Youth@Work Program Review and Redesign

BUILDING YOUTH PATHWAYS TO ECONOMIC MOBILITY IN THE COUNTY OF LOS ANGELES

AUGUST 2026

Dalberg | department of economic opportunity COUNTY OF LOS ANGELES

Acknowledgements

COMMISSIONED BY: LA County Department of Economic Opportunity

The LA County Department of Economic Opportunity (DEO) was created in July of 2022 as the County's first economic development agency with a vision for equitable economy with thriving local communities, inclusive and sustainable growth, and opportunity and mobility for all. The department does this by creating quality jobs, helping small businesses and high-road employers start and grow, and building vibrant communities and spaces. Learn more at opportunity.lacounty.gov.

SPECIAL THANK YOU TO:

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1. Executive Summary

Los Angeles County's economic prosperity is fundamentally intertwined with the development of its youth workforce. Yet today, of the County's 1.2 million youth, approximately 144,000 (12.9%) are disconnected from both school and work, representing an increase in the count of opportunity youth following COVID-19.[1] This report defines opportunity youth as LA County youth, ages 14-24, who are neither in school nor at work, or are at high risk of disconnection due to homelessness, justice system involvement, foster care, low income, CalWORKs and public assistance recipients, or other structural barriers. This definition leverages the State of California's and the Los Angeles Performance Partnership Pilot's (LAP3) definitions, of which the LA County Department of Economic Opportunity (DEO) and the County are founding members.

As the County's central economic and workforce development agency, DEO is committed to improving economic outcomes for the County's opportunity youth. Youth@Work, the County's largest youth workforce development program, has long been a fixture in LA County's workforce development offerings, providing a stable source of first-time work opportunities and career exposure for thousands of youth each year. Through Youth@Work, DEO collaborates with government and community leaders to connect opportunity youth with paid training and work experiences, aiming to support participants with staying in or reconnecting to work or school.

To align with DEO's mission and vision and to acknowledge significant advocacy from LAP3 and stakeholders, DEO commissioned Dalberg Advisors to independently review Youth@Work and develop recommendations for its strategic and operational redesign. The review examined Youth@Work's current program model design, performance, and impact across three program streams: the core Youth@Work model (Work-Based Learning), the Elevate pilot, and Workforce Innovation and Opportunity Act (WIOA) Youth services.[2] Dalberg employed a combination of data analysis, stakeholder interviews, youth focus groups, peer benchmarking, and document reviews to assess program performance and inform the redesign.

The review found demonstrable strengths in the current program, delivering on its existing theory of change and program model. Youth@Work demonstrates strong demand from opportunity youth, with the core model enrolling over 8,000 youth in fiscal year 2023-24. Participant satisfaction rates for both training and work experience were high, with over 80% of participants reporting that training was useful and that work experience helped them grow professionally. Where there were strong employer partnerships, like that of the LA County Park and Recreation Department (Parks), the program saw strong enrollment, completion, and pathways into public sector employment. DEO and Parks supported 2,053 youth placed with the department for paid work experience as Park Aides

1. [a] **Los Angeles County Disconnected Youth**, California Opportunity Youth Network, 2023; [b] For example, the youth disconnection rate was 10.1% (~118,000) in 2019 compared to 13.2% (~156,000) in 2020 and 12.9% (~144,000) in 2021; [c] The definition of opportunity youth in the **[a]** report is 16 to 24-year-olds who are neither at school nor at work. Youth@Work defines opportunity youth in current and target state as LA County youth, ages 14-24, who are neither in school nor at work, or are at high risk of disconnection due to homelessness, justice system involvement, foster care, or other structural barriers (e.g., low income, immigrant or refugee, LGBTQIA+, disability, veteran). This definition leverages the State of California's and the Los Angeles Performance Partnership Pilot's definitions.
2. In this report, Work-Based Learning (WBL) is referred to as the core Youth@Work program, providing participants with 20 hours of paid personal enrichment training, ~140 hours of paid work experience, and supportive services to build foundational workplace skills and expose youth to career pathways. The Youth@Work Elevate pilot is a targeted pilot designed to deepen services for youth with higher barriers to employment by offering expanded paid work experience hours and structured mentorship alongside job readiness training. Lastly, WIOA Youth services is a federally funded youth workforce service delivered through America's Job Centers of California (AJCCs) under the Workforce Innovation and Opportunity Act (WIOA), which is meant to offer up to 200 additional hours for Youth@Work participants who have completed the program and may need additional paid work experiences that support education and job outcomes. For additional details see the Introduction and Section 4.

over the past four years, between FY 2022-23 and FY 2025-26, providing pathways to permanent jobs with Parks, earning the two departments the County's Productivity and Quality Awards prestigious Eagle award, and demonstrating the potential of intentional design and support.

At the same time, the review identified significant opportunities for improvement across four areas, including both program design and implementation:

- **Program activities:** Enrollment targets were largely met. However, consistent drop-off between enrollment, placement at a work site, and completion of total hours and requirements pointed to structural gaps in program design. The review also found that varying definitions of a qualifying worksite led to a mixture of work experiences, ranging from traditional paid work with cross-sector employers to more employer-exposure-focused experiences with America's Job Centers of California (AJCCs) and partners, leveraging Youth@Work as part of independent programs in classrooms and on field trips. Further, the review identified persistent challenges around the training content, work experience placement matching, and worksite quality and monitoring.

- **Target customers and partners:** The program took a single customer approach focused on youth participants, with primary enrollment of in-school youth and limited parallel standards for employer satisfaction or hiring outcomes. In terms of other partners, the exclusive reliance on AJCCs and regional Workforce Development Boards (WDBs) limited provider diversity and largely left trusted youth workforce development providers out of the design and delivery of the program. In addition, the lack of clarity on program standards and enforcement of standards resulted in inconsistent experiences across the network.

- **Funding and resource allocation:** Structural implementation challenges such as complex eligibility standards and delivery structure with AJCCs and WDBs made it difficult to understand spend in real time and reallocate across the system, as needed, leading to annual underspend even with oversubscription of interest. For example, the system saw approximately $6 million in carried over funds in fiscal year 2023-24, representing approximately 20% of the program's allocated budget. In addition, administrative and program-related costs were high at 20% of the total budget as the department invested in WDBs who then contracted in some cases to additional providers. A more fundamental constraint is that current funding of ~$27 million was never sufficient to achieve the publicly stated goal of serving 10,000 youth annually at the current cost per participant.

