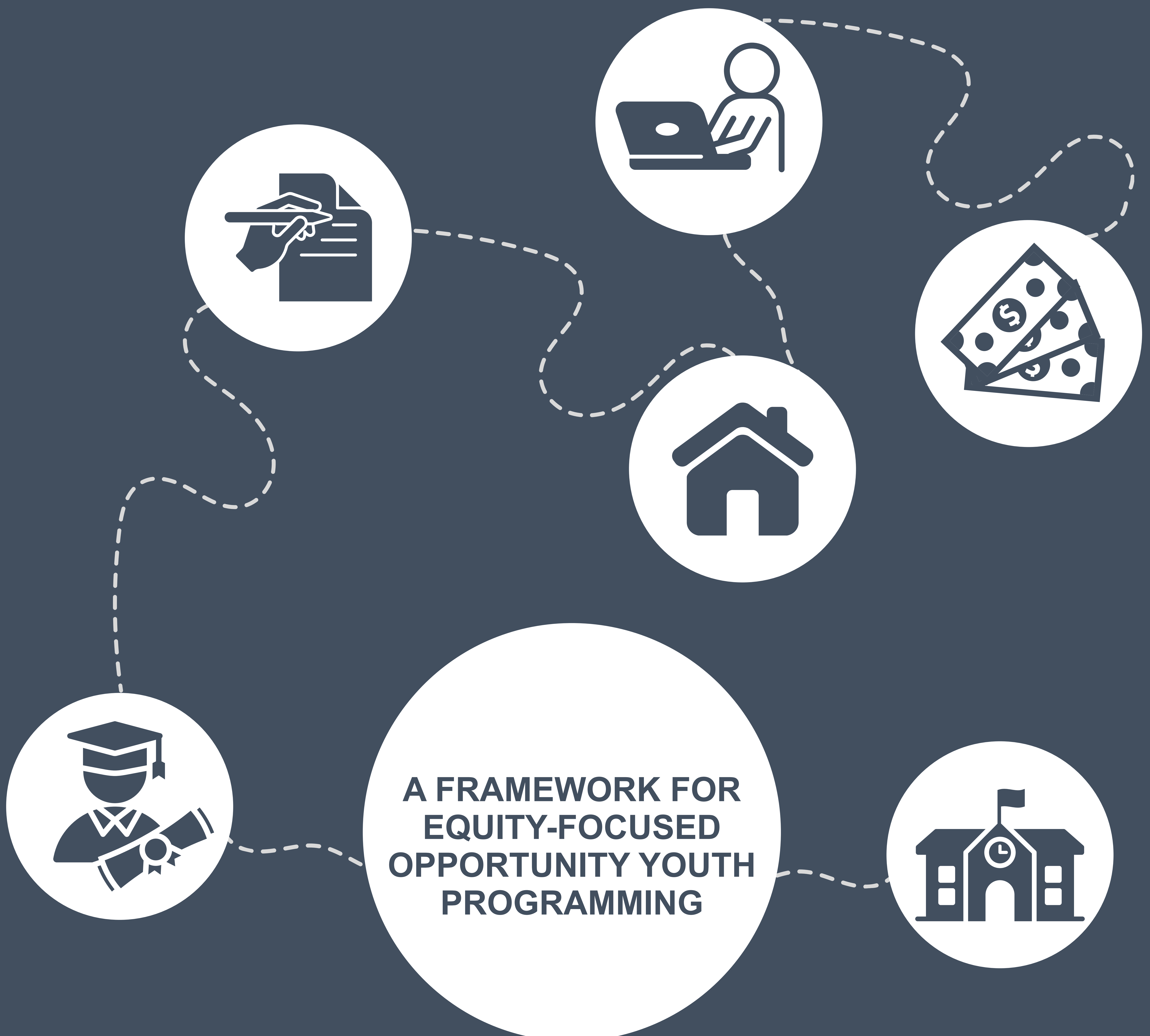


# UNLOCKING YOUTH POTENTIAL

A PATHWAY TO INCLUSIVE HIRING

NATIONAL INSTITUTE TO UNLOCK POTENTIAL





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Institute of Personal and Professional Development  
Legal Action Center  
Multi-Agency Alliance for Children  
New Friends New Life  
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Purelegacee  
Reconcile New Orleans  
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The Sentencing Project  
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Udacity  
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Urban League of Middle Tennessee  
Voices for a Second Chance (VSC)  
Walmart Center for Racial Equity  
Workforce Solutions  
Youth Empowerment through Learning, Leading, and Serving (YELLS)  
YouthBuild USA

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# Executive Summary

The National Institute to Unlock Potential (NIUP) convened a diverse group of stakeholders, including young people, community-based organizations (CBOs), and employers to develop a framework for collaborative, equity-focused employment programs for Opportunity Youth. The NIUP specifically focused on supporting Black and Brown Opportunity Youth who have experienced parental incarceration, the foster care system, the criminal legal system, or human trafficking. These individuals are statistically more likely to be involved in the justice system in the future. By providing targeted support and resources, NIUP aims to reduce this risk and help these youth thrive. This document represents the vision NIUP partners crafted for advancing Opportunity Youth programming, intended as a foundational resource for ongoing work to translate these best practices and guiding principles into concrete, actionable tools for practice.

As the next step in the evolution of workforce development programming for Opportunity Youth, the NIUP recommends that communities and funders pursue collaborative, equity-focused programs in which young people, CBOs, and employers co-create a program uniquely responding to local context. Community-based organizations cannot solve disconnection on their own, employers are called on to enter into a space of learning as equal partners in redesigning systems. While a backbone organization can support the coordination and convening of partners, partners must work together to define pathways that work for young people.

To guide the development of such collaborative efforts, NIUP has identified 10 Areas of Practice that all stakeholders are called on to engage, supporting one another to actively learn and adapt. This framework builds on the expertise and experience of our young people and the many partners who do this work each day.

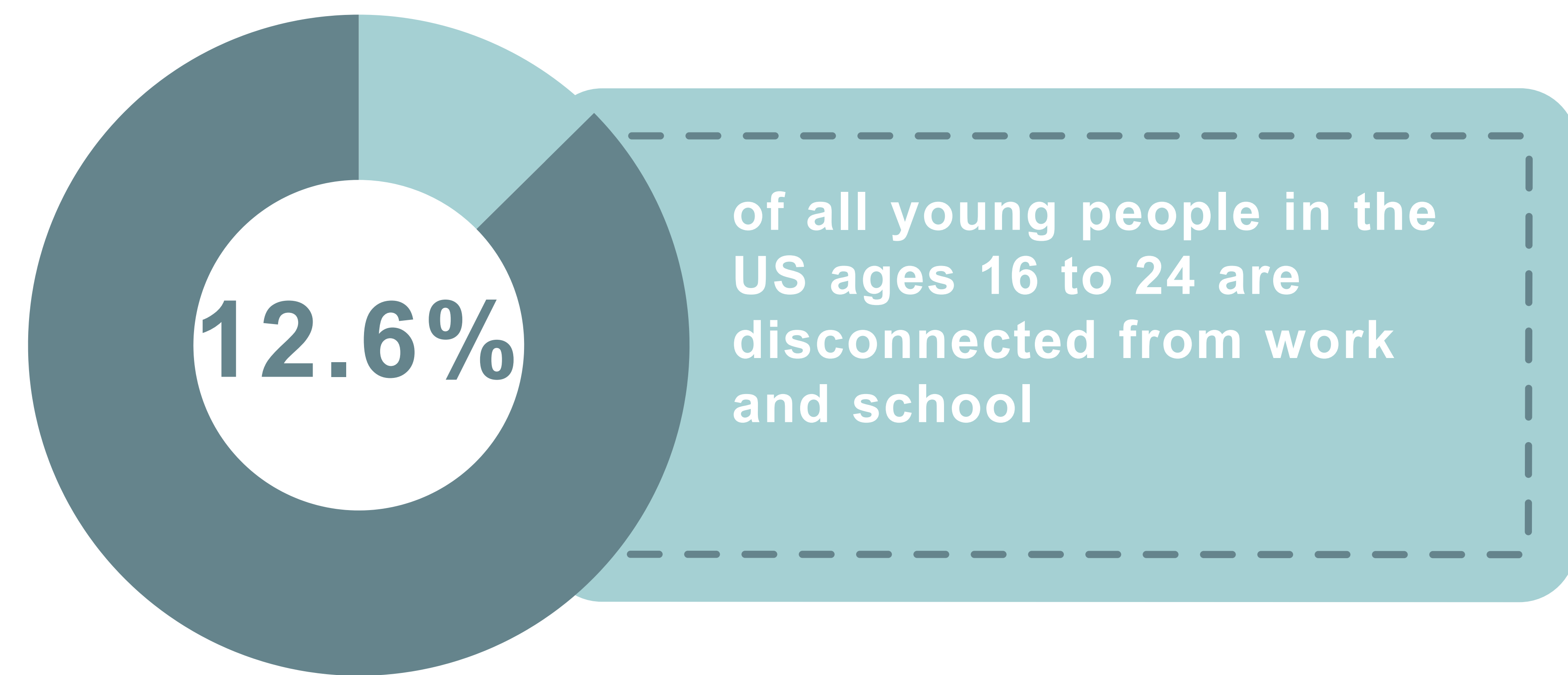
# 10 AREAS OF PRACTICE



# Introduction

**As of 2020, 12.6% of all young people in the US in that age group were disconnected from work or school (Lewis, 2022).** This population of young people is referred to as Opportunity Youth and they face significant challenges created and sustained by our current systems. To grapple with how communities are currently responding to these conditions and how to move forward in the journey towards changing our systems to work for all young people, the NIUP convened a diverse group of stakeholders, including young people, community-based organizations (CBOs), and employers. These partners worked to develop a framework for collaborative, equity-focused employment programs for Opportunity Youth of color. The NIUP specifically focused on Black and Brown Opportunity Youth who had experienced parental incarceration, the foster care system, the criminal legal system, or human trafficking.

