological fallout of COVID-19. As a Brookings Institution blog recently noted, “the fact that nearly two-fifths of millennials and Gen Z are Black and brown makes these issues deeply personal for them.”⁹ These issues should be just as personal to the rest of us, and we need policymakers who go to bat for them like they have done for our democracy.

- ***Make clear that youth and young adults will be a priority*** for this Administration, as evidenced in the State of the Union address, budget proposals, legislative priorities, and public engagements—with a laser focus on young people of color and those who face tremendous structural barriers to opportunity. Identify mechanisms to employ young adults in the federal government and use available [data](#) and partnerships with youth-led movements, networks and youth advocates, to drive this narrative and make public the consequences to our shared social, civic, and economic security and viability if we lack deliberate action. The Biden-Harris Administration should also signal this commitment through early appointments of young adults and millennials.
- ***Issue an Executive Order to establish a “National Youth Development and Equity Administration”*** charged with developing and instituting a national youth policy agenda, in the fashion of the New Deal’s *National Youth Administration*, that is fitting to the current context as a stand-alone entity. This will eventually require authorization from Congress, but the Administration can begin the foundational work in the first 100 days to structure the agency and its priorities by conducting ***youth listening sessions***; seeking stakeholder input via an official ***Request for Information***; creating a ***young adult advisory council***; forming a ***cross-agency committee***; and seeking ***research and policy ideas*** gathered by the National Economic Council, Domestic Policy Council, Office of Management and Budget, and federal agencies. These actions would culminate in a public report to Congress.
 - The National Youth Development and Equity Administration shall be led by a Cabinet-level employee. It should include a paid youth advisory council and a cross-agency and partnership committee made up of representatives from the Departments of Labor, Education, Agriculture, Interior, Health and Human Services (including SAMHSA and CMS), Justice, and Housing and Urban Development, along with business and industry, racial justice organizations, etc.

“Many developed and developing nations have already taken the lead in putting in place dedicated youth ministries that are yielding immediate dividends for their youth agenda.”¹⁰ The United States can join these nations in our public, policy, and fiscal commitments to young people.

- ***Swiftly move away from law-and-order language.*** Reverse the hateful and harmful rhetoric that has dominated airways from the highest office of the land. For example, overstating the threat of gang violence and stereotyping whole communities has broad impacts on all youth of color, particularly Black and Latinx youth, that is often lost in the rhetoric. This [rhetoric](#) in tweets, speeches, and press statements has made the political climate ripe for advancing policies that roll back recent criminal justice reforms in favor of a “law-and-order” agenda and influencing state actions as well. The Administration can counter this by (virtually) convening national, state, and local youth and young adults, as well as justice reform and abolition stakeholders, in the first 90 days to gain further insights on the consequences of language and policies during the Trump Administration and previous administrations. In addition, the Administration could establish a commission that should make recommendations to reverse harmful law-and-order policies and advance a comprehensive healing-centered policy agenda in collaboration with impacted communities. The Biden-Harris Administration must continue the work of the commission and commit to hosting an in-person summit in 2022.

- ***Adopt youth-friendly policies in existing federal programs.*** Several youth-friendly policies could be implemented by youth-serving systems to better meet young people's needs. Among these are adopting paid mechanisms across the federal government to: seek youth input and advisory roles on programs that serve or should serve them; direct CMS to encourage states and issue guidance on [presumptive eligibility](#) in Medicaid; and direct the Department of Labor to issue WIOA guidance for state and local workforce development boards, encouraging them to use youth-led councils for decision-making and use "[self-attestation](#)" as a first-resort strategy for determining eligibility for services, among other things.

Commit to an ambitious legislative agenda and restore progress building on these immediate actions with a focus on equity, healing, and justice.

In order to effectively center young people of color in policy and investment, the Administration must simultaneously focus on advancing racial justice by reversing harmful policies and incentivizing economic justice.

Champion anti-poverty and education policies that can reduce economic burdens for young people of color with low incomes, including but not limited to:

- ***Passing the Raise the Wage Act***, which would ensure the removal of the federal subminimum wage for youth and people with disabilities and strengthen the ***Equal Pay Act***.
- ***Expanding eligibility for the Earned Income Tax Credit (EITC)*** for workers without dependent children who are 19 years or older and making sure students can receive the EITC credit if they are Pell Grant eligible or meet another indicator that denotes financial need.
- ***Revamping financial aid and supporting debt-free college policies*** that prioritize students with low incomes, particularly students of color and first-generation college students.

Reauthorize and significantly fund the Workforce Innovation and Opportunity Act, National Apprenticeship Act, and Higher Education Act commensurate to the scale of the youth income and employment challenge. These reauthorizations should

- Include a range of workforce, skills building, and career pathways strategies, including [green economy employment opportunities](#);
- Institute a permanent federal summer youth employment program informed by field innovations;
- Strengthen provisions for education and employment pathways to better serve [Opportunity Youth](#), youth, and adults impacted by the criminal justice system to mitigate employment consequences of incarceration; and
- Eliminate barriers for undocumented immigrant youth participation.