- **Outcomes and impact:** The program's outcome framework focused on career exposure and early earnings rather than longer-term economic mobility, and performance was often tracked at the provider level rather than as a system-wide measure, making it difficult to assess Youth@Work's contribution to broader County priorities and overall reduction of opportunity youth rates in the region.

The redesigned Youth@Work program model responds to the challenges outlined above and draws on leading practices from youth workforce development programs across the United States. The Youth@Work redesign introduces a new Theory of Change centered on economic mobility for opportunity youth, delivered through four distinct pathways based on participant age, educational goals, and employment goals, that collectively drive living wages earned and increased income and financial resiliency for participants. The redesign addresses each identified challenge through the following:

- **New Theory of Change and program design:** Four differentiated pathways replace the one-size-fits-all model, tailored to participants' age, educational status, and employment goals, with a clear vision of how these pathways lead to economic mobility for opportunity youth.

- **System-level outcome tracking:** The program will establish program-wide goals, with clear outputs from each pathway that lead to outcomes tied to quality jobs and economic mobility in high-growth and opportunity sectors rather than career exposure alone.

- **Dual customer approach for youth and employers:** Worksite quality commitments and formal engagement standards treat both opportunity youth and employers in high-growth sectors as key customers benefitting from the program. This includes formalizing the pathway to County employment for participating agencies in Countywide Youth Bridges Program, a secondary pathway for Youth@Work participants into public sector employment post-program.
- **Right-sized funding model:** Clarified enrollment, completion, and educational attainment and hiring definitions, reduced administrative costs and increased Equity in County Contracting opportunities with procured vendors, including AJCCs and WDBs, but also other youth-serving organizations, and improved planning with County partners will ensure available funds are deployed more fully toward direct participant services.

This table highlights the key changes from the current program model to the redesigned Youth@Work program model:

CURRENT YOUTH @ WORK MODEL	REDESIGNED YOUTH @ WORK MODEL
Single customer approach for opportunity youth	Dual customer approach with opportunity youth and high-road employers
Program designed around funding sources	Program designed for dynamic customer needs, including in and out-of-school youth and hiring employers
Pilots demonstrated improved outcomes against current goals	Integration of appropriate work hours, education and mentorship, financial literacy, and structured work experiences at scale
Program goals centered on career exposure and early earnings	Program goals centered on educational and skills achievement and quality jobs, economic mobility, and closing opportunity gap
Limited delivery through America's Job Centers and Workforce Development Boards	Expanded Equity in County Contracting opportunities with youth development providers
Variable customer experience depending on location or provider	Standard, high-quality operations and oversight
High administrative burdens and overall underspending despite community need	A path to 10,000+ served with increased investment potential by aligning funding sources and streamlining delivery
Partnership with County agencies around enrollment	Partnership with County agencies and regional partners on systems change and priorities, including Prevention, Care First, Sustainability, and State of Homeless Emergency

Achieving the redesigned vision of serving 10,000 youth annually and advancing economic mobility will require maintaining existing funding levels of $27 million as well as identification of an estimated additional $23 million in annual investment for a total budget of ~$50 million. Combined with the proposed program changes, this investment will enable Youth@Work to significantly expand and deepen access to high-quality work experiences, training, and career pathways for the County's most vulnerable youth, while strengthening the foundation for a more equitable workforce pipeline.

2. Introduction

Opportunity youth in LA County face systemic barriers that limit access to education, employment, and essential services, which in turn constrain their long-term economic mobility. Research shows that youth disconnection is linked to poorer lifetime earnings, higher risk of poverty, and greater dependency on public systems. Conversely, reconnection during this critical developmental window can improve individual outcomes, such as educational attainment, employment, and earnings, with broader benefits for community well-being and vitality.[3] Recognizing this research, LAP3 and its Horizons 32K Strategic Plan has set a regional target to reduce the number of opportunity youth in LA County by 32,000 by 2027.[4] This ambition reflects DEO's active role in the LAP3 Horizons 32K Strategic Plan and its broader commitment to expanding access to quality jobs and entrepreneurship, particularly for historically disinvested individuals and communities, through its modernization of AJCCs, High Road Training Partnerships (HRTPs), and the Economic Mobility Initiative.[5]

Youth@Work is Los Angeles County's flagship youth workforce development program, administered by DEO to provide youth ages 14–24 with paid training and work experiences that support reconnection to education and first-time employment. The program is delivered through the County's public workforce system in partnership with AJCCs, seven regional WDBs, County agencies, and employers. Current DEO youth services include the following:

- **Youth@Work Core Model (Work-Based Learning [WBL]):** The core Youth@Work program provides participants with 20 hours of paid Personal Enrichment Training, or basic career exposure and job readiness preparation, approximately 140 hours of paid work experience, and supportive services to build foundational workplace skills and expose youth to career pathways. The program aims to deliver a single program experience to all youth enrolled, regardless of age, education status, and employment goals. It is designed to provide support over a 2-3 month period, but this timeframe can be extended as long as structured with an employer or if enrolled in WIOA for additional services. Youth can also sign up in future fiscal years and participate in Youth@Work more than one time, over time. The average cost is approximately $4,200 per participant and 92% are unique each year.

- **Youth@Work Elevate pilot:** A targeted pilot designed to deepen services for youth with higher barriers to employment by offering expanded paid work experience hours and structured mentorship alongside job readiness training. These pilots and allocations represent an ad hoc effort to increase hours and services for young adults participating in Youth@Work in line with LAP3 recommendations.

- **WIOA Youth services:** Federally funded youth workforce services delivered through AJCCs under the Workforce Innovation and Opportunity Act (WIOA). One of the 14 available services is paid

3. [a] Why We Need to Reach Young People Who Are Disconnected from School and Work, Urban Institute, 2019; [b] Opportunity Youth: Insights and Opportunities for a Public Health Approach to Reengage Disconnected Teenagers and Young Adults, Mendelson et al., 2018; [c] Youth Who Are 'Disconnected' And Those Who Then Reconnect, Hair et al., 2009
4. Horizons 32K Strategic Plan, Los Angeles Performance Partnership Pilot, 2024
5. [a] Modernizing LA County's AJCCs, DEO, 2023; [b] Economic Mobility Initiative, DEO, 2024; [c] LA County HRTP, DEO, 2025

work experience of up to 200 hours for WIOA eligible youth ages 16-24. While individuals are not permitted under the current Youth@Work model to receive paid work experience hours through both Youth@Work and WIOA Youth services, Youth@Work participants who have completed their paid work experience hours and need continued services to obtain employment may co-enroll in WIOA to receive other services, such as career counseling, mentoring, job search, and job placement assistance.