This document is the result of that work, outlining the vision NIUP partners crafted for advancing Opportunity Youth programming. The framework is intended as a foundational resource for ongoing work to translate these best practices and guiding principles into concrete, actionable tools for practice. The NIUP recommends communities and funders pursue collaborative, equity-focused programs in which young people, CBOs, and employers co-create a program that uniquely responds to the local context. To guide the development of such collaborative efforts, NIUP has identified 10 Areas of Practice that all stakeholders are called on to engage, supporting one another to actively learn and adapt. This framework builds on the expertise and experience of our young people and the many partners who do this work each day.



# Purpose of this Framework

The NIUP is developing a guiding framework for organizations to implement effective first-chance workforce development programs for Opportunity Youth. Our focus is on Black and Brown youth who have experienced the legal or carceral system, the foster care system, parental incarceration, and/or human trafficking as minors.

This framework document focused on the foundational principles and elements envisioned by the NIUP for an equity-focused, collaborative first-chance hiring program. It is intended as a resource for any service organization, funder, or employer interested in or currently implementing a first-chance hiring or workforce development program that serves Black and Brown Opportunity Youth. **The NIUP is casting a vision for a collaborative, equity-focused approach to workforce development programming for Opportunity Youth that goes beyond a transactional or referral model, requiring equal partnership across young people, community-based organizations, and employers.** While this level of partnership and collaboration is not the best fit or best place to start for all communities for any number of reasons, the NIUP firmly believes that there is no wrong place to start. Every step taken to change local education and employment pathways to center young people, focus on equity, and streamline the process is a step toward our vision. The invitation of this initiative is to reflect on what is relevant and helpful to your community and program.

The NIUP hopes that this resource will serve as a foundation for ongoing work to translate these best practices and guiding principles into concrete, actionable tools for practice.

**1 in 9** Black children have incarcerated parents

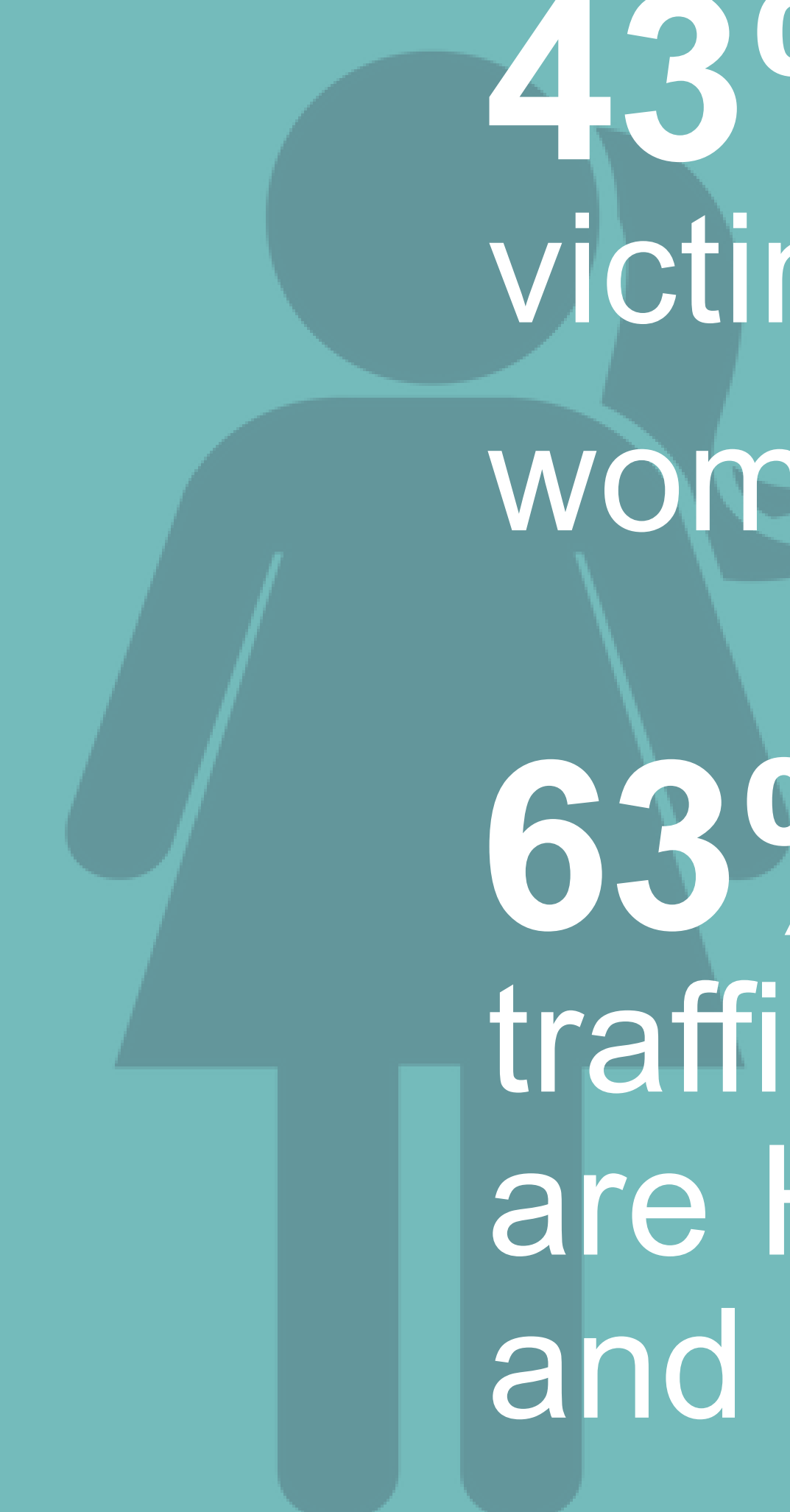


**40%**

of Hispanic youth are more likely to receive an adult prison sentence



**43%** of trafficking victims are Black women and girls



**63%** of labor trafficking victims are Hispanic women and girls

**80%** of all men in foster care will be arrested by their mid-20s



Black children are **4x** more likely to become justice-involved



Black youth are arrested at a rate of **2.5x**

# National Institute to Unlock Potential's Equity Statement

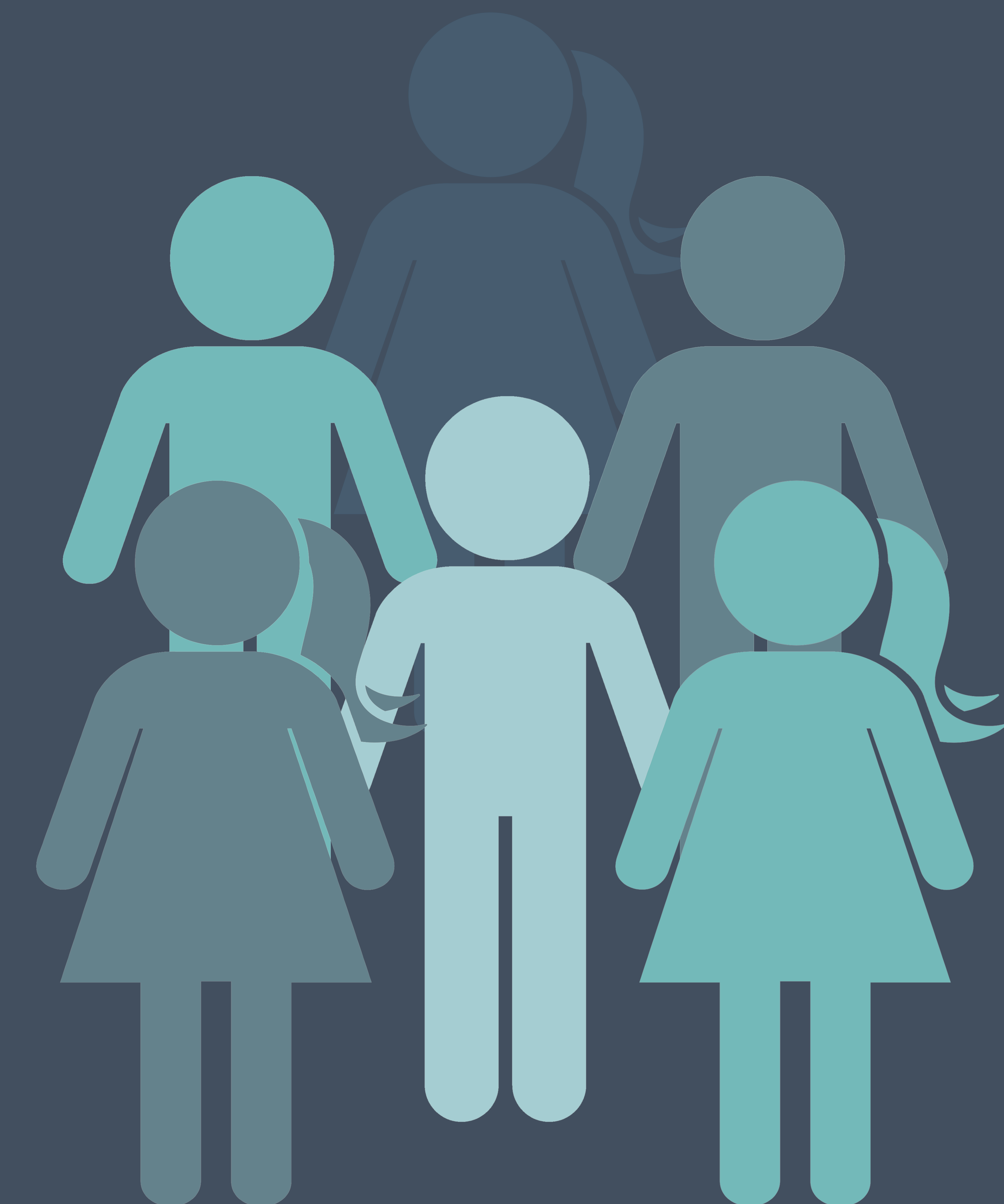
Our commitment to equity, diversity, and inclusion implores us to reimagine all systems that contribute to youth being disconnected and deepen inequities in education and employment.

