

CLASP

CENTER FOR LAW AND SOCIAL POLICY



# Learning from the Youth Opportunity Experience

*Building Delivery Capacity  
in Distressed Communities*

*by Linda Harris*

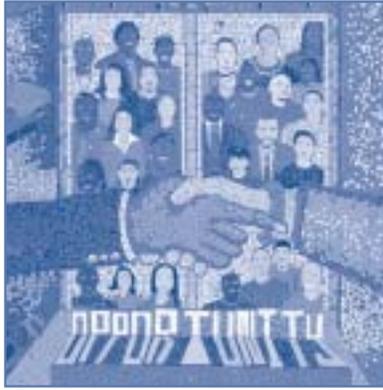
*January 2006*



On the front cover:

*"Preparation + Opportunity = Success"*

*Twenty-six young artists, ranging in age from 14 to 22, designed and created the mural with guidance from Museum of Cultural Arts of Houston (MOCAH) artists Reginald & Rhonda Adams and Prince Maduekwe. It was the final project of a 300-hour mural training curriculum designed by MOCAH and WorkSource Youth Opportunity Centers. This mural was dedicated in November 2005.*



## Executive Summary

In May 2000, the United States Department of Labor awarded sizable Youth Opportunity (YO) Grants to 36 high-poverty urban, rural, and Native American communities. These communities were among the most economically distressed communities in the nation, all characterized by high drop out rates, high youth unemployment rates, greater incidence of juvenile crime, violence, and gang activity. The Youth Opportunity Grants—ranging from \$3.1 to \$43.8 million over five years—provided the resources to put in place comprehensive approaches at considerable scale. The Department’s expressed intent in awarding these grants was to demonstrate that the educational outcomes and economic prospects for young people in high-poverty communities could be dramatically improved by infusing these communities with resources; building capacity and infrastructure; connecting systems; and developing comprehensive, age-appropriate opportunities for youth.

The Youth Opportunity Grants were part of the overhaul of the youth delivery system brought about by the passage of the Workforce Investment

Act of 1998. The expectation was that these communities would be at the forefront of a re-designed national delivery system for disadvantaged youth. With the legislative reforms in place, it was anticipated that congressional appropriations would continue and perhaps increase to allow the expansion beyond the original 36 communities. However, this was not the case. Appropriations for the Youth Opportunity Grants ended and the YO communities are in various stages of transition.

The Youth Opportunity Grant was extremely complex to implement, both administratively and programmatically. It required engaging all sectors of the community and pulling together multiple systems. The grantees were required to engage a sizable proportion of the 14- to 21-year-old population, both those in and out of school, in their target areas. They were required to create Youth Opportunity Centers to serve as Safe Havens and focal points for case management and youth-centered activity. Youth were to be connected to education support, workplace and career exposure, youth development activities, and case manage-

ment support until they completed their academic credentials and successfully transitioned into the labor market or higher education. By the end of the fifth year, more than 90,000 mostly minority youth were enrolled in the Youth Opportunity program in the 36 communities.

Much was accomplished in a relatively short period of time in these communities. These accomplishments are particularly notable, considering the complexities of the YO grant requirements, the challenges of the economic and budgetary environments in the local communities at the time of implementation, and the change in governance in the workforce system that was occurring at the same time. The observations in this paper are based on the responses of 22 of the YO sites to a “Learning from Youth Opportunity” survey administered by the Center for Law and Social Policy (CLASP), wherein respondents were asked to identify areas of strength and challenges on 120 items in four categories: (1) Mobilizing and Engaging Leadership, (2) Connecting Systems, (3) Implementing Comprehensive Program Strategies, and (4) Engaging the Business Sector. Focus group discussions were conducted with several of the YO sites shortly after the start of the final grant year and then again as the year ended. This paper presents an assessment of the capacity building efforts in YO communities, the strengths and challenges of the program, lessons learned, and recommendations for policy and approach.

### General Findings

Several overarching themes were reflected in the survey responses and in the discussions.

**YO resources played a catalytic role in elevating the youth agenda.** Most communities reported that the competition for and receipt of the grant created the impetus for key leadership to come together to focus on “older youth” and be more strategic in the solutions.

