



Qualitative Brief
2025

Mapping the Diversity of OYF Collaboratives: A Guide to Understanding the OYF Network

Prepared for The Aspen Institute Opportunity Youth Forum | May 2025

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INTRODUCTION

Since its formation in 2012, the Opportunity Youth Forum (OYF) network has expanded significantly, resulting in greater variation in the goals, approaches, structures, and outcomes of the collaboratives' opportunity youth work. In addition, OYF has more recently embraced work on belonging, meaning, well-being, and purpose ([BMWP](#)). BMWP's holistic programming and narrative change approaches have integrated racial and socioeconomic equity into collaboratives' strategies.

In our 2023 evaluation report¹, we found OYF collaboratives took many different paths towards systems change. Progress was incremental and most collaboratives experienced periods of change as well as reversals over time. There was no one common journey. (see Appendix A). Similarly, collaborative structures and approaches varied. We embarked on this qualitative study to enhance our understanding of the diversity of collaboratives' stories, the community contexts they operate in, and the variety of approaches used to reduce disconnection in OYF communities. By understanding the diversity of collaboratives in the OYF network, we may also begin to understand how this translates into varied systems change journeys.

The goals of this study were to:

- Better understand collaboratives' origin stories;
- Learn how collaboratives articulate the root causes of youth disconnection in their communities;
- Explore how collaboratives' identities, origin stories, and structures influence how they address youth disconnection and its root causes in their communities.

Based on interviews with leads at 12 collaboratives, and interviews with partners and youth leaders from four of these collaboratives², we explored the core elements that make up each collaborative and present them as a profile in this brief. The intention is to increase collective understanding about how a diverse set of OYF collaboratives conceptualize their work and how they make progress toward OYF's shared goals.

About the Opportunity Youth Forum

The Aspen Institute's Forum for Community Solutions (FCS) launched the OYF in 2012, on the recommendations from President Obama's White House Council on Community Solutions. Since then, FCS has mobilized a national movement, convening and investing in a network of communities dedicated to improving systems so all young people can connect or re-connect to an education or career pathway.

¹ <https://www.equalmeasure.org/wp-content/uploads/2023/12/FINAL-2022-OYF-Annual-Report-with-Exec-Summ-11.28.23.pdf>

² See Appendix C for more details about our methodology.



The brief is structured as follows:

- An overview of the **Collaborative profile**, which examines two emerging elements of each collaborative: the collaborative's distinct **identity** (made up of *history, social/cultural factors, political/economic factors, geographic location, and experience as a collaborative*) and **approach** to *partner relationships, root causes, and youth engagement*. The profile is intended to help better understand the diversity of collaboratives in the OYF network.
- **Vignettes**, where we highlight four collaboratives as examples of the collaborative profile in action.

Themes in this brief are derived from interviews with the following collaboratives:

- Buffalo, NY
- Cheyenne River Sioux Reservation
- Denver, CO
- Greenville, MS*
- Hawai'i*
- Jasper, TX
- Los Angeles County, CA*
- Newark, NJ
- Pueblo of Jemez
- Pueblo of Taos*
- San Antonio, TX
- San Diego, CA

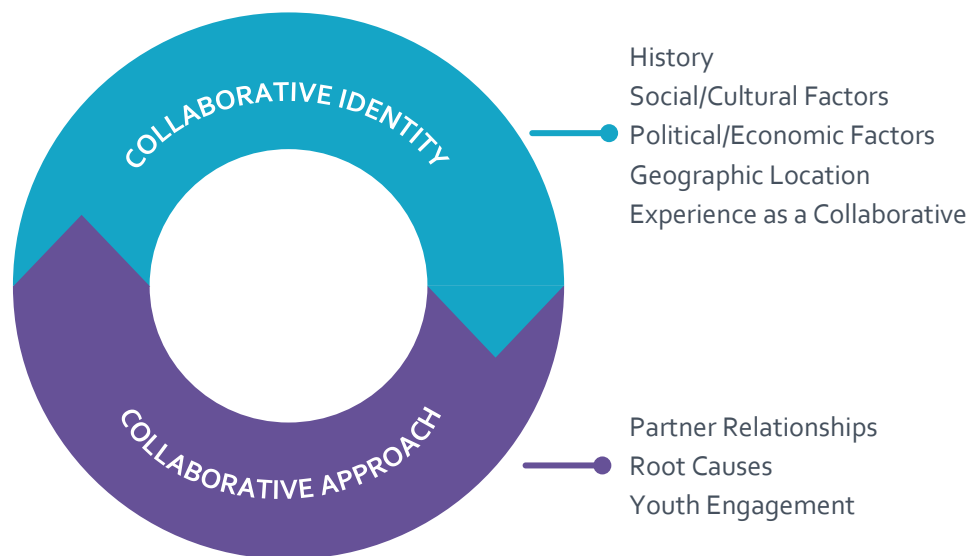
*We conducted additional interviews with partners and youth leaders at these collaboratives, and their insights are featured in the "Collaborative Vignettes" section of the brief. For full interviewee list and interview questions, see Appendix D and E.



A COLLABORATIVE PROFILE: EMERGING FINDINGS

Through our interviews with leads, partners, and youth leaders with a sample of OYF collaboratives, we heard distinct, yet categorizable, ways in which they talked about who they are as a collaborative and as a community, why they exist as a collaborative, how they are structured, and how they approach their work. We have codified these characteristics and organized them under two emerging elements, *identity* and *approach*, each with multiple components. We present these elements and their components in the “Collaborative Profile,” below.

FIGURE 1. COLLABORATIVE PROFILE



The components that make up a collaborative’s identity and approach are the foundation of a collaborative’s values, goals, and functions. By understanding how collaboratives align within these components, the OYF network can learn from its diversity, and the Aspen Forum for Community Solutions can support both individual collaboratives and the broader network by tailoring supports to reflect each collaborative’s unique profile.

Components of Collaborative Identity

We began each collaborative lead interview by asking about the root causes of youth disconnection in their community, then about how and why their collaborative began their opportunity youth-focused work. Collaboratives described contextual factors unique to their community, providing further background about who their collaborative is and why they exist. Through our conversations with collaboratives, five identity-related components emerged:



HISTORY: Historical events, such as colonization or social movements, shape of community dynamics (e.g., displacement of Indigenous people, racial equity activism).

Example: Tribal collaboratives discussed the history and ongoing impact of the displacement of Indigenous people on their communities and youth.

SOCIAL/ CULTURAL FACTORS: The values, practices, relationships, and networks within the community that define and influence collaboration (e.g., local norms around how organizations work together).

Example: Some collaboratives began their opportunity youth work based on needs expressed by community research and voice. The values, needs of the community, and the social factors that impact the community dictated collaborative actions and strategy.

POLITICAL/ ECONOMIC FACTORS: Local and regional political context and climate can affect funding priorities, resources, and support. For example, a community with a climate of hostility towards DEI will translate into challenges for collaboratives. Our 2023 evaluation report similarly found the political context and climate of a community can impact the funding and stakeholder engagement necessary for effective systems change.