The figure on the next page provides a high-level overview of the current core Youth@Work program theory of change, illustrating how its key components work together to connect opportunity youth with paid training and work experiences. The program did not outline explicit outcomes, but rather had passive outcomes that were hoped to be achieved through the various activities. Numerical targets were only set for two outputs: enrollment across specific demographics and worksite placement. While a number of other metrics were monitored at the individual provider level, there were no other explicit system-wide goals or targets.

Figure 1: Current state Theory of Change. *All figures from fiscal year 2023-2024 unless otherwise noted.*

VISION:

Provide young adults who have barriers to employment with support and paid work experiences that increase work readiness, career exposure, and financial empowerment as well as long-term connection to the public workforce system for education and employment outcomes.

IMPACT

Early work and earnings offer financial stability today for youth and families and improve lifelong earnings	Career exposure will improve connection to entry-level hiring with career pathways and mobility	Connection and support from the public workforce system will enable future education, hiring services, and outcomes

IMPLICIT OUTCOMES

Educational attainment: Participants supported to return to school or enter postsecondary education upon program exit; in FY23-24, 66% of participants returned to school, 3% entered advanced training or postsecondary education.	**Unsubsidized hiring:** Program aims to connect participants to unsubsidized employment opportunities upon program exit; in FY23-24, ~1% of exited participants secured unsubsidized employment.	**Retention in post-program education or job:** Program aims to support participants in maintaining connection to education and employment following exit, though these outcomes are not specifically measured.

OUTPUTS

◎ **Youth enrolled:** ~8,200 youth enrolled in core Youth@ Work model (WBL) in FY 23-24 with all demographic enrollment targets met. 85%+ of enrollees are in-school youth.	**PET trainings completed:** ~7,000 participants in the core Youth@Work model (WBL) completed 20 hours of personal enrichment training prior to work placement in FY23-24.	**Mentorship received:** ~900 Elevate participants completed group mentorship sessions as part of the pilot program model.	◎ **Work placement:** ~6,800 youth in the core Youth@Work model (WBL) were placed in worksites (97% of placement target), and ~6,500 participants completed the 120 hour work experience requirement (79% of enrollees) in FY23-24.

ACTIVITIES

Outreach & enrollment: Providers conduct outreach to priority populations and enroll eligible youth ages 14-24.	**Personal Enrichment Training (PET):** 20 hours of paid personal enrichment training covering soft skills and job readiness preparation.	**Mentorship:** Elevate pilot offered weekly 2-hour group mentorship and professional development sessions; core Youth@ Work model does not include mentorship.	**Work experience:** Approximately 140 hours of paid work experience placed through AJCC and WDB networks.	**Supportive services:** Up to $130 in supportive services per participant (e.g., for transportation or work attire) to reduce barriers to participation.

INPUTS & RESOURCES

Target customers: Youth ages 14-24 meeting priority population eligibility criteria, including justice-involved, foster, low-income, and other populations. No target for serving out-of-school youth and employers are not considered target customers.	**Funding:** $27 million annually across LA County Net County Cost, Probation (state funding via Juvenile Justice Crime Prevention Act (JJCPA)), and Department of Social Services (DPSS) via federal Temporary Assistance for Needy Families funds.	**Partners:** Program delivered through AJCCs. This includes DEO's 18 AJCCs, including comprehensive centers and affiliates, as well as all 40+ region wide through partnerships with the six other WDBs. AJCCs work with employers and community organizations to secure worksites.	**Admin & tech systems:** Program managed across 40+ payroll systems alongside manual case management and enrollment processes.

◎ Metrics with defined targets. *All other metrics tracked but do not have explicit targets*

3. Methodology

DEO commissioned Dalberg Advisors in 2025 to conduct an independent review of Youth@Work's current program model, performance, and impact. Following the review, DEO and Dalberg Advisors jointly developed a strategic and operational redesign of Youth@Work.

Dalberg Advisors employed a combination of data analysis, stakeholder interviews, youth focus groups, peer benchmarking, and reviews of documentation to effectively review Youth@Work's current state performance (see figure below). Data analyses included reviewing aggregate data on participant enrollments, training completion, unsubsidized hires, time between process steps, funding and expenditures, participant survey results, and more. The findings as well as external studies and best practices were leveraged to redesign the end-to-end strategic and operational model for target state Youth@Work.

Figure 2: Overview of analysis inputs[6]

50+

INTERVIEWS

Individual stakeholders consulted

44

FOCUS GROUPS

Youth@Work participants consulted in 5 focus groups across supervisorial districts 1-5

200+

DATA ANALYSIS

Sources consulted and analyzed

80+

PEER AND DESK RESEARCH

Reports reviewed and benchmarking of peers

6. Interviews were conducted by Dalberg Advisors. Focus groups were conducted by Dalberg Advisors alongside youth workforce development and engagement experts from Vividus Labs, with DEO members in attendance. There were three surveys analyzed, including (1) a participant exit survey for WBL, (2) a participant exit survey for Elevate, and (3) a survey of 200+ youth who filled out an interest form but did not end up enrolling into Youth@Work. Refer to Appendix for more information.

4. Key Review Findings

The following section presents the review's key findings organized according to the key categories of the current Youth@Work Theory of Change.