**Implementation presented an enormous challenge.** Managing a program with such a broad scope of activity, considerable scale, and adminis-

trative complexity presented tremendous challenge, especially in the start-up year. Pressure for quick start-up before management systems were in place was detrimental to performance in the first year. Successful implementation requires a much longer planning and start-up time than YO sites were afforded.

**Participants felt considerable pride in early programmatic accomplishments.** The YO directors and Workforce Investment Board (WIB) directors

expressed considerable pride—as individual communities and as a collective movement—in their successful outreach to youth and establishment of community and systems connections. There were clearly short-run accomplishments for the communities and the youth involved, including:

- YO communities were successful in outreach-ing and engaging a substantial portion of the youth in the target area, particularly out of school youth. Department of Labor estimates that the YO program had a penetration rate of 42 percent of all eligible youth and 62 percent of out-of-school youth. The saturation approach appears to have worked well in terms of attracting and connecting traditionally hard-to-serve (and hard-to-find) groups.
- YO impacted the way communities organized their systems and resources to respond to the needs of youth in high-risk categories.
- The YO experience contributed to the increased professionalism of the youth delivery system. The consistent focus on upgrading staff skills, creating institutes and academies, establishing a youth practitioners’ apprenticeship program, and ensuring peer-to-peer collaboration across sites has increased the expertise and caliber of youth workers in these communities.

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- The YO sites were successful in dramatically increasing youth participation in academic support or education re-engagement activities. Quite noteworthy are the activities devoted to post-secondary preparation and the high level of post-secondary matriculation.
- The Youth Opportunity sites were very successful in connecting youth to internships and employment opportunities:
  - 23,652 internship opportunities were created
  - 28,302 youth were placed in short-term unsubsidized jobs
  - 18,456 youth were placed in long-term unsubsidized work
  - 23,478 were engaged in training

The infusion of YO funding had an important economic impact. Communities (especially rural communities) reported that YO not only played a role in building the youth delivery infrastructure, but also had an important economic impact. YO required a heavy investment in case management and outreach staff—participating communities added 40 to 70 new jobs, most of which were professional positions. While there is no empirical analysis that documents the magnitude of the YO economic impact, it is reasonable to presume that the increased buying power of new employees and the expanded contracting had a multiplier effect in these local economies.

### Survey Findings

Twenty-two communities participated in the CLASP survey: Albany, GA; Baltimore, MD; Boston, MA; Brockton, MA; Buffalo & Erie Counties, NY; California Indian Manpower Consortium, CA; Cleveland, OH; Denver, CO; Detroit, MI; Houston, TX; Hartford, CT; Kansas City, MO; Los Angeles, CA; Lumber River, NC; Memphis, TN; Philadelphia, PA; San Diego, CA; San Francisco, CA; Seattle, WA; Tampa, FL; Pima County (Tucson), AZ; and Washington, DC. Collectively, a significant expertise has been devel-

oped, with communities demonstrating strength in different areas.

YO communities experienced the most success in the following activity areas:

- Mobilizing community leadership and involving key public systems in the planning and coordination of service delivery.
  - Attracting key leaders to the Youth Council (or similar convening group) and engaging them in a strategic process.
  - Accessing resources from multiple systems in support of the delivery of youth services—78 percent of the communities blended staffing and/or resources from at least three youth-serving systems, including the local school district, juvenile justice, post-secondary, WIA one-stops and TANF system. Sixty-two percent of communities had formal referral relationships with the juvenile justice system.
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- Seventy-eight percent of the communities blended staffing and/or resources from at least three youth-serving systems—local school district, juvenile justice.*
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- Creating the outreach strategies and networks for reaching youth and engaging them in service design or delivery.
  - Developing or accessing alternative education programs for out-of-school youth.
  - Creating work experiences and internships for in-school and out-of-school youth.
- Areas of greatest challenge tended to be:
- Recruiting adults to serve as mentors.
  - Developing special interventions to serve the needs of harder to serve groups such as home-

less youth, youth returning from incarceration, youth with substance problems, and those with limited English speaking ability.

- Engaging the media in a positive, constructive way.
- Assembling local funding and redirecting the funding streams from other systems to accommodate the programming and service needs of youth at very high risk.
- Closing the gap between employer expectations and young people's skills sets.