Currently, racism is inherently embedded in policies that we tend to adopt and implement in our practices and programming to secure funding further perpetuating systems that promote racial inequity, high barriers, and low resources for communities of color, specifically Black, Indigenous, and Hispanic/Latine communities, to advance social and economic wellbeing.

Our systems must instead center on young people's needs, values, and voices to achieve outcomes and promote opportunities for current and future generations. Acknowledging racial equity and building systems focused on addressing racial disparities in quality employment with livable wages and education with non-traditional pathways to increase positive outcomes for all youth.

**We stand firm in our commitment to all youth having access to quality employment and educational opportunities.**

FOR THE BETTERMENT OF ALL, LET US STRIVE TO EMBRACE EMPATHY, CULTIVATE UNDERSTANDING, AND NURTURE COMPASSION. BY DOING SO, WE CAN CREATE A WORLD WHERE KINDNESS AND COOPERATION FLOURISH, BENEFITING EACH INDIVIDUAL AND THE COLLECTIVE WHOLE.

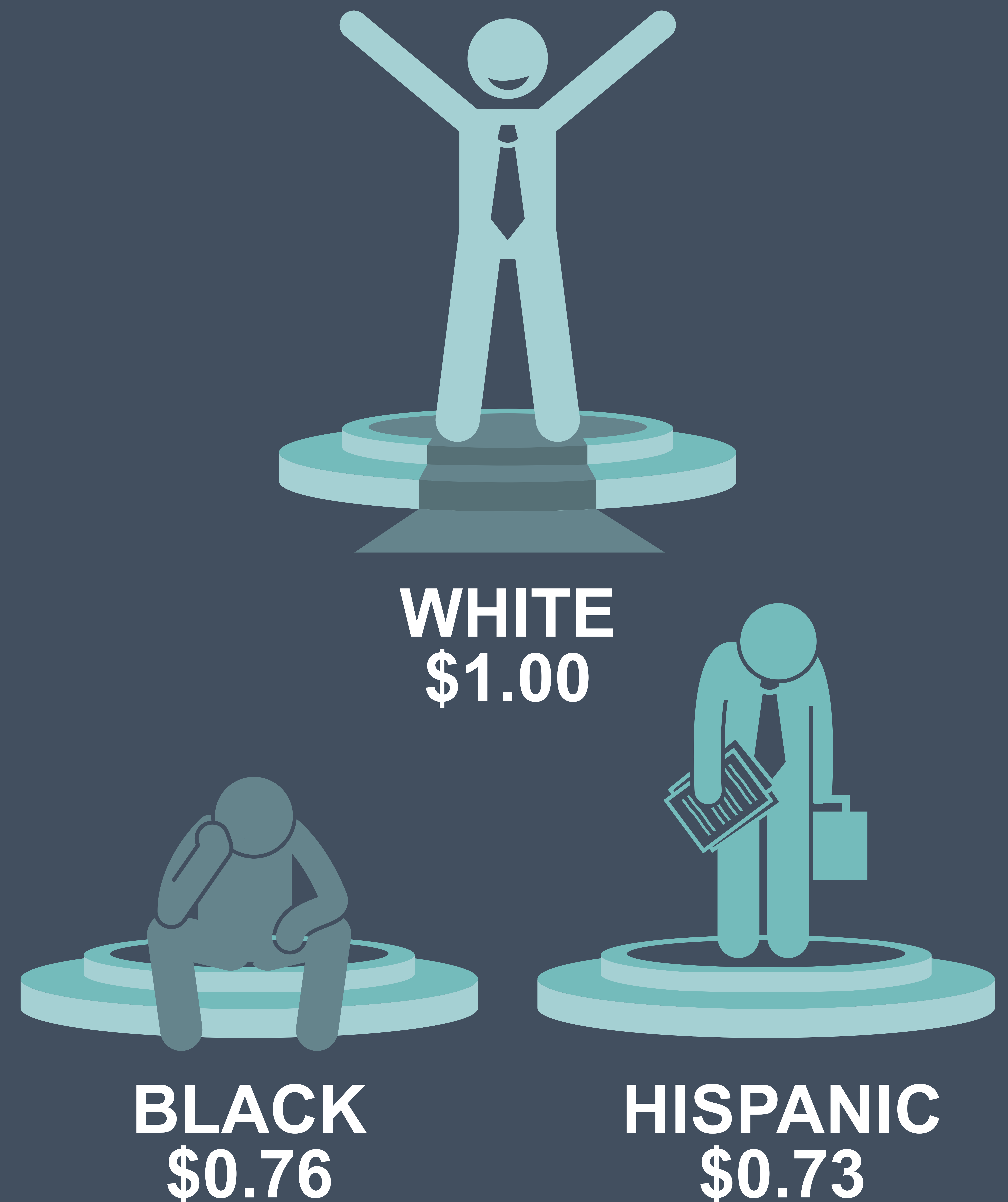


# A Call to Reimagine Systems that Lead to Disconnection

Opportunity Youth are young people aged 16 to 24 who are either disconnected from work or school (Lewis, 2022). The NIUP recognizes that institutions such as the education, legal, and economic systems have created the racial disparities that we observe in disconnection rates among our young people by perpetuating white supremacist policies and culture. Nationally, Black, Hispanic, and Native American children are less likely to graduate from high school than their white counterparts (Lewis, 2022).

**Black and Latino workers are compensated less than their white counterparts and are more likely to be employed without key benefits such as health coverage, paid leave, or retirement plans (Sullivan et al., 2015).** Youth with incarcerated parents are at a high risk for disconnection due to the disruptions that parental incarceration can cause within their family units (Shlafer et al., 2019). Youth with foster care histories experience higher rates of disconnection from work and school than the national rate, with 30% of foster care youth neither working nor in school at age 21. Youth who return home from incarceration often face challenges in reintegrating into society and find themselves feeling segregated from civic life (Smith, 2013).

Despite these statistics, our young people are not defined by their disconnection and continue to have dreams and aspirations for themselves even as they continue to navigate the many systematic barriers and challenges that they face. Our commitment to equity, diversity, and inclusion implores us to reimagine all systems that contribute to youth being disconnected and to design systems that intentionally work to close racial disparities in education and employment. The NIUP conducted a landscape scan to understand the current state of Opportunity Youth, especially those in the four focus populations. The findings of this scan are shared in the *Opportunity Youth Landscape* report.



# Framework for a Collaborative, Equity-Focused Opportunity Youth Program

As we have described in the *Opportunity Youth Landscape* report, the racial disparities and challenges faced by Opportunity Youth are created systematically by institutions, pathways, and policies that do not work for young people of color who have experienced parental incarceration, foster care, the criminal legal system, and/or human trafficking. While community-level direct service programs will not solve systemic issues on their own, collaborative, equity-focused community programs can and do shift local systems, creating and improving pathways for local young people and demonstrating effective practices that can be scaled or incorporated into policy and advocacy work across the country.

As the next step in the evolution of workforce development programming for Opportunity Youth, **the NIUP recommends an equity-focused program model in which young people, CBOs, and employers co-create the program.** Communities can expand their effort to include any other stakeholders who are part of their ecosystem and willing to commit to this process, such as educational or governmental organizations. This model goes beyond transactional referral or training and job placement relationships, centering the relationships across partners and young people as components of the program.

This approach asks that all partners enter with a learning mindset and a commitment to adopting policies and practices that advance racial equity. Throughout the partnership and co-creation process, the collaborative must work together to build a shared equity lens, center youth voice and leadership, and cultivate collaboration and true partnership across participating organizations.