4.1 PROGRAM ACTIVITIES – DESIGN AND IMPLEMENTATION

Activity: Outreach and enrollment

Outreach efforts generally met overall enrollment and demographic targets, but there was consistent drop-off between enrollment, start of PET or worksite placement, and completion. Youth@Work demonstrated strong and consistent demand from opportunity youth, with ~12,000 interest form responses and referral responses in fiscal year 2023-24. The same year, Youth@Work programs were successful in collectively meeting or exceeding enrollment targets, with the core model (WBL) enrolling ~8,200 youth and meeting all demographic enrollment targets. However, enrolled youth did not uniformly translate into placed or completing worksite experiences. Of the ~8,200 enrollees, roughly ~6,800 were placed into work experiences and approximately 6,500 completed the program (79% of enrollees). This drop-off points to opportunities to strengthen the end-to-end participant journey and to redesign the program to have clear, separate goals for outreach, program acceptance, program start and full enrollment, and completion. It is also important to note that enrollment targets were never set at 10,000 with AJCCs and WDBs based on available funding and cost per head.

Figure 3: Number of participants by program stage

Youth@Work Work-Based Learning (WBL), Number of participants by program stage[1]
Fiscal year 2023-2024

Sources: Past Youth@Work surveys, PowerBI dashboard data, Plan to Actual documents, Youth@Work portal data, stakeholder interviews, and Dalberg analysis 1. Number of youth participants at each step of the lifecycle is based on PowerBI data from Youth@Work portal. 2. Number of participants enrolled in PY 2023-2024 that completed PET modules A to E with start and end dates during PY 2023-2024

Despite strong enrollment numbers, many youth participants reported a poor enrollment experience overall, with delays, inconsistent communication, and administrative burdens undermining access. A number of youth indicated waiting significantly longer for a response to interest forms than the 2-day expectation.[7] Youth also reported confusion about eligibility and program offerings, with the majority of the review's focus group participants from Antelope Valley placed on a waitlist of up to two months and over two thirds of West LA focus group participants reporting they received inconsistent information and had to return repeatedly.

Eligibility and allocation by eligibility requirements also created complexity and confusion for providers, further limiting equitable access to program slots and full spend. Service providers did not consistently apply eligibility standards during enrollment, and criteria were confusing to some youth, for example whether participants from a CalWORKs[8] household would risk losing their family's benefits by enrolling. Because eligibility was tied to specific funding sources rather than a unified pool, some providers turned away youth when individual demographic categories appeared full, even where DEO could make systemwide decisions to reallocate funds and as dollars went unspent across the program as a whole. Further, providers lacked real-time systems and tools to measure underspend on those allocated slots (e.g., non-completers or those who used fewer hours), experienced delays in communicating that to the County or WDBs directly or through invoicing, and needed a more formal way to assess spend and need with the County to manage and optimize allocations. This disconnect between apparent scarcity and actual funding availability points to a core design flaw in how eligibility and enrollment were structured.

In addition, the fact that the program was designed around youth participants only, without defined employer hiring outcomes, meant service providers had little incentive to prioritize out-of-school youth enrollment. Across WBL, Elevate, and WIOA services, less than 15% of enrollees were out-of-school, pointing to a gap in serving out-of-school populations. Data also shows that enrollment rates of foster and probation youth referrals, two priority populations, declined year over year: enrollment rates of foster referrals fell from 37% in FY22-23 to 30% in FY23-24, and enrollment rates of probation referrals from 42% to 39% over the same period.

Activity: Mentorship (Elevate pilot only)

The Elevate pilot delivered mentorship as a structured program component, which participants found largely valuable, pointing to a promising model to incorporate into the program redesign. In FY23-24, 880 participants completed the full mentorship component, which included 26 hours with LA Works, surpassing the 800 participant target. Over 80% of Elevate participants reported that sessions were useful and well organized. Youth@Work participants, however, did not receive mentorship support as it was not part of the core program model. Focus group participants consistently expressed a desire for mentorship, pointing to a key opportunity for the program redesign. Staff and participants also shared interest in one-on-one as well as group mentorship opportunities.

Activity: Personal Enrichment Training (PET)

Many participants found Personal Enrichment Training useful, with critiques primarily centered on generic content and limited connection to post-program employment pathways. PET comprised 20-hour paid soft skills training covering basic career exposure and job readiness preparation. This curriculum – called Transition Aged Youth World of Work (TAY WOW) - was developed by DEO and Columbia University and was standard across all Youth@Work providers, regardless of AJCC or WDB. Over 80% of participants found the training useful. However, focus group participants noted that content felt insufficiently tailored to specific career pathways, with many participants describing it as "general information, nothing new or special," and requesting career-specific content

7. In FY23-24, there was a two-day service level agreement (SLA) for responses to interest forms.
8. California Work Opportunity and Responsibility to Kids

across fields including healthcare, trades, and technology. One participant noted simply: "I didn't feel prepared to work." Delivery quality varied significantly by instructor, with some participants reporting that instructors rushed through material without soliciting questions. The review also found that PET did not explicitly include financial literacy skills training, representing a gap relative to the program's goal of building foundational job readiness and financial empowerment skills.

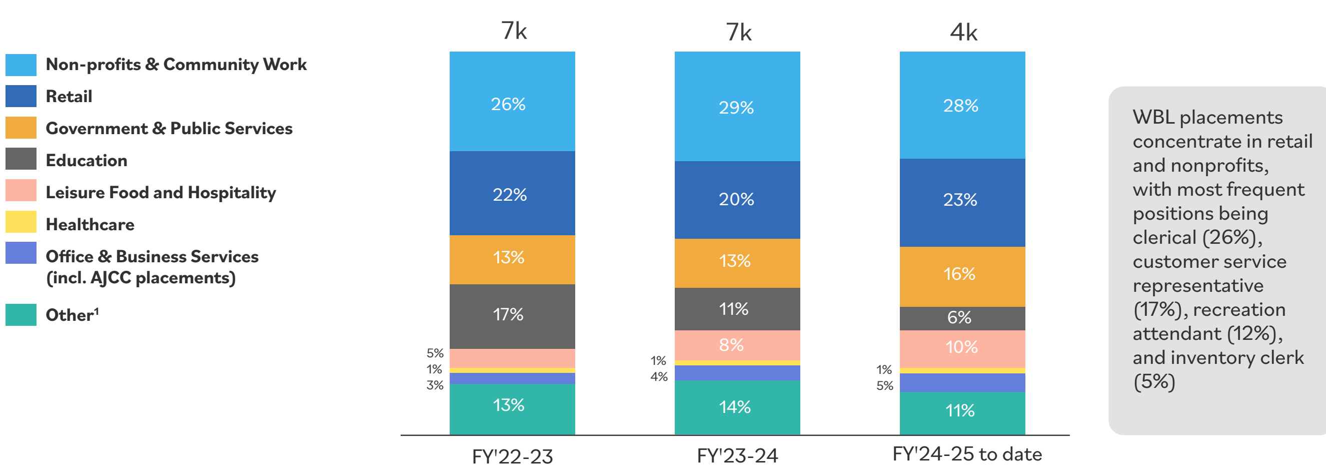
Activity: Work Experience

While most participants found work experience valuable, the review identified persistent challenges around limited hours as well as placement quality, worksite matching, and employer engagement. Core Youth@Work placements approached target in FY23-24, with 6,767 youth placed against a target of 6,962 (97%), up from 87% the prior year. Vulnerable populations including public assistance recipients, probation, and foster youth were placed at lower rates across the program, though rates improved year over year.

