Youth Employment

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Brandon Anaya
Seattle Jobs Initiative

Introduction

If you have ever asked yourself, 'Won't somebody think of the children?', the good news is that there are lots of workforce agencies across the country that do just that. In fact, there are some very good reasons why a special emphasis on youth employment matters. For one, the youth unemployment rate is typically two to three times higher than adult unemployment. For another, employment for those under the age of 24 is complicated by several factors:

- Youth are typically concentrated in volatile industries, including retail and hospitality.
- Youth are usually more subject to *last-hired, first-fired* practices.
- Youth employment is more sensitive to economic shocks, such as COVID, and the pursuit of education and training.

Moreover, there has been a gradual decline in labor participation with each subsequent generation, meaning that the challenges are even more profound than in years past. In short, the need for effective youth employment programs is as important now as ever before.

Youth Employment Approaches

Fortunately, community action agencies who want to tackle youth employment can draw upon a number of best practices that take into consideration the challenges faced by workers aged 16 to 24. These include:

- Summer youth employment programs sponsored by local employers.
- Paid internships in partnership with educational institutions.
- Pre-apprenticeships that offer preferred entry into apprenticeship programs.

These approaches are especially effective since they provide paid work experience, promote credential attainment and facilitate career pathway development.

Many funders have realized the value of investing in youth, including national organizations such as Annie E. Casey and the W.K. Kellogg foundations, which focus on youth economic mobility. The federal government also provides significant support through programs like YouthBuild, AmeriCorps and, of course, the Workforce Innovation and Opportunity Act (WIOA). While many, if not most, workforce development specialists are aware that WIOA includes a youth component, not everyone is aware that up to 10% of state formula funds (sometimes referred to as the Governor's Reserve) are set aside for innovative workforce strategies. Regardless, if your agency has not connected with your local workforce investment board, you should know that they are a critical ally to engage.

Additionally, if you are looking for ideas, the National Youth Employment Coalition is an excellent resource. NYEC provides information on policy, funding, workshops and training for anyone who cares about youth employment.

Community Action and Youth Employment

Whether you know it or not, Community Action Agencies are well positioned to support youth employment initiatives. They have a long history of serving low-income families and understand the barriers faced by youth. They are trusted community partners who can leverage the local workforce system. Perhaps most importantly, their mission of breaking the cycle of poverty is ideally suited to an employment-centered approach.

Not surprisingly, Community Action Agencies have developed successful youth employment programs worth highlighting, including the Uplift Project and Project Discovery.

The Uplift Project (Illinois) – Developed by the Community and Economic Development Association of Cook County (CEDA), the Uplift Project focuses on empowering individuals through youth-driven, evidence-based programming to build skills and expand opportunities for economic mobility. This program includes paid internships, stipends, life/leadership

skills training, and civic engagement via the Mobility LABs Project— all targeting youth ages 16–24.

Project Discovery (Virginia) –Project Discovery works through 19 partner agencies in 16 locations throughout the state, delivering programs in 145 schools. It combines a nationally recognized curriculum covering study skills, time management, and financial planning with hands-on assistance for college admissions and financial aid — and has served over 1,000 students while helping 6,000 graduate high school since 2010. This is a great model for Community Action Agencies looking to plug into an existing statewide network rather than starting from scratch.

Considerations

The most successful youth employment initiatives take advantage of partnerships and remember to center youth voice in program design and continuous improvement. Further, they do more than simply provide workforce training – they connect skills to both certifications, career pathways and real economic outcomes. Perhaps most importantly, they listen to participants to identify and address specific barriers, such as transportation, childcare, food scarcity and mental health.

Finally, remember to celebrate the achievements of your participants! If you are offering a youth employment program, please share your success stories with the National Community Action Partnership (NCAP). You can share your promising practices here or by sending an email to cem@communityactionpartnership.com. We look forward to hearing from you!

For questions about SNAP Employment & Training, including how it can be used to support youth employment, feel free to reach out – Brandon Anaya banaya@seattlejobsinit.com