ytfg
Youth Transition Funders Group
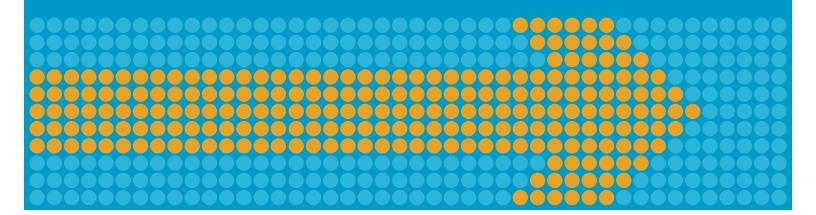### ISSUE BRIEF

CONNECTED BY 25:
EFFECTIVE POLICY SOLUTIONS FOR VULNERABLE YOUTH

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

In an effort to strengthen philanthropic investments among its membership, the Youth Transition Funders Group (YTFG) asked a group of policy experts to provide recommendations on how foundations can work to encourage effective policy solutions on issues affecting youth in transition to adulthood.

The issue brief offers a summary of those recommendations, focusing on four primary transition points that often threaten the ability for youth to be connected by age 25 to the institutions and support systems that help them succeed throughout life.

THE NEED FOR CHANGE

In our society, almost all youth require support until they have connected successfully with the labor force, which generally does not occur until their mid-twenties. The transition to adulthood is changing rapidly due to the increased educational requirements of the economy and the economic downturn. Most young adults experience detours on the road to economic independence, including periods of unemployment and periodic interruptions in their education. Youth with the necessary support, both emotional and financial, will be more likely to make a successful transition.

About 20 percent of all youth will become at risk of disconnection at some point before they reach the age of 25. An estimated 5 to 7 percent will reach age 25 without connecting in a meaningful way to employment and social support systems.

The social and economic costs of failing to address the needs of disconnected youth far outweigh the investments necessary to reduce the number of youth who have or will become disconnected. Policymakers need to be concerned about and develop approaches for addressing the needs of both those at risk of disconnection and those that become disconnected as young adults.

RISK FACTORS CONTRIBUTING TO DISCONNECTION

The risk factors for "disconnection" include four primary groups:

> *Native-born youth not enrolled in school and not holding a high school diploma*

> *Unmarried, teenage mothers*

> *Youth who have been in foster care between their 14th and 19th birthdays*

> *Youth deeply involved in the juvenile justice system*

Within these categories, African American, Hispanic/Latino, and Native American youth are disproportionately overrepresented.

POLICY PRIORITIES FOR VULNERABLE YOUTH

One of the biggest contributing factors to the success of foundations in impacting children, families, and communities is in the advancement of effective policy solutions that support their investments.

Changes in the White House, Congress, Governors' Offices, and State Legislatures suggest new opportunities to further a vulnerable youth agenda. In the issue brief, the panel of policy experts outlines priorities for meeting the needs of youth most at risk of becoming disconnected. Their recommendations are guided by three key observations:

Policy is made in silos and will continue to be made in silos. While philanthropy would like to see a coordinated and comprehensive youth policy, the field must recognize the reality that policy is made through committees (both at the federal and state levels) and is influenced by advocates and special interests that are more narrowly focused.

Opportunities for success are greatest at the state and local levels. Most of the systems that serve at-risk youth are primarily state or locally administered, and are not overly burdened by federal restrictions, despite protests to the contrary by some state and local administrators.

Opportunities at the federal level should not be ignored. While policy and programmatic changes at the state and local levels are most promising, opportunities at the federal level are present. Several key federal programs are scheduled for reauthorization in the coming year and may well provide a vehicle for significant policy reform.

Keeping in mind those three observations, the following policies are considered:

1 **Policy Priorities to Address the Needs of Struggling Students:** In an age when there is increased focus on attaining college credentials, there are still many students who are struggling to complete their high school diplomas. It is critical to align reform efforts to increase college and career readiness while simultaneously increasing graduation rates.