The placement process delivered inconsistent experiences for youth, with delays and poor alignment with participant interest or employer need. The average time from enrollment to program exit was approximately 5 months, yet the actual paid programming (i.e., 20 hours of PET and 140 hours of work experience) amounted to roughly 2-3 months of substantive activity. The gap between the two reflects waiting time, not program time: participants frequently reported waiting months between enrollment and placement against an expected two-to-four-week turnaround. This lag was a direct consequence of insufficient worksite supply. Without structured business development to build and sustain a worksite pipeline, there were too few placements to meet demand, and those that existed were not matched to participant interests or sector goals. One of the key underlying reasons for these challenges was the lack of focus, infrastructure, and guidance on how to engage employers as a core customer. This directly led to placement pipeline delays. Core Youth@Work program placements concentrated heavily in retail and nonprofits regardless of participant interest, with clerical (26%), customer service (17%), recreation attendant (12%), and inventory clerk (5%) roles accounting for most placements. Youth consistently requested career-specific placements in sectors such as healthcare, trades, and technology. As one participant noted: "Job opportunities don't align with my interests." This overall finding reflected both a design gap, the absence of sector-specific placement goals and any required technical or career-specific training tied to those placements, and a delivery gap, inconsistent matching processes across providers.

Figure 4: Youth@Work Core Model's Job Placements by Sector

Total WBL placements and distribution (%) by sector and fiscal year



Note: High growth sectors include Health Services, Trade and Logistics, Leisure and Hospitality, Entertainment and Infotech, Construction and Selected Manufacturing: WBL = Work Based Learning; WIOA = Workforce Innovation and Opportunity Act; Sources: Past PowerBI data, stakeholder interviews, and Dalberg analysis; 1. "Other" sector categories include: Technology & IT, Camp or Hall, Logistics, Finance & Banking, Entertainment, and Manufacturing

Worksite quality was inconsistent, with some sites having limited monitoring to identify and address problems. Youth reported menial tasks, significant "dead time," and limited onboarding or oversight from supervisors. The absence of a clear definition of a high-quality worksite across the program was a design gap, leaving providers without consistent standards to guide placement decisions and assess success on that placement. In addition, the lack of guidance on monitoring requirements led to a delivery shortcoming of inconsistent monitoring of worksites that further limited the ability to identify and address quality issues in a timely manner. From the employer perspective, the absence of a dual customer approach created its own set of challenges: employers faced complicated onboarding processes across multiple service providers without standardized requirements, program timing conflicted with school calendars and typical internship cycles, and employers expressed a desire for greater flexibility to extend participant hours to build genuine career readiness. Taken together, these gaps on both sides of the placement relationship undermined the program's ability to deliver high-quality, meaningful work experiences at scale.

County and government worksites provide opportunities for meaningful scale and permanent post-placement hiring, but their utilization in the current program design was unstructured. County worksites offered volume, with 531 WBL placements through LA County Parks and Recreation alone in fiscal year 2023-2024, and potential for permanent hiring opportunities. Of note, Parks and Recreation created a special classification to provide supportive entry for Youth@Work participants into county positions as Park Aides, providing subsidized employment for 2,053 youth since FY2022-23 youth with successful pathways to permanent jobs in the department.

Activity: Supportive Services

Supportive services were significantly underutilized relative to participant need, due to a combination of low awareness, provider confusion, and reallocated funds. Supportive services included up to $130 per participant (e.g., for transportation or work attire) to reduce barriers to participation. In fiscal year 2023-24, approximately 70% of the supportive services budget went unspent. Contributing to this, ~90% of focus group participants were not aware of supportive services but would have utilized them if made aware. Some providers reported confusion about when and how to use the allocated budget, and some reallocated up to 40% of their supportive services budget toward administrative costs. The underutilization of supportive services reflected both a design gap in how the budget was structured and communicated, and a delivery challenge in how providers applied available funds.

4.2 PROGRAM INPUTS

Input: Target Customers

Youth@Work took a single customer approach focused on youth participants, without parallel standards for employer satisfaction or hiring outcomes. Program standards, reporting requirements, and performance targets were oriented around youth enrollment and worksite placement. Employers were engaged as worksite hosts rather than as customers of the program, with limited formal guidance or goals around employer satisfaction, worksite quality, or post-program hiring commitments. The Elevate pilot was able to take a more proactive approach to employer engagement, pointing to the potential of a more structured, dual customer model within the existing provider network. In Elevate, a condition for all worksites was available positions for hire post-program as well as clear completion goals at 65% and hiring goals of 65% with the worksite and other local hiring employers.

The absence of employer commitment goals contributed directly to waitlists for participants. Without formal expectations around worksite development and employer retention, there was no clear strategy to ensure a sufficient and diverse supply of worksite placements to meet participant demand. As a result, some youth waited months to be placed against an expected two-to-four-week turnaround, and AJCCs flagged insufficient worksites as a recurring challenge.

Input: Partners

AJCCs and WDBs serve as the sole service providers for Youth@Work, limiting opportunities for other youth workforce providers to engage formally. The program operates through all seven WDBs and 40+ AJCCs, including 18 with the County and DEO. This structure enables broad geographic reach and leverages established workforce infrastructure across the County. However, the exclusive reliance on AJCCs and WDBs creates complexity (as described above in monitoring and adjusting allocations and spend in real time) and limits opportunities for community-based organizations and other providers to engage formally with the program. Many community organizations do find ways to align their youth workforce programs with Youth@Work to leverage the wage subsidies for career exposure and work experiences, but this limits deeper partnership with and oversight by the County, a true understanding of braided funds and impact, and requires organizations to implement within the constraints of the existing model versus what might be most optimal for a population of workers or employers or within an industry.