Example: Anti-DEI sentiment in some communities, particularly rural areas in politically conservative states, has impacted the role played by collaboratives in these communities.

Geographic location and collaborative experience were two additional components of identity that emerged from interviews. In our annual evaluation reports, these factors have consistently been associated with collaborative capacity and changing local systems. Generally, collaboratives in urban communities and those with more experience as a collaborative or backbone have had more success in building capacity and changing systems than collaboratives in rural communities and with fewer years of experience.³

GEOGRAPHIC LOCATION: The degree of urbanicity, population density, and social isolation of the area where a collaborative is located affects community needs and access to services. Urban, rural, and tribal collaboratives also varied in their relationships with government partners, their strategic areas of focus, and barriers to their work. (See Appendix B - Table 1)

Example: Rural and tribal collaboratives detailed that despite extreme inequity and need for resources in their communities, funding is limited. Rural collaboratives also cited a lack of transportation options in their communities as a barrier to youth engagement in their programming.

EXPERIENCE AS A COLLABORATIVE: The length of time a collaborative has worked together and focused on opportunity youth shapes understanding, relationships, and strategies within the community.

Example: With more years of experience focused on opportunity youth, the longer-standing collaboratives were trusted in their communities, had a stronger understanding of appropriate partners, and had developed a sustainable funding formula, and as a result were better able to influence long-term change.

³ See: <https://www.equalmeasure.org/oymf-resources/>. Resources have also been found to be a key factor in systems change work; collaboratives and backbone organizations with larger budgets are more likely to change local systems. In our interviews, funding did not emerge as a central identity theme, though was referenced as a priority to ensure consistent services and programs for opportunity youth. Funding for OY work was also identified as a benefit of being part of the OYF network.



Collaborative Approaches

The collaboratives provided us with an overview of their structure, key strategies and programs, as well as information on progress toward their goals. Through our analysis, we identified three **approaches -- to partner relationships, root causes, and youth engagement**. The approaches were present in all collaboratives, implemented in different ways, and influenced by components of the collaboratives' identity. Examining the approaches in more detail helps us to better understand how collaboratives operate and engage in their work to connect young people to school and careers.

Below, we provide definitions and examples for each approach and describe the various categories of implementation we observed in each. We also share related themes from the interviews. More context for how collaboratives are implementing approaches to partner relationships, root causes, and youth engagement can be found in the vignettes.

APPROCHES TO PARTNER RELATIONSHIPS



Definition: The breadth and depth of partnerships critical to the success of opportunity-youth focused work held by the collaborative lead or backbone organization, and the extent to which partners are integrated into programming and decision-making for the collaborative.

Categories and examples

Emerging relationships: The lead organization has emerging relationships with a few partners and key partnerships are still being identified. This type of partner relationship is more common in rural and tribal collaboratives, where there are fewer youth-serving organizations, and they are often geographically dispersed.

Example: *"So, (we are) trying to align ourselves with education [partners]. Also aligning ourselves with workforce development [partners] because there's a decent amount of funding and resources for businesses."*

Developing relationships: The lead organization has strong relationships with most or all necessary partners for their work such as government agencies, community-based organizations, school districts, and workforce agencies, and local employers. Partners have begun collaborating and aligning to drive strategies to prevent disconnection or to reconnect young people to school or work.

Example: *"We're not saying we want to enrich your organizations just because we're saying it. We want to enrich your organizations because it's going to be better for the participants and for the youth in our community."*



Developing partnerships: The lead organization has deep relationships with most or all partners. They integrate their programming efforts, develop and refine collective strategies together, and are aligned on implementing shared strategy.

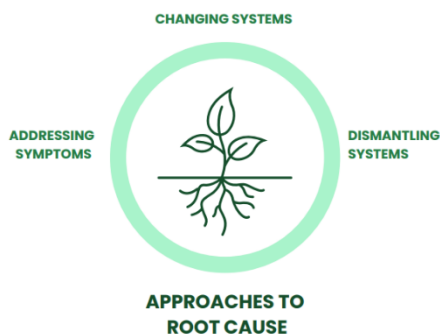
Example: *"We serve as a backbone and intermediary to be able to help them build the capacity because they also serve OY...but we also work in partnership with them to be able to have a true network."*

Themes regarding *partner relationships*

- Collaboratives identified building relationships with key partners as essential and we observed a pattern to the way relationships are integrated into the collaborative structure. As rapport is built, the lead organization moves into the convening and strategic planning role with partners. The longer a collaborative has been established (a component of identity) the more likely they are to have adopted a collective impact-style model of partnership, with the lead organization serving as the "backbone." They also are more likely to articulate "convening partners" as a specific OYF strategy. Some tribal collaboratives are an exception to this; some either do not currently partner with other organizations, or they partner primarily with other divisions within the tribal government. *"The overarching goal for me at the moment within the systems-level work is alignment... we are really trying to work toward making sure that all partners are working step-in-step together to create a better navigable pathway for people out of poverty."*
- Collaboratives serving urban areas were more likely to focus on relationship building and convening partners as a core strategy, while collaboratives in rural communities were more focused on direct service of employment and education programming. Urban collaboratives can tap into a wealth of potential partners doing opportunity youth-focused work in their communities while rural communities tend to operate in a more limited partnership ecosystem. Because there are fewer partnership opportunities in rural communities, rural collaboratives' core strategies are likely to focus on developing and implementing education and employment programs rather than on convening partners.

In our 2023 evaluation report, we found that building relationships with systems leaders is an enabling practice that speeds up collaboratives' systems change pursuits and builds momentum. All types of partner relationships align with this enabling practice to various degrees.

APPROACHES TO ROOT CAUSES



Definition: The extent to which the collaborative articulates the root or underlying causes of youth disconnection in their community, and how the collaborative addresses these through their opportunity youth work.



Categories and examples

Addressing symptoms of root causes: Collaborative strategies are primarily programmatic and focus on interventions that address immediate issues impacting opportunity youth such as basic needs, educational opportunities, and job training.

Example: Focusing on access to services or programs and connecting systems that may not be well-connected to each other. *"There is actually a lot of opportunity in our community, and no one knows how to access it...and I think we're really trying to figure out that access issue."*

Changing systems that perpetuate root causes: The collaborative has identified policies, practices, and power dynamics that if changed would improve outcomes for opportunity youth.

Example: Collaborating with judges to shift outcomes and provide more options for youth that are facing trial. *"Being connected with the judges...really helps in the outcomes during court for those that are incarcerated...so they can understand hopefully one day the prison will not be a prison anymore and it'll be like a community center."*

Dismantling systems that perpetuate root causes: Collaborative strategies are intentionally and clearly connected to addressing root causes at the systems level. Collaborative works to change mindsets and narratives, and to transform systems.

Example: Creating space for transformative change in current systems and redesigning and creating new systems by and for young people. *"We're here for community, not just opportunity youth...(we're) really trying to address the gaps in those systems, and... create transformative change in current systems; redesign, and create new systems that work for our people."*

Note: It is important for collaboratives to focus on all three of these approaches – addressing symptoms of the root causes, changing, and dismantling systems. Youth experience the symptoms of root causes in their daily lives, and to fully address them it is necessary to engage in systems change and long-term transformation efforts.