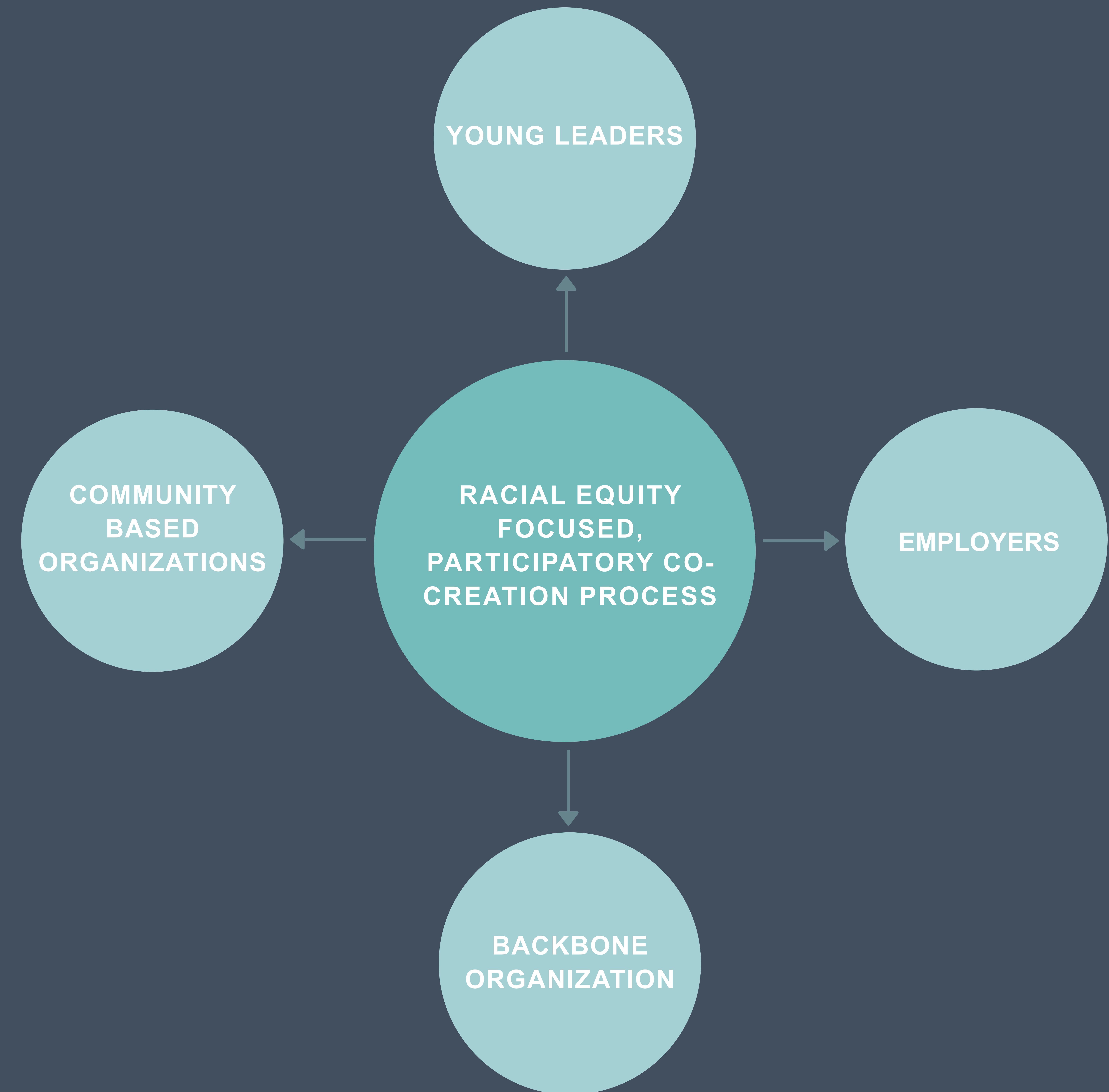
The program that is created through the partnership may not be new services, but rather a new flow and process across partners to streamline the connections from services to supportive employment opportunities. In many cases, CBOs are already providing many of the services described in this framework, and employers are seeking to recruit young talent. **The unique value of the collaborative approach is to bring those stakeholders together with young people to create communities and workflows that remove barriers and allow young people to move easily and with support from crisis to stabilization to thriving.** As such, the relationships across each of the partner groups are essential components of the program, and the progress of the collaborative effort can be measured by changes in how partners work together and how they meet the needs of the young people they serve.

Within this collaborative approach, there are four key roles that we believe are minimum requirements. However, each community must work to customize the approach to their unique context. For example, an initiative that strongly focuses on education completion may consider education partners equally as essential as employers.



In this model, the **backbone organization** assumes responsibility for convening and coordinating across all partners, leading the co-creation process for stakeholders to design a program that meets the needs of local young people while being feasible and sustainable within their organizations. There are many approaches to structuring the backbone organization and may evolve (Weaver, 2016). The backbone may initially also take the lead in identifying and approaching potential CBO and employer partners that align with the values of the collaborative, communicating the potential benefits of joining the collaborative and the expectations that will apply to participating organizations.

The backbone may also drive the development of the collaborative's approaches to racial equity and youth engagement, to ensure a shared understanding, shared power, and integrated strategies. Throughout these processes, the backbone's role is as a facilitator and support, equipping collaborative members to generate the work.



**Young leaders** who are supported and equipped to participate in the collaboration as full partners can bring their feedback and perspective on how the proposed program aligns with the needs and goals of young people in their communities, as well as assume some responsibilities in the collaborative. Young people with lived experience of disconnection are experts in this space and their voices and perspectives must be centered. This is often accomplished through Youth Advisory Boards supported by the backbone or CBO partners (Annie E. Casey Foundation, 2014). Successful Youth Advisory Boards attend to strong onboarding for new members, clarity about their role and how they can contribute to the collaborative, and high-quality meeting facilitation and follow through. For more in-depth information about supporting young leaders and engaging young people more broadly, see the NIUP's, *Unlocking Youth Voice* report.

**Community-based organizations** bring the direct services that they offer to their communities as well as their expertise in their local context. Community-based organizations (CBOs) play a critical role in our nation's pathways for Opportunity Youth, providing supports, building connected relationships, and walking alongside young people to navigate the myriad of systems they encounter. CBOs are often trusted hubs in their communities, responding directly to the needs of the people they serve through their services and programming. Collaborative initiatives may seek to recruit multiple CBOs to build a network of providers with strong referral pathways and follow-ups or may choose to partner with one or two key CBOs and focus on customizing their services for this collaborative program. As partners in a collaborative program, CBOs would be expected to engage fully in the co-creation process to arrive at a program plan that will work inside their organization and with all other partners; build trusting relationships with one another; and implement the components of the program that they are responsible for. Representation from the CBO partners will ideally include organizational decision-makers and direct service staff who will be responsible for implementing the program.

**Employer partners** bring job opportunities in careers with high earning potential and benefits, as well as expertise on the local and national job markets and what skills are needed. Not all employers are an ideal fit for an equity-focused, collaborative program model. The collaborative should work to identify and recruit employers who are strongly invested in the collaborative's vision and willing to change their recruitment, hiring, employment practices, and align their referral and data processes with CBO partners. Just as with CBO partners, employers are responsible for fully participating in the co-creation process for the program; investing in their relationships with the community, CBOs, and young people; and implementing their components of the program. Again, the representation will ideally include organizational decision-makers, managers, or other staff working directly with young people and CBOs to implement the program.

# 10 AREAS OF PRACTICE

## 10 AREAS OF PRACTICE: FOUNDATIONAL PRACTICES



### #1 COLLABORATION

Within the collaborative, equity-focused framework outlined above, the NIUP has identified 10 areas of practice that every stakeholder is called to cultivate internally within their organization and in their relationships with young people and other partner organizations. These areas of practice will look different on the ground for each collaborative and each organization within those collaboratives. They reflect best practices from literature as well as the lived experience and expertise of the members of the NIUP. While these elements apply across all direct service programs, here we consider them specifically through the lens of Opportunity Youth of color. In the diagram below, the outer circle represents the broader collaborative effort within which individual CBO programs will be situated in partnerships with other CBOs, young leaders, the backbone organization, employers, and other stakeholders.

There are many collaboration models available, and each initiative should work together to define how they want to collaborate and what level of collaboration they are willing and able to engage with. In addition to the critical work of coordinating services and building referral networks, investing in collaborative behaviors and processes can lead to truly generative spaces in which partners from across stakeholder groups put aside the agendas of their specific organizations and engage in authentic reimagining of how their parts of the system can work differently. Excellent resources are available to guide the development of collaborative practices and infrastructure. Below are guiding questions that can support your initiative to strengthen collaboration.

The areas of practice themselves are interconnected - learning and growth in one area will always inform growth and change in other areas. They are also iterative - through the life of a program, an organization will ideally go through this cycle many times, revisiting program design based on what is learned and what has changed for the young people you serve. Because we operate in the real world with real constraints, it is also often nonlinear - an organization may make strides in one area while struggling in another, or changes may happen simultaneously in multiple areas.

An organization can begin in any area of practice, starting where it makes the most sense for them based on their unique context, whether that is where they have the most clarity, momentum, or resources to devote to changing their practices. Once begun, an organization can move into building other areas of practice, balancing feasibility and the urgency to create meaningful change within their organization.

The 10 practice areas can be broken into two groups: Three foundational practices that underpin all efforts within the collaborative initiative, and seven practices that make up the creation and maintenance of meaningful pathways for Opportunity Youth. The remainder of this document provides a brief overview of each area of practice and how it applies to CBOs and employers in particular.

#### QUESTION 1

Have we taken inventory of the system ecosystem and gaps needed before we begin our work?

#### QUESTION 2

Do our partners reflect the demographics of the community we seek to serve?

#### QUESTION 3

Does our voice need to be inserted into the conversation or can we leverage our power to convene the necessary voices?