The review found that this delivery structure also contributed to a lack of standardized processes, timelines, and systems across providers. In some cases, WDBs contracted with AJCCs operated by community-based organizations, adding an administrative layer that made consistent application of program standards harder to enforce across the full network. Without sufficiently enforced common standards across the provider network, differences accumulated across every stage of the participant journey. Outreach timelines varied from Q1 to Q3 across providers, directly affecting budget utilization and placement rates. Enrollment prioritization logic differed as well, with some providers applying dedicated funding demographic criteria and others using a highest-need, case-by-case approach, creating inequitable access to program enrollment. Worksite onboarding requirements, time-to-placement expectations, and payroll processes varied substantially, increasing strain on employers and producing uneven participant experiences. For example, one service provider required participants to deliver timesheets in person every two weeks, while another collected timesheets directly from worksites. These differences reflected a structural design flaw of unclear program standards and insufficient mechanisms in place to enforce consistent application across the network.

Input: Admin & Tech Systems

Data, tools, and processes were disconnected, inconsistent, and highly manual, impeding effective management and measurement of Youth@Work programs. Service providers relied on fragmented systems across every stage of program delivery. Enrollment, case management, and payroll processes were largely manual and varied across providers. Program data availability was not real-time nor integrated across systems, and highly manual data entry processes led to high staff burden for service providers and a higher risk of errors, leaving DEO with insufficient and unreliable data to effectively report on and manage the program. For some service provider staff, payroll alone consumed ~30% of their time, with providers managing manual bi-weekly timesheets signed in ink, and some driving to employer sites to collect them. Collectively, uneven administrative and operational deployment caused payment delays for participants, undermining the reliability of one of the program's core commitments to opportunity youth.

While there are areas of growth, there were also positive areas of technology development, such as the Automated Referral System, a web-based application created in-house to streamline participant referrals from other County departments to Youth@Work and other DEO workforce programs. DEO used ARS to receive referrals from Probation and the Department of Children and Family Services (DCFS) of justice-involved and foster youth. In addition to enabling an easy, secure process by which County staff could make referrals, ARS allowed DEO to confirm receipt of referrals with County partners and inform them if a participant enrolled in the program. It also enabled DEO to more systematically track where referrals were coming from, especially when potential candidates were accessing multiple County services and programs. This is a key objective of the County's prevention work that improves customer experience and outcomes for County residents engaged in their local government. Further, where DEO, the AJCCs, and WDBs were able to co-enroll in WIOA Youth services, DEO has the ability to track long-term employment and advancement outcomes through the State's CalJobs system and payroll records.

Input: Funding and Resource Allocation

Multiple implementation challenges at the provider level led to overall underspend, limiting program reach in recent years. Across Youth@ Work, approximately $6 million was allocated and unspent and carried over in fiscal year 2023-24, representing over 20% of the program's allocated budget. Participant wages and benefits accounted for the vast majority (77%) of unspent dollars, while program costs such as service provider wages were more fully spent. Several factors drove this pattern. First, the one-year funding cycle aligned to the fiscal year created particular challenges: the July-to-June calendar conflicted with the academic calendar and summer employment windows, budget confirmation sometimes arrived after the program year had already started, and the resulting uncertainty constrained providers' ability to enroll participants and develop worksites during the highest-potential enrollment periods in summer. Maintaining some carry over was in part strategic to bridge this gap. Second, budget assumptions were based on participants completing 160 hours of work experience, but actual hours fell short due to unexpected dropout rates and delays in participants receiving budgeted funds. Third, eligibility requirements added further complexity and constrained full spend. Funding tied to discrete demographic categories rather than a unified pool meant providers sometimes turned away eligible youth when individual categories appeared full. Providers also lacked real-time tools to measure underspend and act on those gaps. As a result, dollars went unspent across the program as a whole.

In addition to the underspend, funds that were spent were not always directed toward delivering direct participant work experiences. In some instances, worksite partners – particularly human and social services partners – who did not have a clear definition of the worksite experience or success – used funds for training stipends or internship programs that blended classroom instruction with work experience rather than direct employer placements. For example, one worksite used cohort-based internships with classroom sessions and coaching alongside work placements, with wages sometimes covered through AJCC funding after participants were sourced externally. At the same time, administrative costs consumed a disproportionate share of available resources: core Youth@Work program related and administrative costs represented approximately 20% (~$6 million) of total spending at $819 per participant. While these are valid ways to spend workforce dollars broadly, the spend limited actual resources available for paid work experiences in line with the program model and goals.

Beyond these specific challenges, a more fundamental constraint is that current funding levels were never sufficient to achieve the publicly stated goal of serving 10,000 youth annually. The review found that Youth@Work's ~$27 million budget supports approximately 6,000-7,000 participants under the current model (~$4,200 per participant),[9] with WIOA Youth services funding for paid work experience providing for ~1,000 additional WIOA eligible youth ages 16-24 to be served. Funding increases over time have covered rising minimum wage and benefit costs but have not enabled meaningful expansion of the total number of participants served.

9. The $4.2k cost per participant figure is for most WBL participants, except certain demographics of low-income participants who are eligible for more paid work experience ($6k cost per participant).

4.3 PROGRAM OUTCOMES AND IMPACT

The current outcome framework prioritized career exposure and early earnings over longer-term economic mobility. The core Youth@Work program focused on career exposure and paid work experience, with earnings generated during the program itself. Of ~6,400 exited participants in FY23-24, 66% returned to school, ~3% entered advanced training or postsecondary education, and ~1% transitioned to unsubsidized employment at program exit. In an effort to strengthen connection to postsecondary education, the County and City of Los Angeles piloted the use of WBL funds to place community college navigators in WorkSource Centers, though the impact of this effort was not formally evaluated and the funds used did not go toward direct work experience for participants. The program did not require or track post-program employment placement, and no post-program targets existed. As they were not required, these numbers are likely conservative estimates of outcomes and impact, although they do highlight a need for intentional design and monitoring.