Themes regarding root causes

- **Regardless of how long a collaborative had been focused on opportunity youth work, most were able to articulate and describe the root causes of youth disconnection in their communities; racism was the most frequently cited.** Collaboratives described racism built into policies or systems, such as education and workforce systems, and how it translated into youth disconnection. Interviewees discussed the lack of representation on school boards and the intentional under-resourcing of public-school systems. Collaboratives also detailed how redlining and the imposition of physical boundaries, such as major highways caused and furthered racial segregation. Acknowledging and understanding how structural racism shaped the lives of youth was critical to effectively navigating barriers and making progress as a collaborative.



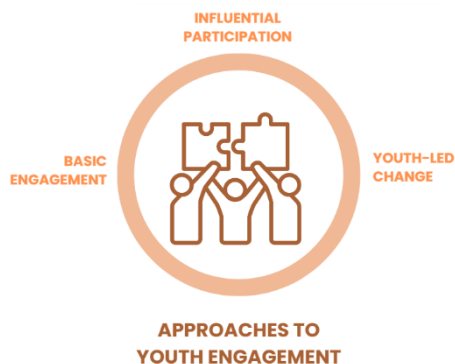
Many of the collaboratives recognized these systemic inequities but were not able to dismantle them without intentional strategies, resources, and sustained commitment. To move beyond addressing the symptoms of root causes to addressing the root causes themselves, collaboratives tried to work beyond surface-level interventions and drive meaningful systems change that uplifts youth and fosters long-term opportunities.

Example: *"(a) big underlying systemic issue is the history of redlining...that is still an issue where there's just not as many opportunities for folks living in certain areas. And those are primarily where Black people are living, low-income people, really density populated Latino communities, that are just not receiving the same amount of support from the city or county as like other areas."*

Rural and tribal collaboratives were more likely to identify generational trauma and mental health as root causes of youth disconnection than urban collaboratives. Tribal collaboratives described historical and current trauma rooted in harm caused by the U.S. federal government compounded over generations. For example, one interviewee described how the primary school in the area, run by the Bureau of Indian Education, failed to offer tribal culture or history. Rural and tribal collaboratives more often cited cultural competency as a strategy and belonging, meaning, well-being, and purpose (BMWP) as an outcome of their collaborative's work, which may address the trauma attributable to these root causes.

Example: *"I'd say that the residential schools, or the boarding schools, are a root cause of a lot of intergenerational, transgenerational trauma that still has a lot of pain and we're still healing from, which has led to high amount of substance abuse, substance addiction, further abuse, physical, all sorts of abuse, which is what our ancestors suffered for generation after generation. So, we're trying to heal and unlearn that, and it's a long and difficult process."*

APPROACHES TO YOUTH ENGAGEMENT



Definition: The extent to which the collaborative centers youth voice and perspective in their work, including encouraging youth participation in the development and refinement of programming and decisions about the collaborative's strategies and vision.

Categories and examples:

Basic engagement: Youth are asked for their perspectives or input for a specific program rather than for the collaborative's broader strategy.

Example: *"We convene youth regularly on a monthly basis to get their feedback. We have different youth leaders who help facilitate the discussion and lead it and really provide feedback to all of the collaborative partners."*



Influential participation: Youth are stewards or ambassadors for change and leadership in the collaborative. Youth have strong input and influence on decisions and strategies.

Example: *"We encourage our young people to be ambassadors. It's important for our young people to...really believe in what it is that we have for them and be an investment in their own transformation."*

Youth-led change: Youth are leading or co-leading the collaborative. They hold influential positions in the decision-making structure and drive collaborative strategies.

Example: Adult leaders in a couple collaboratives have stepped back and become the advisors and enablers of the youth leaders, who lead the collaborative's strategy and decision-making. *"It's the youth, letting them make decisions for themselves and giving them the tools and the resources they need to build their own foundations and that it's okay to do things differently because we've been doing the same thing for so long..."*

Youth-led change is a core value of the Opportunity Youth Forum and authentic youth engagement continues to be an essential approach among collaboratives in the network. Our findings align with FCS' continuum of youth and young adult engagement, described in a 2018 report "Aligning All Voices."⁴

Theme regarding youth engagement

While collaboratives of all durations include youth engagement in their strategies, **collaboratives in operation for more than ten years more often cited youth voice as evidence of success than newer collaboratives did.** Longer-standing collaboratives (a component of identity) provided examples of youth integration into the management of programming and youth leaders co-designing structural change strategies. *"Young leaders are co-designing almost every component to the structural change... it's one of our biggest wins."*

In our 2023 evaluation report, we found engaging young people as advocates is an enabling practice to speed up collaboratives' systems change pursuits and maintain momentum. Supporting authentic youth influence and participation and youth-led change align with this enabling practice.

⁴ See: <https://www.aspencommunitysolutions.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/01/IncludingAllVoices-SCREEN-FINAL.pdf> The report references four stages along the youth engagement continuum which we've condensed to three categories to align with our qualitative findings.



COLLABORATIVE VIGNETTES

Sharing examples and stories from four collaboratives

Based on interviews with collaborative leads, partners, and youth leaders, we share vignettes about four collaboratives: Greenville, MS; Hawai'i; Los Angeles County, CA; and Taos Pueblo.

These vignettes are designed to provide examples of the collaborative profile, including the two emerging elements – prominent **identity** characteristics and how they are incorporating each of the three **approaches** to help reduce youth disconnection in their communities.

Greenville, MS

BACKGROUND

Rural LISC's Greenville Opportunity Youth (GO YOUTH) Initiative is a collaborative of community organizations dedicated to empowering disconnected youth through education, workforce development, and leadership opportunities. The collective effort seeks to address systemic challenges in order to improve academic and employment outcomes for rural youth from ages 16-24 who have become disengaged from education and the workforce.

We spoke to key partners in this initiative including Delta Compass, which serves as the primary convener for the collaborative, and the Mississippi Delta Nature and Learning Center, which operates the AmeriCorps program designed to engage and support youth in the region.

The collaborative's identity is deeply rooted in the **rural geography** of the Mississippi Delta, where they face limited access to resources and opportunities. The collaborative serves a predominately Black community, and their work is shaped by a **long history of structural racism** that continues to affect youth outcomes. Operating in a **challenging political landscape**, they navigate resistance to equity efforts that seek to achieve transformative change for the region's youth-serving systems.