## 10 AREAS OF PRACTICE: FOUNDATIONAL PRACTICES



### #2 EQUITY LENS

Partners need to work together to build a shared understanding of the current disparities present in their system and the historical and current contexts that contribute to those disparities. As part of this work, the NIUP recommends that collaboratives dedicate structured time to define equity for their initiative, review and process recent data on disparities, and unpack how racialized histories create current disparities and barriers. From this strong shared understanding, the group can work together to articulate their collaborative commitments to advance equity and identify practices for assessing their work against those commitments. Below are guiding questions to support your collaborative's development of an equity lens.

#### QUESTION 1

Have we documented and shared language that supports how we define and address equity, racism, justice, and other words that have various social uses?

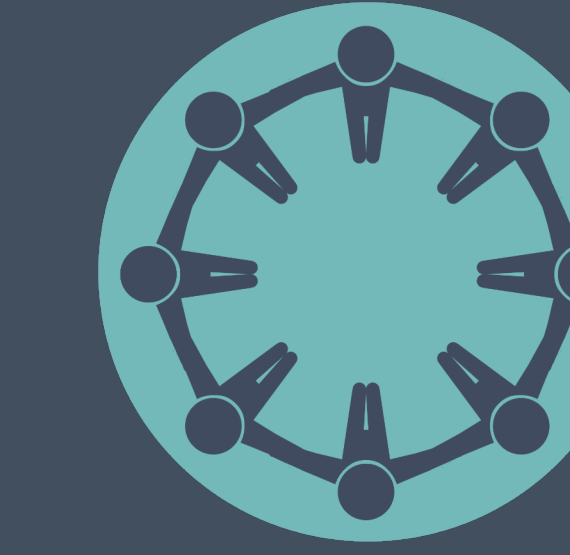
#### QUESTION 2

Who is affected by the content and current framing of this policy, program, practice, or decision?

#### QUESTION 3

How does this policy, program, practice, decision-making process, or decision increase belonging, meaning, well-being, and justice for Opportunity Youth? How does it produce or worsen any disparities?

## 10 AREAS OF PRACTICE: FOUNDATIONAL PRACTICES



### #3 YOUTH ENGAGEMENT AND LEADERSHIP

A commitment to authentic youth engagement is critical at the initiative level and within each partner organization. To support collaboratives in developing research-based youth engagement and leadership strategies, the NIUP has developed a separate guide titled *Unlocking Youth Voice* to accompany this framework. Readers are encouraged to refer to that document for further details. In addition, the following are guiding questions to support your collaboration in strategizing around youth engagement.

#### QUESTION 1

Have we established a youth feedback loop for check-ins at each step of our work?

#### QUESTION 2

Do we have current or previously impacted Opportunity Youth as a part of our paid consulting team?

#### QUESTION 3

Have we provided youth opportunities to speak, lead, train, or create policies that are used beyond your organization?

## 10 AREAS OF PRACTICE: PATHWAY PRACTICES



### #4 CONTINUOUS DATA-DRIVEN LEARNING AND ACTION

Across both CBOs and employer organizations, leaders and staff manage their organizations' internal measures of success. As such, what and how an organization chooses to measure can powerfully shape the work. In entering into a collaborative initiative to create an integrated pathway, working towards a shared set of well-defined measures of success can provide the clarity and accountability needed to support implementation on the ground. Specifically, it is strongly recommended that collaborative Opportunity Youth programs adopt shared measures for collaboration, youth engagement, and advancing racial equity. These measures can be implemented at both the collaborative level, to help partners understand the progress and impact of the entire initiative and within each partner organization.



Measuring key outcomes by race and other key demographic categories is a current gap for many CBOs and employers. A recent report from *Race Forward* (2017) found that although **58%** of the CBOs surveyed indicated that they have observed racial disparities in how clients are served in workforce development programs, only **25%** of those CBOs regularly track and report on racial disparities in their program's outcomes. While employers may be more likely to collect data to understand equity issues, they may not report it. JUST Capital's 2022 Corporate Racial Equity Tracker project, which collects data on the largest 100 employers in the US, found that **23%** of those employers disclose diversity targets for hiring, workforce composition, promotion, or retention by race/ethnicity and only **7%** disclose their internal hire or promotion rate by race/ethnicity (JUST Capital, 2022).

To continue to center and drive towards racial equity, our CBO and employer partners must build the capacity and infrastructure to regularly collect, analyze, and report on process and outcome data with breakdowns by race and other marginalized identities, sharing what they learn with their collaborative partners and the young people they serve. Infrastructure and capacity to collect and utilize data varies widely across organizations. As such, part of the collaborative work may be to offer resources or capacity building around data and learning. This practice can shift the culture around data and evaluation to one of learning and growth, centering the shared commitment to developing a pathway that truly works for the young people in the community.

Measuring the implementation and impact of the pathways developed by the collaborative will be critical to understanding what is working and can be scaled or replicated in other settings. The specific measures designed by the collaborative will be context-specific and may be implemented in phases. All measures should align with the overarching shared vision that the collaborative is working towards.

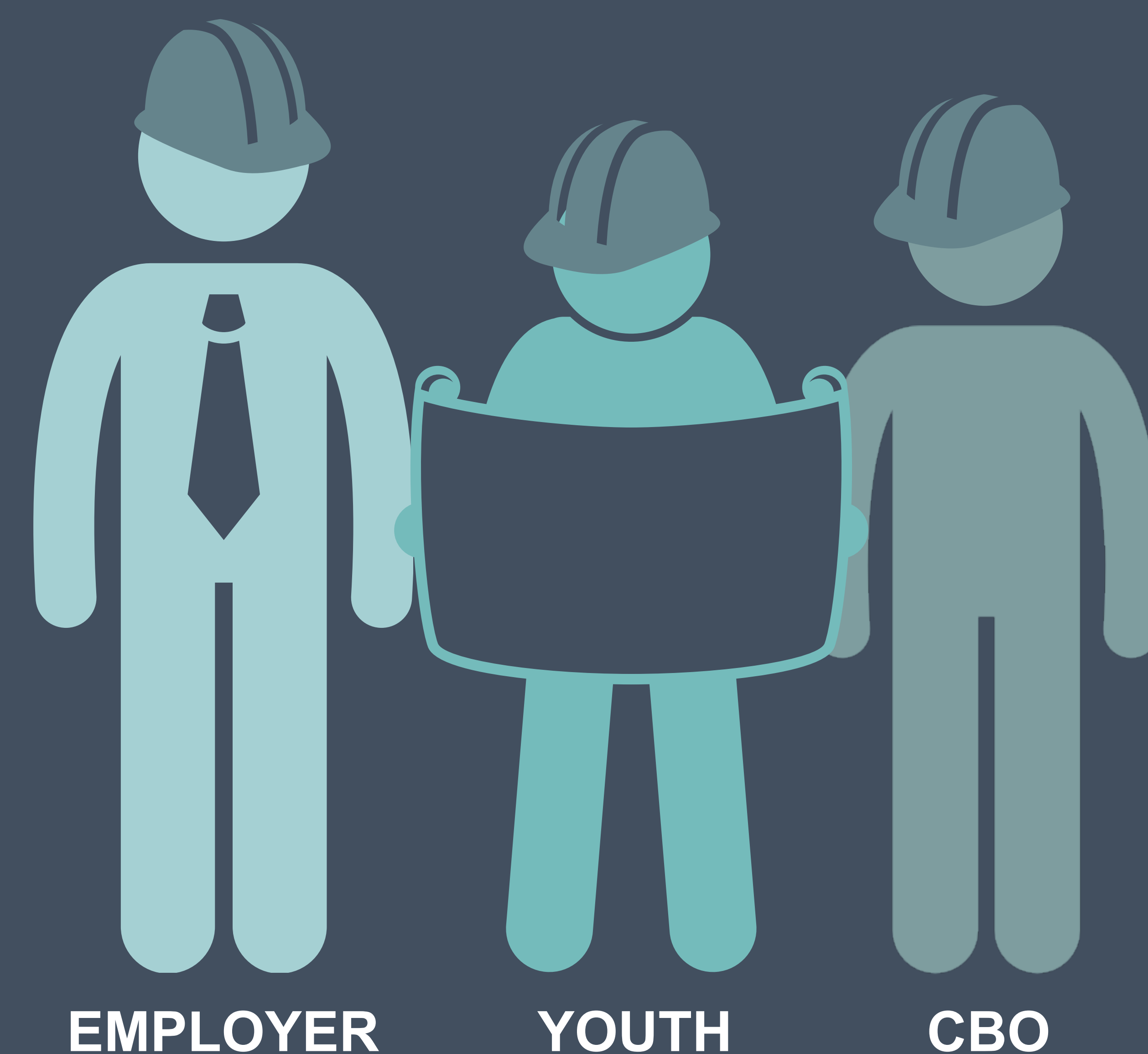
## 10 AREAS OF PRACTICE: PATHWAY PRACTICES



### #5 PROGRAM DESIGN

Within the context of a collaborative, equity-focused initiative to develop first-chance hiring programs for Opportunity Youth of Color, the program design should be developed through a co-creation process with young people, CBOs, and employers engaging as equal partners. Young leaders have the opportunity to design a pathway that would work for them and their peers. CBOs have an opportunity to envision what programming addresses the barriers young people face. Employers have the opportunity to envision hiring and employment experiences that truly support young people, releasing institutional practices or historical ways of doing business that perpetuate disparities. CBOs and employers must collaborate to determine how their communications and processes can integrate to create a streamlined pathway for young people.