Elevate and WIOA went further: Elevate set goals for and tracked unsubsidized employment at exit, achieving over 95% of its placement target, while those co-enrolled in WIOA for additional hours and services tracked employment, earnings, skills gain, and credential attainment for up to one-year post-program, where nearly half of unsubsidized employment was in a high-growth sector. These pilot efforts show the immediate improvement in intended outcomes.

Performance measurement operated at the provider level rather than as a system-wide measure, limiting DEO's ability to understand program impact in aggregate. Performance was evaluated individually against provider contracts. No system-level aggregated outcome targets existed across Youth@Work. As a result, it was difficult to assess the program's contribution to broader County priorities, including youth development, Care First and prevention, and pathways to County and public sector employment, or its alignment with the LAP3 Horizons 32K goal. The program also did not track economic mobility outcomes beyond one year after program exit, further limiting the ability to assess Youth@Work's long-term impact.

5. Recommendations for Redesign

5.1 NEW THEORY OF CHANGE AND PROGRAM GOALS

The review validated the importance of the Youth@Work program and identified meaningful strengths in the current program that the future program can build on. The core model enrolled over 8,000 youth in FY23-24, with strong representation across priority populations including CalWORKs, foster, and probation youth. Over 80% of participants found both training and work experience useful. The program operates broadly across the county spanning all five supervisorial districts. A redesigned theory of change and program model can leverage these core strengths to drive more consistent delivery and impactful outcomes for opportunity youth.

The review found that the current Youth@Work program was designed and is delivering primarily around work readiness and career exposure, without a clear framework for driving longer-term economic mobility. Across program components, clear standards and performance guidelines for what a high-quality participant continuum experience should look like were often absent, limiting DEO's ability to drive consistent improvement across the provider network. Where standards did exist, they focused primarily on short-term outputs, such as enrollment and work experience placement, rather than on quality or longer-term outcomes. The one-size-fits-all model further limited the program's ability to meet participants where they were in their educational and employment journeys: services and funding allowances varied by funding source rather than by participant goals, resulting in a single, uniform program experience regardless of individual need. Together, these gaps pointed to the need for a redesigned Theory of Change anchored on measurable, long-term outcomes for opportunity youth.

The redesigned Youth@Work Theory of Change (ToC) responds directly to these challenges by establishing a clear, measurable approach to advancing economic mobility for opportunity youth in LA County. In the redesign, Youth@Work will provide opportunity youth with customized education and training, paid work experiences, and support in high-growth sectors that increases immediate educational attainment and employment and both advances long-term economic mobility and reduces the opportunity youth gaps in LA County. It directly contributes to the LAP3 Horizons 32K Strategic Plan's target of reducing the number of opportunity youth in LA County by 32,000 by 2027.[10] The redesign also deepens coordination with County departments, including the new Department of Youth Development (DYD) as well as Public Social Services, Probation, and DCFS as active partners in program delivery as referral partners for priority populations and worksites offering pathways into public sector employment, aligning Youth@Work placements with broader departmental and countywide goals. The redesigned approach also takes a dual customer approach to serving both youth participants as well as employers, with specific changes to deepen engagement with high-growth and opportunity employers. Overall, the redesign focuses on differentiated intermediate outcomes, including high school equivalency completion, postsecondary educational attainment, and unsubsidized job placement in high-growth sectors with high-road employers, which will ultimately lead to living wages, increased income, and financial

10. Horizons 32K Strategic Plan, Los Angeles Performance Partnership Pilot, 2024

resiliency that will help unlock pathways for economic mobility for opportunity youth. It draws on findings from the review as well as evidence-based practices from leading youth workforce development programs across the United States. It also recognizes the level of service and care available with alignment to DYD, as the County invests in youth development, safer neighborhoods, and elimination of youth incarceration.

The table below summarizes how the redesign responds to the key opportunities and challenges identified in the review, providing a view of the current core model, and how key elements will be different after the redesign. The sections that follow provide additional details on the redesign changes for each component of the Theory of Change.

Figure 5: Youth@Work redesign – detailed summary of key changes

TOC COMPONENT	ORIGINAL TOC FRAMING	OPPORTUNITIES & CHALLENGES IDENTIFIED BY REVIEW	HOW THE REDESIGN ADDRESSES THIS	REDESIGNED TOC FRAMING
Vision	Provide young adults with barriers to employment with support and paid work experiences that increase work readiness, career exposure, and financial empowerment as well as long-term connection to the public workforce system for education & employment outcomes	Career exposure focus without a clear pathway to economic mobility	Youth@Work repositioned as a driver of economic mobility across LA County	Provide opportunity youth with customized education and training, paid work experiences, and support in high-growth sectors that increases immediate educational attainment and employment and both advances long-term economic mobility and reduces the opportunity youth gaps in LA County
Impacts & Outcomes	• Impacts: Early work & earnings; career exposure; future education and hiring services • Outcomes: educational attainment; unsubsidized hiring; retention in post-program education or job	• Impacts & Outcomes were passive/implicit vs. explicit • Impacts & Outcomes focused only on career exposure and early earnings • Limited post-program outcomes tracked • No outcomes related to employers • Fewer than 3% of participants transitioned to unsubsidized employment, as tracked and known by providers and DEO	• Explicit outcomes with a differentiation between long-term impacts and outcomes • Program anchored in outcomes that benefit opportunity youth and employers • System-level impacts and outcomes shared across all providers and aligned to local economic realities (e.g., thriving sectors) • Integrated funding and partner goals • Differentiated intermediate outcomes for each pathway to ensure activities are tailored to differentiated opportunity youth needs	**Impacts** • Ability to secure employment at living wages • Increased income and financial stability • Enhanced access to qualified, local talent for high-road employers • Equitable employment outcomes and workforce representation across all LA County communities • Reduced reliance on public benefits and decreased recidivism among program participants • Increase in civic engagement **Outcomes** • Pathway 1: Career exploration • Pathway 2: High School Equivalency (HSE) credential attainment • Pathway 3: Postsecondary education enrollment • Pathway 4: Steady employment in high-growth and opportunity sectors