APPROACHES TO PARTNER RELATIONSHIPS



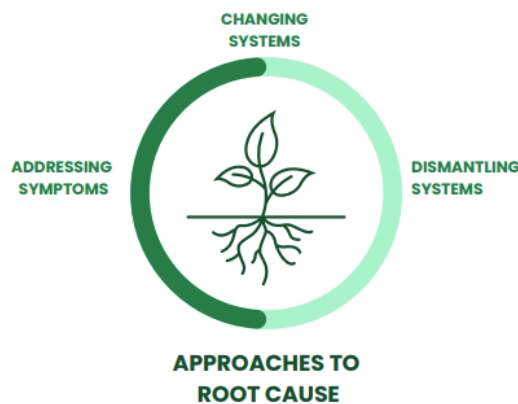
GO Youth's success lies in its ability to **develop and maintain engagement with a diverse network of partners**, each contributing unique strengths that align with their shared goals for opportunity youth programming. Their partnerships provide access to the systems they aim to transform, enabling the group to leverage funding and decision-making power to increase opportunities for the youth they serve. The Delta Compass was described as *"the hub that provides*



capacity-building, technical assistance, (and is) also an implementer; we manage a lot of the aggregation between data-sharing agreements for outputs and outcomes.”

The collaborative has cultivated a range of partners, including community-based organizations, schools, and major employers, all working together to improve outcomes for opportunity youth. Trust has been built by being deeply embedded in the community, consistently “doing the work” and demonstrating their commitment to shared goals. They’ve achieved success at both individual and systems levels by leveraging funding from multiple sources and using it to support preventive strategies. A challenge to forming partnerships has been addressing and overcoming resistance rooted in racism. By demonstrating the tangible outcomes of their work and framing the impact as a shared gain for the broader community, GO Youth strives to shift mindsets and foster more inclusive support for opportunity youth.

APPROACHES TO ROOT CAUSES



The root causes of youth disconnection in Greenville are deep, generational poverty driven by systemic oppression and a history of intentional divestment in Black communities. Partners and the backbone organization note that **the most prominent and well-funded system in the area is the criminal justice system, where investments in incarceration far surpass those in education and workforce development.** In the face of this disparity, the collaborative has worked to create alternatives to detention, offering judges options to sentence youth to positive programs such as workforce training instead of jail — helping to break cycles of disconnection and build pathways to opportunity.

GO YOUTH’s approach serves as a powerful example of **changing systems that perpetuate root causes** and creating pathways within the system to increase access to opportunities for youth who are disconnected. Greenville OYF partners recognize that working in a rural setting often requires innovation, as funding is limited and entrenched systems are difficult to change. Compounding these challenges is the need to navigate the political beliefs of local policymakers, who reject both DEI efforts and efforts to mitigate climate change. In response, the collaborative adapts its language and framing to appeal to decision-makers in non-threatening ways while maintaining their focus on equity and systemic change. *One partner explains their perspective as “...sad that we have to tiptoe around it, but it’s like I said, the work survives, and you just wait for a new body of governance that hopefully has a little bit more empathy in this space.”*



APPROACHES TO YOUTH ENGAGEMENT



This collaborative's youth engagement approach prioritizes regular, **meaningful input from youth**, with monthly convenings led by youth leaders who guide discussions and provide insights to the collaborative partners. Recognizing that systems-level thinking often comes from a privileged, academic perspective disconnected from on-the-ground realities, the collaborative relies on youth to act as a crucial reality check. Youth participants help evaluate what will or won't work, offer culturally appropriate approaches, and revise plans to ensure they are comprehensive and grounded in the lived experiences of the community.

CONCLUSION

The Greenville, Mississippi collaborative demonstrates how innovative, community-centered approaches can address systemic barriers experienced by opportunity youth in their community. By leveraging diverse partnerships, amplifying youth voices, and strategically navigating challenging political landscapes, the collaborative is creating meaningful pathways to promote systems change for both individuals and systems in the rural Delta region.



HAWAI'I

BACKGROUND

The Opportunity for Youth Action Hawai'i (OYAH) is a partnership of nonprofit organizations working with state partners at the Kawaiiloa Youth and Family Wellness Center. Founded in 2020, its goal is to replace punitive approaches to treatment and incarceration with healing and community-based programs inspired by Indigenous knowledge and cultural practices.

We spoke with three nonprofit organization partners to learn more about the collaborative approaches to their work through OYAH: Partners in Development Foundation (PIDF), which operates Kupa 'Aina Farm to facilitate 'āina⁵-based learning for youth, families, and community members; Kinai 'Eha, a Native Hawaiian culture-based, wraparound workforce development program; and RYSE, which addresses homelessness through a youth access center and shelter with supportive services. We also had the opportunity to conduct a focus group with four youth from Kinai 'Eha and RYSE.

OYAH and their partners aim to create a safe, peaceful space where youth in Hawai'i can learn to heal themselves, their families, and their communities. The Native Hawaiian and Pacific Islander community is greatly impacted by the history of **colonization and oppression**, which presently results in lack of housing, food insecurity, substance use, and a disconnection to traditional Hawaiian culture. The collaborative's work is focused on addressing **generational trauma** and is deeply rooted in its **cultural values** that prioritize healing and belonging to transform the systems that continue to oppress youth.

APPROACHES TO PARTNER RELATIONSHIPS



The Opportunity for Youth Action Hawai'i (OYAH) collaborates with state partners including the Hawai'i Youth Correctional Facility and the Department of Education's Olomana School. Together, they provide specialized programming and build a supportive community for opportunity and justice-involved youth. Over time, these organizations have developed **deep relationships rooted in mutual trust and understanding**.

To strengthen these partnerships, the collaborative established a cross-campus team with representatives from each program known as Pilina Builders, dedicated to fostering connections to help partner organizations understand the full scope of programming and how it aligns with the overall strategy. Initially, each organization focused on its specialized program area without a clear vision of how their efforts could collectively transform the justice system. These relationship-building efforts helped partners better understand each others' roles and identify intersections in their work, enabling more cohesive and effective collaboration. State partners are critical to this work, as transforming the justice system requires collective action. The collaboration between nonprofits has been instrumental in

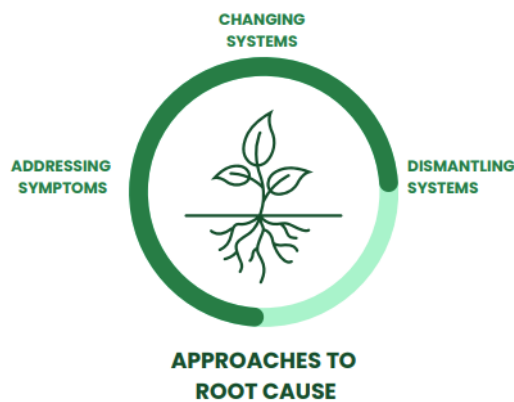
⁵ 'Āina is a Hawaiian word that means "land" or "earth"



shifting mindsets, fostering a shared commitment to creating a system that heals rather than punishes. One partner reflected on this process, saying, *"I think it's the solidarity in these three very impactful organizations coming together and... as long as we have that collective group, the Pilina Builders have been wonderful in helping with that. We have seen considerable progress in this last year."*

The organizations support each other in realizing their goal to transform the justice system from a punitive model that perpetuates harm, to a model that centers on healing and therapeutic practices. This new model helps to heal the trauma youth have experienced, restoring their connection to their land and culture, and helping connect them to education and careers. Another partner describes: *"within the partnership, understanding we all stand... in the work that we do, we're the experts, but bringing all of that expertise together in the same space so that our mission of really healing and having these young people become the next generation of healers, I think is what's most important."* Together, these organizations are working to reclaim cultural values and improve long-term outcomes for Native Hawaiian, Pacific Islander, and all youth.