At the K-12 system, this requires:

> *Keeping students "on track" to graduation by establishing a high priority on increasing graduation rates and by reforming the lowest-performing high schools.*

> *Getting students back "on track" when circumstances have prevented traditional education routes. This includes expanding recuperative capacity to get students back on track regardless of whether they are in school or out of school.*

> *Re-engaging youth. For youth who have aged out of the K-12 system, programming must be upgraded and expanded. For example, GED programs need to be revised so that they offer a high-quality college prep curriculum and transitional programming into community colleges.*

At the post-secondary level, this requires:

> *Establishing an educational safety net to re-engage youth. Community colleges, adult basic education, and youth employment programs can work hand in hand to re-engage those youth burdened by low literacy and limited work experience.*

> *Expanding K-16 data systems to monitor and manage the recuperation and recovery of young people who did not complete their high school diplomas. This expansion would include cross-sector data systems that draw from K-12, adult education, youth employment, and community colleges.*

At the federal level, this requires modifications to:

> *The Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA). Changes must drive towards greater flexibility in high schools to better serve the most vulnerable students: those who have experienced an interrupted education or have fallen off track to graduation. This population includes teenage mothers, young people who are under the care of the child welfare system, or youth who are court involved.*

> *Workforce Investment Act (WIA). The current youth employment system serves less than 5 percent of youth deemed eligible for services. Employment and training programs must be expanded and upgraded so those students most in need of services benefit.*

> *Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Act (JJDPA). Traditionally, this act has focused on reducing recidivism rather than on increasing educational and employment outcomes of court-involved youth. It is necessary to increase alignment across agencies to ensure that these youth are able to take advantage of multiple pathways leading to a diploma and post-secondary options.*

2 **Policy Priorities to Address the Needs of Pregnant and Parenting Teens:** Currently, there is no specific system designed to meet the needs of pregnant and parenting teens. This means that policy opportunities for this group arise in a number of youth-serving programs. Recommendations include:

> *Expanding Title XX funding and scope of services to provide assistance for additional populations, age groups, and outcomes.*

> *Making TANF more accessible to minor teenage parents. Current TANF legislation has strict eligibility requirements for minor teenage parents, including enrollment and residency requirements. Successful programs in Illinois and California could be used as models for incorporating change.*

> *Making teenage and young parents a priority group for parenting education, child care, Early Head Start and Head Start, and relationship education.*

> *Expanding resources for young fathers. State and federal programs for teenage parents should expand their outreach to young fathers, including programs to increase father involvement with children, parenting skills, and educational and employment services.*

3 **Policy Priorities to Address the Needs of Youth in Foster Care:** Both federal and state policymakers can have a significant impact on ensuring that youth in foster care meet the Connected by 25 outcomes.

At the federal level, opportunities exist in:

> *Financing reform, allowing for greater flexibility in allocating federal resources.*

> *Accountability, particularly at the state performance level, using the National Youth in Transition Database.*

> *Reauthorization of key programs, including JJDPA, WIA, ESEA, and TANF.*

At the state level, opportunities exist for:

> *Ensuring permanent, family connections for youth in and leaving foster care.*

> *Implementing PL 110-351, including the option that allows youth to remain in foster care past age 18.*

> *Implementing PL 110-351 mandates on educational stability, health care coordination, and youth-directed transition planning.*

4 **Policy Priorities to Address the Needs of Youth Involved with the Juvenile Justice System:** Among all of the policy areas affecting vulnerable youth and families, juvenile justice probably suffers the most glaring gaps between best practice and common practice. The most urgent need is to reduce the wasteful, counterproductive over-reliance on incarceration and detention, and instead toredirect resources into proven strategies that cost less, enhance public safety, and increase the success of youth who come in contact with the juvenile courts. Reducing racial disparities and combating abuse in juvenile facilities also require immediate attention.

The ideal step, the reauthorization of the Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention Act and subsequent state implementation, should include a focus on the following priorities:

> *Restoring the Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention. (Since 2000, the OJJDP budget has been slashed by 90 percent.)*

> *Focusing the resources of the OJJDP and federal agencies on the crucial and pervasive shortcomings of current practices.*

> *Improving the juvenile justice workforce.*

THE ROLE OF FOUNDATIONS

Given the fact that numerous foundations have already invested considerable resources in strategies to define the challenges faced by vulnerable youth, new investments will be best targeted at finalizing a policy change agenda and securing movement on adoption of new policies (e.g., building coalitions, convening stakeholders, and policy research and analysis). In addition, particularly at the state and local levels, resources should support effective implementation of federal policies that are already in place (e.g., through leadership development, model legislation, toolkits, and technical assistance).