As part of the program design process, we recommend that the collaborative gather input from multiple sources. It is important to revisit each of these throughout the life of an initiative, as the needs of your community will shift over time. While you and your partners may identify additional elements, we recommend a program design process incorporate at least the following inputs.



**Community strengths and needs assessment** for the populations the program will focus on, centering lived experience and grassroots solutions. This may include community conversations or listening sessions and reviewing existing local data to understand the current state.

**Root cause analysis with an equity lens** to map the causes and impacts of the issues your specific community faces, including reviewing and discussing local history and trends to give context to the current state.

**Identifying effective strategies** from organizations doing similar work, thought leaders in the field, and other sources. Know that any promising strategies will need to be adapted to your local context.

**Direct input and design sessions with young people throughout the process.** Engage young people using the strategies and principles provided to get early input on their needs and how they would redesign the community pathways. Return to them with findings from the needs assessment, root cause analysis, and potential strategies or services you are considering offering. Most importantly, commit to acting on their feedback. CBOs may gather input specifically to understand what wraparound services to provide. In contrast, employers gather input on the recruitment, hiring, and training processes they plan to offer as part of the pathway.

Based on these inputs, the collaborative can decide what elements to include and how the pathways should operate. As they reach clarity, they can create a shared map of the program to understand how young people will move through the program and how the partners will work together at each stage, including communication, data sharing, and workflows. Common tools to assist in developing a shared understanding of the program include theories of change and logic models, program manuals and flow charts, and memorandums of understanding.

## 10 AREAS OF PRACTICE: PATHWAY PRACTICES



### #6 EQUIPPING STAFF TO IMPLEMENT THE PROGRAM

Once the program design is ready to be tested in the real world, staff at CBO and employer organizations must be equipped. Hopefully, the program will represent a clear shift in practices away from business as usual and thus will require staff to learn a different process. It is clear from the literature that meaningful, supportive relationships between young people and adults are critical to the success of Opportunity Youth programs; from the perspective of the young person, their direct care staff member, and their manager are the programs. Both CBOs and employers need to address four key areas to equip their staff to implement an equity-focused Opportunity Youth program. These elements may not be exhaustive, and all areas of practice should be adapted to the collaborative's unique context.



1

Culture Shift  
Conversations



2

Clarify  
Expectations for  
Staff and  
Commit



3

Training to  
Support Young  
People Early in  
their Career



4

Training in  
Pathway  
Implementation

1

**Culture Shift Conversations.**

At an organizational level, CBOs and employers need to work towards shifting cultural beliefs and behaviors around young people. In many organizations and throughout our broader culture, there is a belief that adults are more capable than youth and young people, and this belief is typically reinforced by the power dynamics inherent between service providers and young people receiving services (Nemoy, 2018). These dynamics work against commitments to center youth voice and partner with young people to re-design systems. Organizational leaders must attend to the conversations, inquiries, and actions needed to shift culture to view young people as capable, knowledgeable partners.

2

**Clarify Expectations for Staff and Commit.**

Protect time for staff to invest in their relationships with young people and their ongoing learning, which requires time and flexibility. Often in nonprofit and for-profit organizations, new initiatives represent additional tasks or responsibilities on top of already full workloads. We urge partners undertaking work with Opportunity Youth to resist this pattern by adjusting staff members' responsibilities to provide the program with the time and space it requires. For example, in a CBO this may look like adjusting caseloads, while in an employer organization, it may look like moving supervision of some existing staff to other managers to enable managers of Opportunity Youth to offer more mentorship and one-on-one time. When training staff to implement the program, clarify what is expected of them and follow through by creating the conditions for those expectations to be met.

3

**Training to Support Young People Early in their Career.**

Caring, mutually respectful, one-on-one relationships between staff members and young people emerged again and again as the foundation of any programming serving youth, and as such CBO and employer staff need to be equipped to cultivate those relationships skillfully (Warland et al., 2015; Bennett et al., 2022; National Council of Young Leaders, 2020). Trainings in youth development, cultural competence, and trauma-informed care can provide important frameworks for staff to be able to meet young people where they are, and training on specific skills such as motivational interviewing and mental health first aid can give staff concrete tools to use in conversations with young people. Such training is strongly encouraged for all staff interacting with youth, including employers and backbone staff.

4

**Training in Pathway Implementation.**

In addition to building the staff's capacity to work with young people early in their careers, staff also need adequate training and support on the expectations and workflows of the collaborative pathway. Shared documentation across CBO direct care staff and managers at employers who will be working directly with young people can create clarity and streamline the process for young people. Employers who adopt new or different hiring or training practices for the Opportunity Youth pathway must ensure managers understand the commitments that drive those changes and expectations for how they will be implemented. Additionally, youth should be paid at a respectable rate to show that their work is valuable.

# 10 AREAS OF PRACTICE: PATHWAY PRACTICES



## #7 RECRUITING YOUNG PEOPLE

Recruitment of young people is a critical area. In our review of the literature, we found that recruiting Opportunity Youth is challenging for both CBOs and employers. Four principles emerged that underpin effective strategies for reaching and recruiting Opportunity Youth into workforce development programs.



1

### **Increase Program Visibility.**

Young people have identified a lack of information about available programs and opportunities as a barrier (Annie E. Casey Foundation, 2017). Outreach via social media, at community hubs and events, through referral partnerships, and directly in neighborhoods are all recommended simultaneously.

### **Make Outreach More Personable.**

This is often done through direct outreach by trained staff members, adults, or peers, who go into the community canvassing and offering immediate resources and information about services (Warland et al., 2015). Another common strategy is “warm” referral partnerships with other organizations such as churches, schools, and other service providers, where young people can learn about the program through existing relationships with staff or representatives at organizations they are already involved with (Sakala et al., 2022). Organizations that are already serving adults in the community can also recruit through families, connecting young adults to programming through their parents or caregivers.

2

3

### **Create and Foster a Youth Centered Space.**

Sites in the Urban Employment Demonstration Grants found that developing youth-focused community centers improved engagement and retention because young people felt the space was for them (Gordon & Ullrich, 2017). This principle can apply to employers throughout their recruitment process - employers can craft the language and visual design of recruitment materials and job descriptions to speak to and attract young people (2021\_Advancing Racial Equity in the Workplace).

### **Make Programming Accessible.**

This might be done by providing a meal at program events, facilitating carpools or other transportation at workplaces, providing childcare while the young people are in training or working a shift, and providing both remote and in-person ways to participate in programming. For employers, special attention should be given to reducing barriers in the hiring process. Focus on streamlining the process to reduce steps and waiting time for young people and train hiring managers to be more open to candidates with limited experience (2021\_Advancing Racial Equity in the Workplace). In the context of CBO services, accessibility needs often change for young people throughout their participation in a program. As program participants are placed in jobs and begin work, other program elements will need to accommodate their work schedules.

4

## 10 AREAS OF PRACTICE: PATHWAY PRACTICES



### #8 WRAPAROUND SERVICES THAT ADDRESS STABILITY FIRST

We define wraparound services as comprehensive, coordinated services customized to meet the needs of each young person. Wraparound services that remove barriers and create positive supports have an incredibly strong evidence base and are critical for Opportunity Youth as they address the social determinants of work. Social determinants of work include social factors, such as family income, health and access to health care, housing quality and affordability, and access to child care all strongly influence what job opportunities are available and sustainable for individuals. These social factors are all impacted and shaped by our country's history of racialized policies, creating the population disparities we see in the social determinants of work (Langston et al., 2021). Access to comprehensive wraparound services is one of the primary reasons that people of color matriculate through workforce development programs (Race Forward, 2017).

As such, providing comprehensive wraparounds is critical to addressing racial equity. While the connection to stable career paths with high earning potentials is the end goal of many programs for Opportunity Youth, stabilization should come first for all young people, with the focus shifting to education and employment only when a young person feels ready and has addressed barriers that previously kept them disconnected (Warland et al., 2015). Ongoing wraparound services are critical to supporting young people's retention in employment opportunities as they help maintain stability and can be increased or customized to address challenges or crises as they arise in young people's lives. In this way, comprehensive wraparounds are perhaps the most essential ingredient in any programming for Opportunity Youth.

In the NIUP's vision for a collaborative Opportunity Youth program, employers are called upon to share responsibility and ownership for providing supports to young people who enter their workforce. Often community-based organizations assume full responsibility for wraparound services, but as young people begin employment they often have less time and bandwidth to continue engaging with CBOs and fall out of contact. Employers can step into that gap, taking responsibility for reconnecting young people to services or resources as they are needed and making such services accessible through the workplace.

Some of the core elements common across many models for providing wraparound services include:

#### **Cultivating Authentic Relationships.**

Building one-on-one caring relationships with young people through coaching and mentoring (National Council of Young Leaders, 2020; Annie E. Casey Foundation, 2017; Warland et al., 2015).

#### **Youth Centered or Family Centered Approach.**

In this approach, the young person who is the primary client articulates their goals, prioritizing what they hope to accomplish by working with the CBO. The coordinator or facilitator develops an individualized plan for that young person. The NIUP recommends that programming centers on the whole family, as in the 2Gen Approach, which works towards positive outcomes for both adults and children in the family by offering wraparound services to all members of the family (Mosle & Sims, 2021).

#### **Formal and Informal Services and Supports.**

The coordinator or facilitator ensures the young person gets connected with all the services and supports needed to begin working on their individualized plans. In many cases, this may look like the CBO staff person directly providing services such as coaching, interview skill practice, or assisting in applying for benefits; in other cases, this will look like a warm referral for services not offered at your CBO agency.