APPROACHES TO ROOT CAUSES



OYAH has always focused on opportunity youth and social justice reform, collaborating with organizations dedicated to addressing systemic inequities that disproportionately affect Native Hawaiian and Pacific Islander youth. Hawai'i's long history of colonization resulted in the loss of Indigenous sovereignty, cultural erasure, and the generational trauma that continues to shape the lived experiences of Native communities. This history has led to stark disparities, with Native Hawaiian and Pacific Islander communities experiencing the highest rates of incarceration,

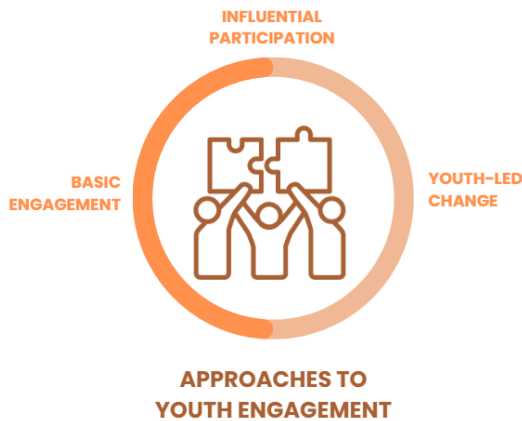
educational inequities, poverty, and homelessness in the state.

The collaborative is working to **dismantle systems that perpetuate trauma** by applying a trauma-informed lens when working with youth, with a strong focus on fostering safety, belonging, and compassionate support. Since 2018 when PIDF, Kinai 'Eha, and RYSE were invited by the state government to co-locate services on the Kawaiiloa campus, the nonprofit organizations have been working to build a new system for opportunity and justice-involved youth. When youth are ready, partners guide them to provide community service and build their work experience, helping them explore career paths and interests. As one partner stated, *"To be able to take [the land] and to be able to really start to transform what that looks like... to now see community working together to Mālama our children... We don't incarcerate and lock kids up. We don't punish and kick out, push away youth."*

Youth also participate in health, wellness, and traditional Hawaiian practice events, creating a supportive campus community that uplifts them and inspires them to envision a brighter future. Youth shared that having the community around them helps them feel empowered to reach their goals: *"It's a whole team behind you that's trying to help you move forward, not just one person. You have multiple people to fall back onto to help you reach the goals you want to reach."*



APPROACHES TO YOUTH ENGAGEMENT



The collaborative's youth engagement approach prioritizes creating opportunities for **youth to serve as stewards and leaders**, ensuring their voices shape programming and decision-making. Youth are welcomed to attend planning meetings with partners, where they have shared their input on what works, what needs improvement, and what they hope to see more of, such as events celebrating Hawaiian holidays. One youth shared, *"The meetings we held, it's a pretty welcoming environment, and so whenever there's a need or a want, it's usually always met. If something didn't work, that's where we can voice it and improve it for the next time."*

Informed by youths' needs and interests, OYAH is forming a youth-led committee. In a recent effort, youth representatives from PIDF, RYSE, and Kinai 'Eha were invited to plan a Youth Jam event, which celebrated Hawaiian history and culture. Youth also led a campus-wide staff appreciation day on Lā Kū'oko'a, a Hawaiian holiday. The collaborative prioritizes keeping youth at the center of decision-making, ensuring their voices are heard and directly impact programming. Events like Youth Jam exemplify this approach, providing spaces for youth to connect with culture, community, and peers, while fostering support systems that empower them to overcome challenges and build toward their goals.

CONCLUSION

The Opportunity for Youth Action collaborative demonstrates how centering healing, cultural connection, and restorative practices can address the systemic barriers rooted in the generational trauma of Indigenous communities. Through strong partnerships and a commitment to restorative approaches, the collaborative is creating meaningful pathways for opportunity youth to overcome challenges and envision brighter futures.



LOS ANGELES COUNTY, CA

BACKGROUND

The Los Angeles Opportunity Youth Collaborative (OYC) is led by the backbone organization, Alliance for Children's Rights, and in partnership with UNITE-LA and John Burton Advocates for Youth. This collaborative is a deeply rooted coalition that has been serving the community for over two decades and has been a member of the OYF network since 2013. Its origins are tied to addressing the pressing issues of gang violence and reducing involvement in the child welfare system in LA County. Today, the collaborative is working toward the holistic needs of opportunity youth who have experienced disconnection from school or work, including young people who have experienced child welfare or juvenile justice systems and/or have experienced homelessness.

To learn more about their work, we spoke to one of the co-conveners for the collaborative, UNITE-LA, and a key strategic partner, New Ways to Work. We also had the opportunity to conduct a focus group with four youth from the OYC Young Leaders program.

The identity of the Los Angeles Opportunity Youth Collaborative is shaped by its location in one of the **largest and most diverse urban centers** in the country. One of the longest-standing collaboratives in the OYF network, their extensive **experience and deeply rooted relationships** are evident in the long list of partners they have cultivated over the years. They navigate the familiar urban challenges of disparities in access to resources and a **history of systemic underinvestment in certain neighborhoods**, which continues to shape the opportunities available to youth. Their ability to address these inequities while leveraging the strengths of a diverse network of partners demonstrates their commitment to systems change for youth across LA's communities.

APPROACHES TO PARTNER RELATIONSHIPS



Since its inception, the collaborative has taken a dual approach—working to create opportunities for advancing in education and workforce access while working with partners to prepare youth to successfully transition into their next stage. Their coalition structure **brings together partners with expertise** in education, workforce development, child welfare, and positive youth development, all supported by **strong relationships with public systems** and officials who provide critical funding and policy support. This public-private partnership model combines a community-

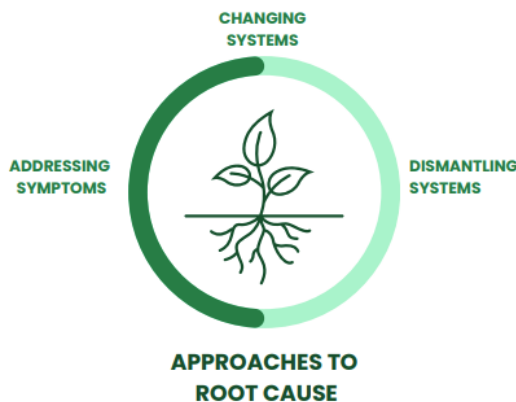
centered approach with strategic partnerships as the collaborative continues to drive meaningful change for opportunity youth in Los Angeles.

The collaborative has a long-standing presence in the community and trusted relationships with essential local partners. They have particularly strong relationships with the K-12 and postsecondary education systems, the workforce development system, and the child welfare agency, enabling them to act as connectors and conveners across multiple systems. By strategically aligning each partner's strengths and capacity, the collaborative fosters a sense of shared purpose among stakeholders.



