

## Executive Summary

# Improving Equitable Employment Outcomes for Transition-Age Foster Youth in L.A. County

## Streamlining Access to Career Development Services

The L.A. Opportunity Youth Collaborative (OYC) commissioned a case study of its efforts to connect foster youth to public workforce programs in L.A. County using a shared referral process across agencies. This brief describes the development and implementation of a process to coordinate and streamline foster youth referrals to workforce programs and includes specific recommendations for process improvement based on feedback from both network partners and foster youth themselves.

### A History of Collaboration in Streamlining TAY Access to Workforce Programs

In 2014, the L.A. Opportunity Youth Collaborative (OYC) launched its inaugural campaign, Foster Youth at Work, to improve access to public workforce programming for transition-age foster youth (TAY). Convened by the Alliance for Children's Rights and UNITE-LA, Foster Youth at Work engages both public workforce and child welfare agencies in L.A. County to work together to devise collaborative, systemic solutions for TAY. Together, the OYC partners were able to establish additional funding specifically for foster youth, streamline enrollment

verification documents, and implement a targeted outreach and awareness campaign, resulting in a ten-fold increase in the annual number of foster youth placed in a work experience, from just 80 in 2014 to nearly 800 in 2017.

### Further Innovation: A Universal Workforce Referral Process

Building on this collaborative success and lessons learned, in 2018 the OYC Foster Youth at Work partners embarked on a new strategy to develop a coordinated and integrated universal referral process between L.A. County Department of Children & Family Services (DCFS) and the seven workforce boards in L.A. County. The universal referral process was designed in 2018 and launched in March 2019.

### Foster Youth Universal Workforce Referral Process Goals

- Build greater efficiency in inter-agency communication
- Increase the likelihood that foster youth enroll at their closest workforce center
- Provide greater transparency in understanding of referral outcomes

## Learning from the Referral Process

The OYC worked with Harder+Company Community Research to both document the outcomes of the universal referral process and gather feedback on its implementation through multiple data sources. Between December 2019 and January 2020, Harder+Company conducted interviews and focus groups with a total of 15 workforce and three DCFS staff who were involved in the universal referral process, both on the administration side and direct implementation. Harder+Company also administered two youth surveys: one with foster youth who were referred through the pilot (94 respondents) and a separate survey with foster youth who participated in a work experience (73 respondents). Finally, administrative data on foster youth referrals and program enrollments was provided by DCFS and L.A. County Workforce Development, Aging and Community Services (WDACS).



Between February and September 2019, DCFS generated 584 unduplicated referrals for foster youth to public workforce programs. Of these referrals, 118 youth, or roughly 20 percent, enrolled in a workforce program. About a quarter of youth (24 percent) did not complete the enrollment process, such as through not submitting required documentation or not showing up to orientation. Workforce center staff were unable to establish contact with about a third of youth (30 percent), suggesting substantial challenges with establishing and maintaining contact with youth. The initial pilot relied on excel sheets and emails to share referral information. Understanding the limitations of this design, WDACS worked with DCFS to launch a new and improved Automated Referral System (ARS) for foster youth in February 2020.

The OYC has utilized lessons learned from the universal referral process pilot to inform the following recommendations for the implementation and continual improvement of the new ARS, aimed at increasing the percentage of youth who successfully enroll in a workforce program and who are placed in a work experience after a referral is made.



## 10 Recommendations to Improve Foster Youth Access to Public Workforce Programs

- 1 DCFS and L.A. County workforce systems should jointly agree on a definition of “foster youth” to be used for both eligibility and prioritization for workforce services.
- 2 Develop a department-wide goal, implementation, and accountability plan within L.A. County DCFS to ensure that 100 percent of youth have vital documents in the custody of their caregiver by age 14.
- 3 Develop application programming interfaces (APIs) across multiple workforce data systems to reduce duplication of tracking and reporting mechanisms.
- 4 The ARS should send referrals directly to the workforce center, without the need for an intermediary to manually assign cases, and should re-route referrals if the center has exhausted its placement capacity.
- 5 The ARS should automatically check whether a youth is already enrolled in a workforce program to make the best match with a workforce center.
- 6 The ARS should include referrals to other workforce programs, such as Bridge to Work and the Department of Rehabilitation.
- 7 Monitor usage of the ARS across the workforce system and provide ongoing training to ensure all centers utilize the tool effectively.
- 8 Create a “batch notification” feature within ARS that quickly summarizes all outstanding referrals to alert a workforce center to actions needed on a daily and weekly basis.
- 9 Develop protocols for utilizing ARS for “reverse referrals” and external stakeholder referrals system-wide.
- 10 Create a user interface that allows youth, caregivers, and the referring individual to initiate a referral, check on the status, receive text and email notifications, and find important contact information.

Implemented together, **we believe these 10 recommendations will significantly advance the OYC’s goal of improving foster youth access to public workforce programs in Los Angeles County.** These publicly funded career and employment services are intended to serve our most vulnerable youth populations, providing supports to combat the inequitable education attainment and employment outcomes experienced by low-income youth of color, first-generation and undocumented students, and youth involved in the child welfare and juvenile justice systems, among others. We know that many of these recommendations will require new investments in data infrastructure, but streamlining communication within the foster youth referral system should also improve efficiency of outreach efforts, save staff time, and result in more foster youth accessing early work experience programs that provide a foundation for life-long career success.

While the focus of the foster youth referral process and this evaluation was primarily on issues related to access and enrollment, this project also uncovered **several barriers related to youth engagement** that ultimately affect a youth’s chance of success in workforce programs. Part 2 of this brief, which the OYC will begin to develop in 2021, will focus on challenges workforce programs experience in effectively engaging youth in services and corresponding recommendations to advance youth-centered design principles across L.A. County’s public workforce system.



## Acknowledgements

The Opportunity Youth Collaborative Foster Youth at Work campaign engages public workforce and child welfare agencies in L.A. County in devising collaborative, systemic solutions to improve foster youth connection to work readiness training, early work experiences and pathways to sustainable careers.

**Thank you to the many Foster Youth at Work partners** who collaborated on the initial pilot of the foster youth Universal Referral Process, and who continue to partner on its continuous improvement.

- Alliance for Children's Rights
- Foothill Workforce Development Board
- L.A. City Economic and Workforce Development Department
- L.A. County Department of Children and Family Services (DCFS)
- L.A. County Office of Child Protection
- L.A. County Workforce Development, Aging & Community Services Department
- L.A. County Workforce Development Board
- Pacific Gateway Workforce Innovation Network
- SELACO Workforce Development Board
- South Bay Workforce Investment Board
- UNITE-LA
- Verdugo Workforce Development Board

### THANK YOU TO OUR FUNDERS:

ANGELL FOUNDATION

BALLMER GROUP

CALIFORNIA WORKFORCE ACCELERATOR FUND

CONRAD N. HILTON FOUNDATION

HIRE OPPORTUNITY COALITION

PRITZKER FOSTER CARE INITIATIVE

STUART FOUNDATION

THE ASPEN INSTITUTE  
FORUM FOR COMMUNITY SOLUTIONS

THE CARL & ROBERTA DEUTSCH FOUNDATION

THE RALPH M. PARSONS FOUNDATION

## About the Co-Authors

This report is a collaboration among UNITE-LA, the Alliance for Children's Rights and Harder+Company Community Research on behalf of the L.A. Opportunity Youth Collaborative.



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