#### **Extended and Flexible Engagement Expectations.**


For young people experiencing high barriers and operating in "survival mode," it may take years to move into stability and thrive. Additionally, they may disengage and re-engage from services multiple times. Programs can align their service model with the reality of serving this population by intentionally including on-ramps to re-engagement and expecting enrollments to last years (Warland et al., 2015). It is essential for staff within these programs to take a trauma-informed approach when working with young people to ensure that they are adequately prepared for the challenges that young people face.

Some of the specific wraparound services that emerge again and again as critical for Opportunity Youth are listed below. For many Opportunity Youth, one or more of these needs going unmet is often the primary cause of their disconnection, impacting their attendance and retention in education and employment. Additionally, many young people work multiple low-wage jobs simply to cover their basic needs. Addressing these needs is typically a prerequisite for young people to be able to engage in education or employment pathways successfully. The specific services that your collaborative program provides as part of the program should be tailored to the needs of your young people and the context of your local community. Where possible, universal services offered to all young people regardless of background provide support without singling them out, which reduces stigma (Benninger et al., 2023).


CHILDCARE



TRANSPORTATION



HOUSING ASSISTANCE / NAVIGATION



FINANCIAL CAPABILITY / ASSISTANCE



DISABILITY ACCESS NEEDS



## SUPPORTS MOST COMMONLY HELPFUL FOR OPPORTUNITY YOUTH

Foster Care

College tuition waiver programs, financial aid for higher education and trade school, and post-secondary support services (Geiger & Okpych, 2022)

Criminal Legal System

Supporting young people in understanding and navigating their legal system involvement, such as supporting them to comply with requirements and addressing fines; and providing one on one support to increase their engagement in services and work (Sakala et al., 2022)

Parental Incarceration

Connecting with other children of incarcerated parents; connecting with incarcerated parents if the young person wants to do that; and supporting young people as their parents return from incarceration (Benninger et al., 2023)

Human Trafficking

Trauma-informed behavioral and mental health services, safe housing, living wage jobs, medical services, and job training, support navigating the mainstream financial system, and support navigating barriers from criminal records (Polaris, 2023)

Spotlight on Mental Health Services for Young People

In 2022 the National Youth Employment Coalition released a report on the current capacity of youth employment programs across the country to meet the mental health needs of their young people. In their survey of 563 providers, 64% reported that they did not have a mental health screening process and 89% reported they did not have sufficient resources to deliver high quality mental health training to staff (Bennett et al., 2022). Black and Brown youth experience unique risk factors that contribute to the onset of behavioral and mental health conditions such as experiences with racism, discrimination, and traumatic events (Roberson, 2023). Mental health challenges and chronic stress are a significant barrier for many Opportunity Youth (Annie E. Casey Foundation, 2017), and including partners who can offer high quality mental health services as part of the program model is recommended.

## 10 AREAS OF PRACTICE: PATHWAY PRACTICES



### #9 SUPPORTIVE EMPLOYMENT

This area of practice encompasses preparing young people for employment, navigating employment opportunities and determining a good match, supporting the young person through the application and placement process, ensuring young people are adequately trained once hired, and supporting long term retention and growth on a pathway that can lead to economic well being. While the specific design of each Opportunity Youth first-chance hiring program will vary by the community's needs and capabilities of the partners, it takes both CBOs and employers to create work situations that are sustainable for young people.



**High-Quality Career Navigation and Low-Barrier On-Ramps.** CBOs can provide employment and career navigation that is youth-centered and focused on supporting young people in identifying the path that best fits them. This often includes providing information on high-demand jobs and career paths; supporting the job search, resume development, and interviewing process, and building warm connections or actual placement agreements with employer partners (Practitioner Task Force on Modernizing Career Navigation Policy, 2022). An added layer that will apply to many Opportunity Youth is navigating the “benefits cliff” – a term used for the sudden and often sharp decrease in public benefits that can occur with a small increase in earned income (Introduction to Benefits Cliffs and Public Assistance Programs, 2022). As part of career navigation, CBOs can help young people understand and forecast how their families’ benefits will be impacted by specific job opportunities.

Employers can support the career navigation process for young people who are and are not employees. For young people exploring options, employers can offer opportunities for them to gain direct exposure in a field through demonstrations, tours or visits, and informational interviews. Short-term job trials in which young people are paid as a full-time staff member give them the opportunity for direct experience. For young people fully hired, rotations through departments and opportunities to shadow team members in other jobs broaden exposure to potential career paths (Warland et al., 2015).

**Earning an Income while Developing Skills.** Opportunity Youth often need to be able to earn income while participating in programming to develop their skills (National Council of Young Leaders, 2020; Annie E. Casey Foundation, 2017). Earn-and-learn models, often called work-based learning or apprenticeship programs, are specifically designed to address this need. Collaborative programs should work to ensure compensation if offered as part of youth development and training programming to eliminate this barrier for young people. Paid work is also important for building a work history. This might be achieved by CBOs offering compensation for participation in in-house trainings, CBOs providing financial support for young people who are completing an education program, or employers offering paid apprenticeships, internships, or other earn-and-learn opportunities (Warland et al., 2015; Grobe et al., 2015).

Skills development encompasses essential and technical skills needed in specific jobs and may be offered by the CBO partners, employer partners, or both. Many young people will be ready to begin a training or earn-and-learn opportunity with an employer. Still, many others with limited or no prior work experience have had fewer opportunities to learn the implicit expectations of employers and the variety of skills and behaviors needed to maintain employment (Warland et al., 2015). They may be interested in participating in training for careers but do not yet have the skills needed to succeed in a job training or apprenticeship program offered by employer partners. One such skill gap that CBOs and employers can work to close for young people of color originates with the digital divide.

The vast majority of job postings (92%) require digital skills, and this requirement is consistent across all industries, regardless of company size (Bergson-Shilcock et al., 2023). Nationally, racial gaps in access to high-speed internet and ownership of computers create a digital skills gap that limits job opportunities for people of color (Walia, 2020), and lack of access to the internet and phone are often barriers for Opportunity Youth (Annie E. Casey Foundation, 2017). Programs participating in the Youth/Industry Partnership Initiative found it most effective when CBOs created on-ramps to these training experiences by focusing on developing essential skills and job readiness before young people began job training (Grobe et al., 2015).

**Supportive Employment Environments with Benefits.** While both CBOs and employers can support retention through wraparound services, creating a supportive work environment that offers meaningful benefits and other resources has a significant impact on retention. During the recruitment of employer partners to participate in the Opportunity Youth initiative, CBOs, and the backbone organization should make it clear that employers will be expected to offer such benefits to the positions included in the program and focus on recruiting employers who are willing and able to do so. Benefits such as medical insurance, dental and vision insurance, paid time off, and sick leave are often just as critical to Opportunity Youth as competitive pay (Langston et al., 2021; National Council of Young Leaders, 2020; Polaris, 2023).

As mentioned above, many Opportunity Youth face the benefits cliff when their income increases, which can deter young people from accepting jobs with high incomes but benefits too scant to replace the support they would otherwise receive. Employers should seek the input of young people in the program and their organization about what benefits have the most impact on them (National Council of Young Leaders, 2020). Tuition assistance or reimbursement, providing a cell phone, and an internet stipend are examples of benefits that may cost the company relatively little and have a significant impact on young staff. Employee Assistance Programs available to all staff make mental health care services more accessible, reducing barriers to critical support that many Opportunity Youth need.

Beyond benefits, employers can create a supportive environment by encouraging and equipping supervisors to invest in one-on-one relationships with Opportunity Youth, as has been emphasized through this document. Young people entering a new employment situation benefit from supervisors and on-the-job mentors who take the time to provide training, modeling, and feedback (National Mentoring Resource Center, 2022; Grobe et al., 2015). Offering clear job expectations that balance accountability and flexibility is key to equipping young people to succeed. Employers can also be a critical link back to CBO wraparound services when young people encounter new barriers after securing employment. Within the collaborative, strong warm referral processes that flow both from the CBO to employers and from employers to CBOs should be established.

**Support Entrepreneurial Pathways.** Many young people are interested in pursuing entrepreneurship and starting their businesses, rather than pursuing traditional employment (Annie E. Casey Foundation, 2017). CBOs and employers can support these young people by offering training in business and financial management skills, connecting young people with mentors, and giving young people experience and learning opportunities around project management on the job (National Council of Young Leaders, 2020; Spaulding & Martin-Caughey, 2015). Working closely with a supervisor can be a tremendous learning experience through modeling, mentorship, and coaching. CBOs can also connect young people with seed funding or offer small business accelerator programs.

## 10 AREAS OF PRACTICE: PATHWAY PRACTICES



### #10 EDUCATION SUPPORTS

Services that support young people in completing education programs are consistently described as critical to creating pathways to long-term financial stability and thriving for young people. As part of a collaborative first-chance hiring program, a community may focus on any number of educational pathways, including high school diplomas or equivalent, higher education, vocational or trade training programs, and certifications. Educational organizations may be recruited as partners in the collaborative program and work towards integrating a trauma-informed approach through their work, given the reality that many of their students have been impacted by trauma.