Supported by deep partnerships with the philanthropic sector, the collaborative is positioned as a neutral intermediary, giving them the flexibility to explore new partnerships and innovative approaches. This ability to bridge systems and refine strategies ensures their partnerships remain effective in addressing the needs of foster youth. They are now planning to expand their focus beyond foster youth to include all youth and addressing systemic barriers that disproportionately impact certain communities.

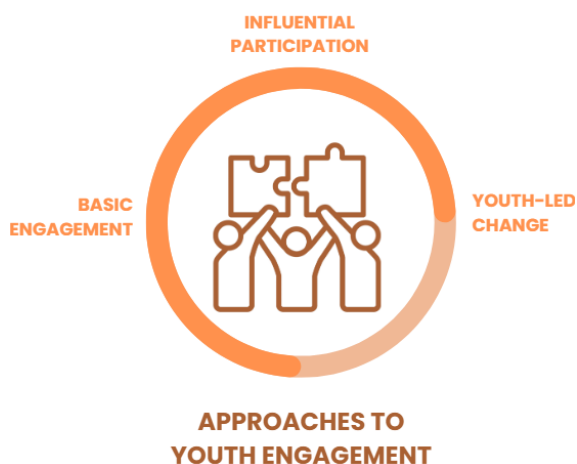
APPROACHES TO ROOT CAUSES



The root causes of youth disconnection in Los Angeles stem from a combination of systemic racism, poverty, and a lack of opportunity that leaves many young people, especially foster youth, underinvested in and overlooked. Partners emphasized the level of generational trauma experienced by foster youth and the absence of hope, with youth internalizing feelings of being undervalued and system decision makers often perceiving them as unworthy of investment. These issues contribute to a cycle of disconnection that disproportionately impacts youth in underserved communities, as well as youth exiting the foster care

system. Collaborative leadership and key partners are deeply aware of the systemic issues driving youth disconnection and their awareness clearly shapes much of their work on empowering youth to navigate the systems that impact their lives. By integrating youth into their advocacy efforts, they actively work to **change systems and challenge power dynamics**. The LA collaborative has a powerful vision to provide pathways for success while continuing to advocate for broader systemic change.

APPROACHES TO YOUTH ENGAGEMENT



The collaborative places a strong emphasis on youth engagement, **integrating the voices and experiences of the youth** they serve—particularly the Opportunity Youth Collaborative (OYC) Young Leaders—into their programming and advocacy efforts. Young Leaders shared that they feel heard and empowered, both to advocate for themselves and to contribute meaningfully to the collaborative's overall vision. A young leader shared *"They're (OYC staff) very helpful and they do want to see us in the rooms with the people who are making the big decisions and changing policies. So, they give us preparation, they give us feedback, and they help us for the most part so we can be recognized as a professional in this space."*

By building trust and creating a safe, welcoming environment, the collaborative ensures that youth feel supported and that their lived experiences are reflected in programming and decision-making within the collaborative and with partners. Another young leader shared that there is still room to grow, but the



consistency in their support has laid a strong foundation for experiencing authentic youth engagement and leadership development. One of the young leaders we spoke to believes that youth engagement is a key reason for the collaborative's success. They shared that *"the director's willingness to engage and be around young people and listen...and have had those breakthroughs that other state(s) said that they've been trying to work on. Because you have to get the buy-in from all the levels, and I think that's something that we've been successful at doing."*

CONCLUSION

With decades of experience, strong partnerships, and a focus on supporting foster youth, the Los Angeles Opportunity Youth Collaborative has established itself as a leader in addressing opportunity youth disconnection and remains committed to growing and evolving to meet the community's needs.



TAOS PUEBLO

BACKGROUND

In 2015, Taos Pueblo Division of Health and Community Services created the Youth Outreach program to re-engage youth with their culture, community, and education as well as establish a cultural space for youth within the local public school system. Since then, they have collaborated with other programs within this division including RecoveryWorks, a transitional substance abuse recovery program, and the Division of Education and Training, which oversees all education-related programs. Through this collaboration, Taos Pueblo has provided education and workforce development opportunities to youth. We spoke with staff and leadership within these programs and divisions to gain a deeper understanding of their approaches to working with opportunity youth. We also had the opportunity to conduct a focus group with two Youth Outreach Workers.

Taos Pueblo is an Indigenous community that has experienced historical traumas in the context of colonialism⁶ and racism under U.S. federal policies, which in turn has led to intergenerational trauma in their community. For Indigenous youth in this community, the only option for high school has been to attend public schools in the border town of Taos, requiring them to **navigate educational systems that have historically contributed to their community's trauma**. The collaborative aims to address and heal this intergenerational trauma by focusing on the younger generation, grounding its work in the **cultural values of healing and belonging**. These values are central to how the collaborative approaches its efforts to support and empower its community.

APPROACHES TO PARTNER RELATIONSHIPS



The collaborative's approach to partnerships is centered on **building strong, trust-based relationships** with public and charter schools where Indigenous youth from Taos Pueblo attend high school. The collaborative focuses on advocacy, acceptance, and fostering a sense of belonging for these students within the school system. When the partnership began, there was minimal collaboration between the Pueblo and the schools, with tribal consultation often reduced to formality. Over the past seven years, dedicated tribal leaders have worked to repair and rebuild these relationships by establishing

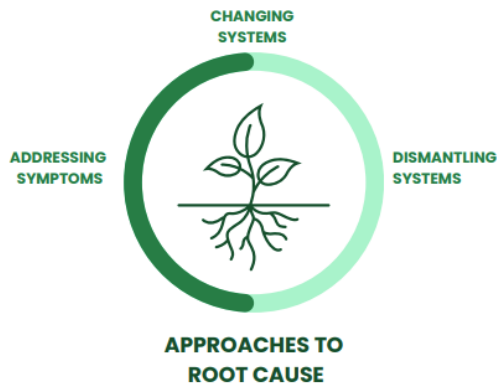
trust with school administrators, advocating for transportation solutions, and securing support for cultural language programs. For the first time in 20 years, Taos Municipal School Board includes Taos Pueblo representation. These efforts are grounded in consistent communication and establishing shared goals; they are also supported by formal agreements to ensure the partnerships endure beyond individual leadership changes. Schools remain critical partners in the collaborative's mission to support

⁶ In 1970, President Richard Nixon signed the Blue Lake Act, returning 48,000 acres of land to the Taos Pueblo, including the sacred Blue Lake. Blue Lake had been taken from the Taos Pueblo by the U.S. government in 1906, leading to a 60-year battle between the Taos Pueblo and the U.S. government. The return of Blue Lake was a significant victory for the Taos Pueblo people and for all Native Americans, marking the first time land was returned to a Native tribe rather than providing monetary compensation. It set a precedent for self-determination and ensured the continuation of the rich Taos Pueblo culture in place.



opportunity youth, as these partnerships provide essential pathways for cultural recognition, safety, and academic success.