Invest in mental health partnerships and provide robust federal investment in state and local cross-sector collaborative partnerships to improve systems and policies that address youth and young adult mental health needs. Systems changes must include adult-child system collaboration, cross-system collaboration, authentic youth engagement, and a racial equity and culturally responsive lens to identify policy changes that improve access to care by addressing social determinants of health, prevention, wellness, and physical-behavioral health care integration.

Champion the [Counseling not Criminalization in Schools](#) Act and other school climate legislation to divest from School Resource officers and law enforcement at the federal level and provide schools with grants to improve their mental health services.

Address food insecurity among college students

- Students enrolled at least half time in postsecondary education are often excluded from SNAP due to student eligibility restrictions. Therefore, issue a blanket waiver that will allow states to interpret the SNAP student exemptions and provide more flexibility for students to be eligible. These flexibilities could include broadening the definition of what constitutes being enrolled in an employment program to include WIOA- and Perkins-eligible career or technical training or college programs and allowing students to be eligible for SNAP once they have accepted work-study positions. In so doing, states can ensure students, including student parents, have access to SNAP benefits.¹¹

Poverty and homelessness pose deep threats to LGBTQIA youth and young adults of color. This is especially true for transgender and gender non-conforming people of color.¹²

- The Biden-Harris Administration should immediately rescind [HUD's proposed rule](#) to weaken the enforcement of the Equal Access Rule, which protects the LGBTQIA community from discrimination when accessing HUD-funded single-sex shelters that align with their gender identity. This rule would subject the transgender community to heightened risk of discrimination and harassment as they seek shelter during times of hardship.
- LGBTQIA youth need discrimination protections in all federal programs, which should implement nondiscrimination policies that include sexual orientation and gender identity as protected classes.
- The Administration should also announce its support of the *Equality Act* and prioritize passage of the law. Such legal protections could reduce employment, housing, and medical discrimination for the LGBTQIA community.
- Finally, the Administration should prioritize collecting data on the LGBTQIA population, including on rates of poverty. Having this data will allow policymakers to better understand the population and how to support economic security in the LGBTQIA community.

¹ Center for Law and Social Policy, Why We Can't Wait Youth Data Portrait 2020 Economic Justice, 2020, <https://www.clasp.org/why-we-cant-wait-economic-justice>.

² Ibid

³ Ibid

⁴ Kristen Lewis, A Decade Undone: Youth Disconnection in the Age of Coronavirus. Measure of America, Social Science Research Council, 2020, <https://ssrc-static.s3.amazonaws.com/moa/ADecadeUndone.pdf>.

⁵ Center for Law and Social Policy, Why We Can't Wait Youth Data Portrait 2020 Healing and Well-Being, 2020, <https://www.clasp.org/why-we-cant-wait-healing-well-being>.

⁶ Center for Law and Social Policy, Why We Can't Wait Youth Data Portrait 2020 Safe Communities, 2020, <https://www.clasp.org/why-we-cant-wait-safe-communities>.

⁷ Allana Akhtar, Hilary Hoffower, 9 Startling Facts That Show Just How Hard the Student Debt Crisis is Hurting Black Americans, Business Insider, June 10, 2020, <https://www.businessinsider.com/how-americas-student-debt-crisis-impacts-black-students-2019-7#4-black-student-loan-borrowers-default-on-their-loans-at-five-times-the-rate-of-white-graduates-4>.

⁸ MaryBeth Musumeci and Jennifer Tolbert, Federal Legislation to Address the Opioid Crisis: Medicaid Provisions in the SUPPORT Act, Kaiser Family Foundation, October 2018, <https://www.kff.org/medicaid/issue-brief/federal->

[legislation-to-address-the-opioid-crisis-medicaid-provisions-in-the-support-act/](#).

⁹ William H. Frey, Now, More Than Half of Americans are Millennials or Younger, Brookings Institution, 2020, <https://www.brookings.edu/blog/the-avenue/2020/07/30/now-more-than-half-of-americans-are-millennials-or-younger/>.

¹⁰ Emmanuel Edudzie, Rethinking Ghana's Youth Development Architecture: The Case for a Separate Youth Ministry, Africa Portal, 2019, <https://www.africaportal.org/features/rethinking-ghanas-youth-development-architecture-case-separate-youth-ministry/>.

¹¹ Carrie Welton and Darrel Thompson, SNAP and Students: Food Assistance Can Support College Success, Center for Law and Social Policy, December 2019, <https://www.clasp.org/publications/fact-sheet/snap-and-students-food-assistance-can-support-college-success>.

¹² Sandy E. James et al., The Report of the 2015 U.S. Transgender Survey, National Center for Transgender Equality, December 2016, <https://transequality.org/sites/default/files/docs/usts/USTS-Full-Report-Dec17.pdf>.