Just as with employment, re-engagement in education must come after young people have been able to stabilize by addressing immediate needs. Once a young person has reengaged with education, ongoing wraparound services are critical to supporting their retention, maintaining stability, and ramping up or down to address challenges as they arise in young people's lives (National Council of Young Leaders, 2020). Without wraparound services, the challenges that led young people to disconnect from education and work will continue to impact them, and may again cause disconnection. In addition to wraparounds, the following components are also often included to re-engage Opportunity Youth in educational pathways. Support for re-engaging young people in education is often along three dimensions.



#### Preparation & Education Navigation

Complimentary to the high-quality career navigation described above, education navigation provides young people with information on various education paths and coaching to help them determine what path is a good fit for them. For many young people, this will include prioritizing pathways in which the young person can maintain an income while learning. Once a young person has selected a path, staff can help them navigate the process. While education navigation is often housed within CBOs, employers may have linkages and partnerships with specialized training or certification programs. They can support young people in determining if those paths are a good fit. Ideally, education partners are included in the overall collaborative initiative and participate in streamlined referral and enrollment processes with CBOs and employers (Steinberg & Almeida, 2019).

#### Financial Assistance

Reducing the financial burden of completing education programs addresses a key barrier that contributes to disengagement. Direct financial assistance to young people that fully covers the cost of education or training programs is recommended. Employers can do this through financial assistance programs for staff members, covering the cost of tuition and fees for education that advance a young person's skills. CBO staff can work with young people to identify financial aid opportunities as well as provide education on the financial options available (loans, grants, etc.) and the short-term and long-term implications of each. Again, this is best done in close partnership with local educational institutions that partner with CBOs and employers.

#### Academic & Peer Supports

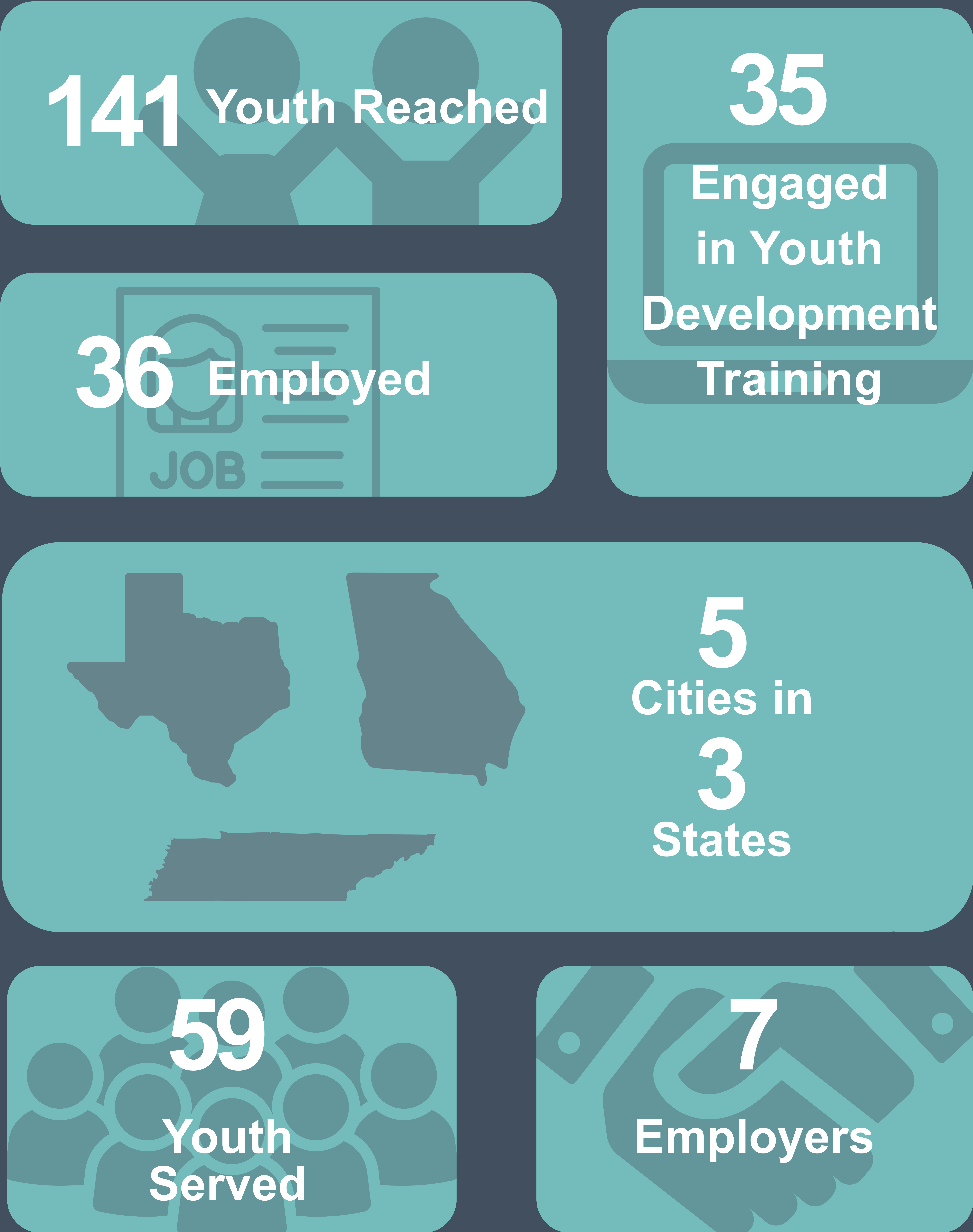
Academic tutoring and workshops on study skills support retention. CBOs can also offer concrete support by providing necessities such as books, technology, and supplies. Finally, CBOs can foster peer support networks to connect young people on similar re-engagement journeys.

# Unlock Potential Case Study Pilot Summary

The Unlock Potential (UP) Pilot was a first-chance hiring program for Opportunity Youth with a focus on those who had experienced parental incarceration, the foster care system, criminal or legal system involvement, or human trafficking. The pilot was implemented from December 2022 through December 2023 in five cities: Houston and Dallas, TX, Nashville and Memphis, TN, and Atlanta, GA. Persevere and the Responsible Business Initiative for Justice (RBIJ) served as co-backbone organizations for the pilot, with Persevere responsible for identifying and recruiting CBO partners and RBIJ responsible for recruiting and preparing employer partners in each participating city.

Young people who were ages 16 to 24, had no prior convictions, and were enrolled in a participating CBO's services were recruited. The pilot included three components: wraparound services through their CBO, participation in a Youth Development Training and Peer Support Network, and placement in employment with participating employers. The evaluation of the pilot included an assessment of youth outcomes, youth interviews and a focus group, and focus groups with the CBO partners.

Overall the pilot was successful, serving a total of 59 young people, 36 of whom became employed. Of all the hires made in the pilot, 39% of them were with employers participating in UP. Young people who completed follow-up evaluations (15) experienced significant improvement in their childcare situation, as well as major improvements in their employment and housing situations. The pilot offered many lessons learned at both the collaborative level and at the service delivery and employment level.



RECOMMENDATIONS  
FOR  
COLLABORATION

1

**Allocate Ample Time for Planning and Learning.**

We recommend a six-month planning period before program implementation. This will allow the collaborative to focus on recruiting aligned partners, clarifying expectations, and building ongoing communication and collaborative relationships.

2

**Share the Responsibility of Resources.**

Employer partners should share the responsibility of providing wraparound support services to young people once they are employed to increase retention.

3

**Create Learning Communities for Employers.**

Opportunity Youth programs should provide ongoing training and learning communities for employers. This will help front-line managers navigate and implement best practices into their business practices. Collaborative programs can offer structured training, technical assistance, connections with consultants, or peer learning groups for reflection and support.

4

**Staffing the Collective.**

The backbone played a crucial role in implementing the pilot by coordinating across partners, managing relationships and communications, and providing support. Based on the pilot, we recommend having dedicated positions for leading the backbone's work with CBOs, employers, and young people and managing data collection and reporting for any similar effort.

RECOMMENDATIONS  
FOR  
PROGRAMMING

1

**Longer-Term Wraparound Supports.**

Providing wraparound services for at least 12 to 18 months is crucial to support retention for Opportunity Youth programs. The literature review showed that pilot participants faced significant challenges, including basic needs such as housing, transportation, and childcare. Young people's journeys are often not linear and require ongoing support to overcome setbacks. Our pilot study has shown that wraparound services increase the chances of success and stability and ensure young people receive the support they need to stay employed or enrolled in education.

2

**Family-Centered, Comprehensive Wraparound Supports.**

Opportunity Youth programs can benefit the whole family by providing comprehensive wraparound supports. The pilot showed that many participants were parents of young children. Programs can focus on parenting skills, early childhood education, literacy programming, and school enrollment. The 2Gen model from The Aspen Institute provides a roadmap for this approach.

3

**Create Safe Spaces for Young People to Learn and Dream.**

Providing opportunities that align with their interests and personal growth goals can be profoundly impactful. Practicing intentional self-reflection can support the development of critical thinking skills that aid in planning, predicting, and decision-making. Young people who participated in the Youth Development Training and Peer Support Network described feeling less alone, better equipped to navigate daily life, and more confident. They also helped shape this guide through their feedback as part of the Advisory Team.

4

**Make Re-Engaging with Opportunity Youth Programs Easy for Young People.**

Create low-barrier pathways for continuous support and accessible entry points that allow exploration at any time. Ensure all stakeholders can reconnect youth to necessary support and opportunities when they are ready.

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*~Persevere and the Guiding Team of the National Institute to Unlock Potential*