APPROACHES TO ROOT CAUSES



The root causes of youth disconnection in Taos Pueblo lie in the historical enforcement of racist U.S. federal policies, like the establishment of Native American boarding schools, resulting in the oppression of tribal communities. The trauma is felt at the youth, family, and community levels, leading to significant social challenges for Indigenous populations. Within Taos Pueblo this trauma manifests in substance and alcohol abuse and a disconnection from tradition and cultural practices. As one collaborative staff member explains, *"That whole system of oppression from the federal government...that's how boarding schools were formed,*

and we still have tribal members who suffer from that trauma." The Youth Outreach program was in part created to address the challenges Indigenous students face transitioning from the Bureau of Indian Education school, which ends at eighth grade, into the public school system, aiming to provide better representation, resources, and community-based support to help them navigate this shift.

Changing systems in Indigenous communities involves preserving sovereignty and continuing to uphold traditional values and cultural practices that prioritize belonging and healing. Taos Pueblo is working to **change systems that perpetuate intergenerational trauma** by working across the multiple program divisions to redesign a better system that focuses on healing trauma by starting with youth. This involves creating safe and supportive spaces for young people and for the rest of the community.

The collaborative is cultivating traditional values and healing their community to support opportunity youth and future generations by addressing systems that perpetuate intergenerational trauma. Through the collaboration, RecoveryWorks works closely with Youth Outreach to hold community outreach events. The events are fun and safe spaces for children and youth such as movie nights and an open mic night, as well as intergenerational mentorship opportunities with community elders. The events have helped to cultivate a feeling of belonging and purpose among youth. Through their partnership with the public school system, leaders in the Education and Training division are advocating for policy changes, such as updating absence policies to recognize cultural activities and holidays as official days off rather than excused absences. This change respects the tribal community, reduces the risk of truancy, increases positive outcomes for Indigenous youth, and contributes to healing intergenerational trauma.



APPROACHES TO YOUTH ENGAGEMENT



Taos Pueblo **empowers youth to share their voices** and play a role in creating inclusive spaces within the community. The collaborative involves youth in decision-making processes for program development and design whenever possible, ensuring their perspectives shape the initiatives that serve them. For instance, the Youth Outreach program facilitates enrichment activities at public schools, including an Indigenous Club and boys' and girls' groups. These groups provide safe and inclusive spaces for Indigenous youth to engage with peers, explore cultural identity, and participate in activities driven by their interests. Youth are encouraged to suggest topics and activities,

fostering a supportive and collaborative environment.

Youth are recognized as stewards and leaders in the community, with their ideas actively shaping events and programming. Division leaders embrace their contributions, such as the movie nights initiated by the Youth Outreach workers and organized in partnership with RecoveryWorks. By embracing youth-driven ideas and supporting their implementation, the collaborative demonstrates a commitment to sharing power and strengthening the next generation to drive meaningful change. As one collaborative member noted, *"Providing youth opportunity through ... a restorative community lens and understanding what's behind creating those spaces so that (it's) something that's effective and mindfully thought out. I think is important, creating those spaces with youth, and then sharing power, empowering youth."*

CONCLUSION

Taos Pueblo is an Indigenous community with a long history of trauma that continues to affect youth outcomes. The Taos Pueblo collaborative demonstrates how prioritizing healing and restorative practices to address inter-generational trauma can start to remove systemic barriers experienced by opportunity youth.



APPENDICES

APPENDIX A: SYSTEMS CHANGE JOURNEYS

Based on our analyses of self-assessment data (annual survey completed by OYF collaborative site leads), we found that the year-to-year systems change journeys were varied, with most communities experiencing some variation of “ups and downs” (growth and declines in systems change scores) over time.

FIGURE 1. OYF COLLABORATIVES SYSTEMS CHANGE JOURNEYS, 2019-2023⁷



Zigzag. Over half (53%, nine collaboratives) of collaboratives showed growth and decline over the time period (2019-2023). For some, this looked like a zigzag pattern with yearly alternating growth and declines; for others, it was up and down followed by two years of growth or decline (or vice versa).



U-shape. About a quarter of collaboratives (24%, four collaboratives) followed a “u-shape” pattern of declines followed by rebounds or periods of growth.



Growth, then decline in 2023. About a quarter of collaboratives (24%, four collaboratives) showed growth over four years and then a decline in 2023. At two collaboratives, this decline was significant.

⁷ Among collaboratives with 4-5 years of assessment data.



APPENDIX B: ADDITIONAL FINDINGS

Table 1. Differences by Geography

| | Urban | Rural | Tribal |
|---------------------|---|---|---|
| Government partners | Collaboratives often have governmental partners who are involved in the work | Often struggle to have meaningful partnerships with government, which may relate to political divides and anti-DEI sentiments in these communities. | Collaboratives are often led by the tribal government, or partner closely with the tribal government |
| Strategies | Collaboratives have a stronger focus on relationship building and convening partners | Collaboratives are focused on specific strategies related to education and employment. Collaborative strategies are more likely to include cultural competency. | Collaborative strategies are often holistic and related to the concepts of belonging, meaning making, wellbeing, and purpose. |
| Barriers | Collaboratives often cite the COVID-19 pandemic and turnover as barriers to their work. | Collaboratives often cite political divide, anti-DEI sentiments, and physical remoteness as barriers to their work. | Collaboratives often cite the effects of generational oppression, generational trauma, and mental health as barriers to their work. |



APPENDIX C: METHODOLOGY

Collaborative Selection

Using data from the OYF annual self-assessment, such as the collaborative's geographic focus, priority populations, systems change priorities, and how long the collaborative has been engaged in opportunity youth work, and in collaboration with Aspen's Forum for Community Solutions, we developed a representative sample of 16 collaboratives (12 primary, 4 backup) to outreach for interviews. We oversampled tribal collaboratives to ensure that perspectives from these collaboratives were meaningfully included in our data.

We sent email outreach to lead contacts of the 12 primary collaboratives, who signed up for a 75-minute interview. Interviews were conducted via Zoom, were audio-recorded with interviewees' permission, and transcribed via Rev. Interview topics included drivers of youth disconnection in their communities; how collaboratives started their opportunity youth-focused work; collaborative structure and strategies; and evidence that collaboratives are making progress toward their goals.

We coded these interviews in [Dedoose](#), a qualitative analysis package, using a codebook we developed that maps codes to interview questions and study goals. To ensure interviews were conducted and analyzed consistently across team members, we trained each other on the interview protocol and coding. We also calculated interrater reliability as a consistency check.

Based on interview data analysis, Equal Measure drafted the collaborative characteristics, which were presented during a concurrent session at the 2024 Fall OYF convening. Session participants reflected on how the characteristics fit in with their experience and provided feedback about existing and missing characteristics.

Based on interview data analysis, Equal Measure identified five collaboratives (four primary, one backup) to invite for partner and youth leader interviews. We sent email outreach to interviewees from the four primary collaboratives, describing the purpose of these interviews and providing guidance on who to include. Equal Measure conducted 60-to-90-minute group interviews with partners and youth leaders from these collaboratives. Partner interviews had similar foci as the collaborative lead interviews. Youth leader focus groups focused on how the collaborative has shared power in decision-making; the collaboratives' efforts in addressing systemic barriers and improving opportunities for youth; and to identify practices that resonate in engaging with youth. Focus group participants were at least 18 years of age, provided consent before the interview, and were given \$50 Visa digital gift cards as compensation for their participation. These interviews were also coded via Dedoose and served as the basis for the case studies presented in the brief. Before final publication, collaboratives were sent their case studies for review and approval.