### *Conclusions and Key Recommendations*

The infusion of the YO resources into these communities at a time when the workforce delivery system was in transition, when the economy was recessing, when resources to other youth service organizations and systems were retrenching and when youth unemployment was on the rise created a synergy in many communities. Out of necessity, and given this opportunity communities coalesced around the older youth agenda creating relationships and interventions that extend beyond the YO boundaries and will most probably continue beyond the grant funding. It also created a national movement uniting communities in a process of learning from each other and building community capacity to implement and manage this effort of significant scale and importance.

The Youth Opportunity experience demonstrates that:

1. **Young people by the thousands are anxious for a chance to reconnect.** When presented with options to re-engage in schooling, prepare for careers, and transform their paths, youth by the thousands connected through Youth Opportunity. The Department of Labor estimates that 42 percent of the eligible youth and 62 percent of the eligible out-of-school youth in the target areas enrolled in the YO program. The loss of such resources and infrastructure in these most distressed communities would be tragic.
2. **Communities can manage to scale.** YO communities persevered through the start-up challenges, demonstrating that—given adequate resources and planning time—communities can bring effective, comprehensive, coordinated programming to scale.
3. **Requiring the involvement of multiple systems and resources as a contingency of funding is effective in bringing disparate players to the table.** The directives of grant makers and funders affect how programs and planning occurs in a community. In communities with limited resources, every incentive should be used to leverage systems and resources to work in tandem to address the needs of youth.
4. **There must be a convening entity.** A Youth Council (or similar vehicle) comprising the appropriate membership can help create a strategic vision for youth—in particular, those falling outside the mainstream—and engage all segments of the community in implementing the vision and benchmarking progress.
5. **Local and state officials have an extremely important role to play.** Communities that indicated success in engaging their mayor or local official also had greater success in accessing multiple systems.
6. **Local delivery capacity is directly related to the ability to hire and maintain quality staff.** Most YO sites invested in recruiting, training, and developing quality case management staff. The vagaries of funding make it difficult for communities to maintain a high-quality direct service capacity. Developing and maintaining the professional capacity in youth service

delivery is a critical challenge to overcome if communities are to make a substantial impact on the negative indicators.

7. **Communities with large numbers of drop-outs will need to explore multiple avenues for connecting these youth to quality education options.** Many of the approaches employed in the YO communities are promising but relatively young and may succumb to a lack of funding support. Given the tremendous need for effective educational alternatives, these collective YO efforts should be maintained and supported—they are a fertile arena for continued study, information sharing, and technical support.
8. **The child welfare and mental health systems must be more fully engaged in the local visioning, strategic planning, and delivery of these interventions,** in order to address the myriad situations that young people face as they attempt to reconnect. These systems appeared to be tangential in the YO efforts. In fact, the welfare and child welfare systems were least likely to be engaged in the planning process.
9. **The YO communities were successful in motivating youth to post-secondary aspirations.** Making those aspirations a reality requires greater support for non-traditional students matriculating in college.
10. **Economically stressed communities can't replace the loss of millions in federal funding.** The provision for Youth Opportunity Grants in the 1998 WIA legislation was built on lessons from several years of prior demonstration funding and was grounded in the findings from years of research on effective practice. The abandonment of a well thought-out, targeted intervention— particularly at a time when drop out rates among poor urban minority youth exceed 50 percent— should be reconsidered.
11. **Foundations and other funders have an important role to play in incubating and sustaining these innovations.** Many promising—in some cases groundbreaking—approaches were implemented in the YO communities. Many of these will suffer not because they aren't effective, but because the available resources are insufficient to nurture their growth and development in complicated environments. Foundation funds are critical to maintaining and further developing these successful efforts and assisting in their evaluation, dissemination, and replication.
12. **There is a need for expanded participation of employers and business leaders in crafting pathways for youth to connect with high growth, high skill areas of the economy.** In many communities, the YO effort brought together secondary, post-secondary, and workforce systems to support non-traditional students. The business sector can help these systems define the skills set, exposure, and experiences that can create a pipeline of well-trained candidates for the skilled jobs of the future. Several YO sites noted the challenge of imparting the requisite occupational skills for success—a task that cannot be accomplished without business and industry at the table. Further exploration of incentives and supports to expand business and industry alliances is warranted. ■