Foundation investments that have been successful in advancing the vulnerable youth agenda include those set forth by:

The Tow Foundation, which helps support the reform of Connecticut's juvenile justice system and was involved in efforts to reduce the number of delinquency referrals to Juvenile Court by 20 percent. Detention admissions have been reduced by 30 percent, and the average number of youth committed to the state for residential placement has dropped by 60 percent. Thanks to efforts by The Tow Foundation and its partners, Connecticut has invested millions more dollars in evidence-based mental health, education, vocational, and family support services at the community level to divert youth from the justice system and to ease the transition back home for those who must serve their time.

The William Penn Foundation, which strategically focuses on statewide and local issues in its efforts to expand educational quality and access. At the state level, the foundation supports efforts to address the structural inequity of school funding. At the local level, it has partnered with the Philadelphia Youth Network to establish Project U-Turn to address the dropout crisis in Philadelphia public schools. Using research, coalition building, and communication to shape a city-wide strategy, Project U-Turn has focused the city's attention on improving high schools and recovering students who have dropped out of school. The foundation has recently expanded its work on high school dropout recovery and prevention to the state level with a grant to the Pennsylvania Partnerships for Children to convene stakeholders and develop an advocacy agenda.

The Jim Casey Youth Opportunities Initiative (Jim Casey Youth), which provides technical assistance, tools, and funds to local organizations and systems to improve outcomes for youth transitioning out of foster care. The foundation focuses its efforts in the areas of permanent family connection, youth engagement, and economic success. Jim Casey Youth partners with public and private systems throughout the United States, successfully implementing and leveraging collaborative projects with foundations and public agencies. Through its Opportunity Passport™, Jim Casey Youth has demonstrated that this population can save and amass age-appropriate assets, and advocate for systems improvements.

The Stoneleigh Center, which offers a fellowship program that supports research in child welfare, education, and juvenile justice. With an ideal outcome of policy change, the Stoneleigh Center provides the necessary funding and support for professionals to develop innovative solutions that affect the well-being of vulnerable youth over the long

term and for ensuing generations. Their efforts have helped to shape and define relationships among education providers, policymakers, and members of the community.

THINKING AHEAD

Young people's life trajectories are deeply influenced by how they interact with the different public systems, such as education, child welfare, and juvenile justice. When these young individuals are unlucky enough to be in a low-performing high school, the likelihood of graduating falls to 50 percent or below. If drawn into the juvenile justice system as compared to child welfare, an entirely different set of services are offered. Moreover, young people of color often receive differential treatment at each step of the process in the juvenile justice system.

There are thousands of organizations (foundations, advocates, and practitioners) working on behalf of youth. The framework and recommendations set forth in the issue brief encourage even greater strategic grantmaking and leadership so that each and every one of our youth is supported in his or her transition to adulthood.

For additional information on the Connected by 25 framework and related grantmaking strategies, reach out to the Youth Transition Funders Group at Connectedby25@ytfg.org.

FIVE GUIDING PRINCIPLES

Youth at risk of disconnection are a diverse, changeable group, and no single set of solutions can address needs on the individual level. In order to better serve them, it is important for everyone—foundations, policymakers, and community workers—to embrace the five guiding principles.

1) To honor and assist young individuals, public systems must focus on youth motivation, empowerment, and protection of rights, as well as the reception high-risk youth have in the community as a whole.

2) The use of data, accountability, and measurable outcomes will help with working across systems that have traditionally had little to no collaboration.

3) Social systems and youth policies must provide multiple pathways to success. It is unfair to assume that any single program will be viable for each unique situation.

4) Youth systems and adult systems must have transitional services (or a point of crossover between systems) to ensure the success of youth as they move forward into adulthood.

5) It is important to reinforce connections in youth's lives with families, children, and community/faith organizations. This goes beyond providing new support services and extends to encouraging the continued success of existing ones.