Table 2. Collaboratives selected for additional partner and youth leader interviews.

| Collaborative | Urbanicity | Age | Tribal | Rationale |
|----------------|------------|--------------|--------|--|
| Greenville, MS | Rural | 5-10 years | No | Strong sense of building partnerships while navigating rural barriers and anti-DEI political climate. |
| Hawai'i | Rural | Less than 5 | Yes | Clear understanding and articulation of root causes of disconnection for their OY and community; approaches and strategies that focus on the full person and on systems. |
| L.A. | Urban | More than 10 | No | Well-established partnerships and a clear understanding of root cause while addressing immediate needs. |
| Taos Pueblo | Rural | 5-10 years | Yes | Strong sense of the impact of historical trauma and building culture of well-being and focus on prevention. |



APPENDIX D: INTERVIEWEE LIST

Thank you to the collaborative leads, partners, and youth leaders from the twelve collaboratives who participated in this study:

BUFFALO, NY

Kate Sarata, Executive Director, The Service Collaborative of WNY

Maria Whyte, Chief Community Impact Officer/Chief of Staff, Community Foundation for Greater Buffalo

CHEYENNE RIVER SIOUX RESERVATION

Wakinyan Chief, Arts Program Manager, Cheyenne River Youth Project

DENVER, CO

Julia Hughes, Senior Director of Strategic Initiatives, Colorado Youth for a Change

Mary Zanotti, Executive Director, Colorado Youth for a Change

GREENVILLE, MS

Mary Brooks, Chamber Director, Washington County Economic Alliance

Justin Burch, Executive Director, Washington County Economic Alliance

Amanda Delperdang, Executive Director and Co-Founder, Mississippi Delta Nature and Learning Center

HAWAII

Josiah Akau, Founder, Kinai 'Eha

Boni Grimm, Project Director, Partners in Development Foundation

Carla Houser, Executive Director, Residential Youth Services & Empowerment

Shawn Malia Kana'iaupuni, President & CEO, Partners in Development Foundation

Melissa Waiters, Diversion Case Manager, Kinai 'Eha

Harley and Jayce, Youth Leaders with Kinai 'Eha

Dawson and Kyle-Ann, Youth Leaders with Residential Youth Services & Empowerment

JASPER, TX

Nicole Colvin, Director, East Deep Texas College & Career Academy

Denise Davis, Consultant to East Deep Texas College & Career Academy

LOS ANGELES COUNTY, CA

Lauri Collier, Director of LA Opportunity Youth Collaborative, Alliance for Children's Rights

Melanie Ferrer-Vaughn, Associate Director of LA Opportunity Youth Collaborative, Alliance for Children's Rights

Carrie Lemmon, Senior Vice President of Systems Change Strategy, UNITE-LA

Robert Sainz, President and Executive Director, New Ways to Work



Iziko, Joel, and Jacqueline, Youth Leaders with LA Opportunity Youth Collaborative

NEWARK, NJ

Robert Clark, Founder and CEO, Newark Opportunity Youth Network

Daniel Croson, Chief of Staff, Newark Opportunity Youth Network

Jasmine Joseph-Forman, Chief Program Officer, Newark Opportunity Youth Network

PUEBLO OF JEMEZ

Lenora Loretto, Educator Services Manager, Pueblo of Jemez

Dr. Stephanie Mack, Assistant Director of Education, Pueblo of Jemez

PUEBLO OF TAOS

Cheryl Concha, Youth Outreach Coordinator, Taos Pueblo

Naomi Concha, Community Wellness Manager, Division of Health & Community Services, Taos Pueblo

Augusta Sunshine Duran, Recovery Works Coordinator, Taos Pueblo

Bettina Sandoval, Education and Training Division Directors, Taos Pueblo

Domonick and Faith, Youth Leaders with Taos Pueblo

SAN ANTONIO, TX

Elvia Pace, Senior Management Analyst, City of San Antonio

SAN DIEGO, CA

Claire Snyder, Director of Programming and Internal Development, YouthWill



APPENDIX E: INTERVIEW PROTOCOL

Site Lead Interview Questions⁸

Root cause and community drivers of youth disconnection

1. **Origin story.** How did your collaborative start focusing on opportunity youth? Tell us the story about how your collaborative's focus on opportunity youth began.
 - a. Have there been major shifts in the collaborative's focus or structure over the past few years? If so, please describe the change(s) and why it occurred.
 - b. Did the story about how your OY work began influence your collaborative's structure or strategies? If so, how?
2. **Structure.** How is your collaborative organized?
 - a. Is there a primary or "backbone" organization, or is this function spread in a different way, such as across multiple partners?
 - b. How are decisions about the collaborative made? Do partners and youth leaders have decision-making power or influence?
 - c. How does your collaborative ensure that partner and youth leader perspectives are heard and acted upon?
3. **Root cause.** What are the main causes of youth disconnection in your community, and how does this show up in your community?
 - a. How does this contribute to racial and socioeconomic inequity in your community?
 - b. What are some of the barriers to transforming these conditions and systems?

Collaborative strategies, structure, and outcomes

1. **Change and outcomes.** What is the change or transformation that your collaborative is trying to effect or influence? What are the main outcomes your collaborative is trying to achieve?
 - a. How does this connect to addressing the root causes of racial and socioeconomic inequity, and the main drivers of youth disconnection that you mentioned at the beginning of the interview?
2. **Strategies.** We would like to know, in detail, the strategies your collaborative employs in support of opportunity youth. We'd like to spend some time on each strategy. We'll ask you the same questions for each of these strategies. *(Interviewer: For each strategy, ask the following questions. After finishing these questions for a strategy, ask about another strategy. I have estimated 10 minutes for this per strategy, but let's see how this goes.):*
 - a. Please give us an overview of the strategy. What is the content and goal of the strategy?
 - b. Who are the partners involved in this strategy?
 - c. How are youth involved in designing, refining, or implementing the strategy?
 - d. How does this strategy address the root causes of racial and socioeconomic inequity, and the main drivers of youth disconnection that you mentioned at the beginning of the interview?
 - e. What changes and outcomes are you seeing from implementing this strategy?

⁸ Similar topics and questions were used in interviews and focus groups with partners and young people.



3. **Evidence of success.** Where have you seen the most promising evidence of progress in support of OY in your collaborative's work?
 - a. Amongst young people?
 - b. Programmatically?
 - c. With regards to systems change or transformation?
4. **FCS/OYF role.** How has the Opportunity Youth Forum and the Aspen Forum for Community Solutions supported your collaborative's OY-focused work? What role would you like them to play in the future?
5. **Documents.** Are there any documents about your collaborative that you could share that would support this study's goals? (e.g., theory of change/theory of action/logic model; org chart/partnership chart; etc.)
6. **Final thoughts.** Anything that you would like to share with us that would be important for us to know that this interview did not give you a chance to share?