TOC COMPONENT	ORIGINAL TOC FRAMING	OPPORTUNITIES & CHALLENGES IDENTIFIED BY REVIEW	HOW THE REDESIGN ADDRESSES THIS	REDESIGNED TOC FRAMING
Outputs	Youth enrolled	• Strong interest and initial enrollment • Drop-off between enrollment, worksite placement, and completion pointed to structural program gaps	• Ensure unified branding • Clear definitions and targets for each step of outreach, acceptance, enrollment, and completion of work experience across all four pathways	• Set clear metrics and Key Performance Indicators at all stages of the program model, including activities, outputs, outcomes, and impacts • Redesign current metrics for education and skills outputs and integration of both employer and participant benefits
	Trainings completed	• Completion rates varied across providers • No system-level targets though information tracked • 80% of participants found training useful but insufficiently tailored to specific career pathways	• Minimum training standards and system-level performance targets across all pathways • Trainings tailored to unique needs of the pathway	
	Mentorship received	• Limited to Elevate pilot with no equivalent in the core program • Over 80% of participants found mentorship useful	Structured mentorship with clear completion targets in Pathway 4	
	Work placements	• Vulnerable populations placed at lower rates • Majority of participants found work experience useful • Placement quality, worksite matching, and employer engagement were challenges	Clear worksite development goals; WIOA funds integrated into program pathways to increase enrollment capability	

TOC COMPONENT	ORIGINAL TOC FRAMING	OPPORTUNITIES & CHALLENGES IDENTIFIED BY REVIEW	HOW THE REDESIGN ADDRESSES THIS	REDESIGNED TOC FRAMING
Activities	Outreach & enrollment	• Process skewed toward in-school youth; delays and eligibility confusion limited equitable access • Demographic targets only	Unified brand, updated eligibility standards, and targeted outreach strategy across all four pathways.	Outreach & enrollment across all four pathways
	Personal Enrichment Training (PET) / Job Readiness Preparation	• Content perceived as generic; financial skills training not included • Uneven guidance on what constitutes completion and what completion goals are	Build from the original curriculum and tailor content to provide emphasis on areas of most relevance for different pathways	Pathway-specific training modules with financial literacy, BankOn banking support, and local labor market information
		Services provided not tailored to differentiated Opportunity Youth needs	Integration of HSE training needs based on benchmark best practices	HSE training & certificate (Pathway 2)
			Integration of college visits based on benchmark best practices & youth focus groups	College visits (Pathway 3)
			Integration of career-specific training based on benchmarks and employer feedback	Career specific training (Pathway 4)
	Mentorship	Available only through Elevate pilot; WBL participants had no access despite expressed demand	Structured mentorship integrated as a core component of Pathway 4	Mentorship (Pathway 4 only)
	Work experience	Placements concentrated in low-barrier sectors; worksite quality inconsistent and monitoring limited	New worksite quality standards, sector-specific employer commitment goals, and Pathway 4 requires hiring-committed employers	Differentiated work experience per pathway with post-hiring commitments from Pathway 4 employers
	Supportive services	~70% of supportive services budget unspent despite strong participant demand	Formal partnerships with County agencies to connect participants to housing, food, childcare, and other support, with clearer referral pathways and utilization targets	Increased level of supportive services across pathways
	Employer engagement	Not a core part of the ToC	Redesigned program takes a dual customer approach for youth and employers	Engagement with high growth and high opportunity sector employers to design trainings and build pipelines for work experience

TOC COMPONENT	ORIGINAL TOC FRAMING	OPPORTUNITIES & CHALLENGES IDENTIFIED BY REVIEW	HOW THE REDESIGN ADDRESSES THIS	REDESIGNED TOC FRAMING
Inputs	Target customers	Single customer approach	Dual customer approach for youth and employers.	• Eligible opportunity youth • High growth and opportunity sector employers
	Funding	~$27M never sufficient to reach 10,000 participants; underspend within existing budget given structural challenges	Right-sizes goals to available funding; integrate WIOA into program pathways	LA County (including JJCPA, DPSS, etc.), philanthropy as well as potential employer co-investment and service provider co-investment over time
	Partners	Sole reliance on AJCCs and WDBs limited provider diversity and produced inconsistent experiences.	Open, competitive procurement to any organization meeting baseline requirements; two-year calendar-year contracts; improved participant-employer matching processes	10-20 competitively selected community based organizations who meet program delivery and performance requirements
	Admin & tech systems	40+ disconnected, manual payroll systems created significant administrative burden	Single system of record, third-party payroll administrator, and participant-facing portal	Third parties for consolidated system of record & payroll management

5.2 PROGRAM COMPONENT REDESIGN RECOMMENDATIONS

The following section details the recommendations for redesigning Youth@Work across each component of the redesigned Theory of Change, seen in the graphic on the next page:

Figure 6: Target state Youth@Work Theory of change

VISION

Provide opportunity youth with customized education and training, paid work experiences, and support in high-growth sectors that increase immediate educational attainment and employment and both advances long-term economic mobility and reduces the opportunity youth gaps in LA County

IMPACTS

Opportunity youth secure employment at living wages**	Enhanced access to qualified, local talent for high-road employers**	Reduced reliance on public benefits and decreased recidivism**
Increased income and financial stability for opportunity youth**	Equitable employment outcomes and workforce representation across all LA County communities	Increase in civic engagement

OUTCOMES

Career exploration for 14–15-year-old youth**	High school equivalency (HSE) credential attainment**	Postsecondary education enrollment**	Steady employment in high-growth and opportunity sectors[1]**

OUTPUTS

- Consistent pipeline of placements in high growth and opportunity sectors benefitting Opportunity Youth and Employers
- Skills attainment**
- Education attainment**

ACTIVITIES

Pathway 1 – career exposure for 14-15-year-olds: Provide 14 to 15-year-old opportunity youth with paid job readiness preparation, 80 hours of paid work experience[1], and supportive services[2]	**Pathway 2 – HSE credential attainment:** Provide 16 to 24-year-old opportunity youth with of paid job readiness preparation, an HSE training and certificate, 100 hours of paid work experience[1], and supportive services[2]	**Pathway 3 – post-secondary education:** Provide 16 to 24-year-old opportunity youth who have HSEs and are seeking post-secondary education with paid job readiness preparation, 10 hr. of paid local college visits, 120 hr. of work exp.[1], and supportive services[2]	**Pathway 4 – High Growth and High Road Employment:** Provide 16 to 24-year-old opportunity youth who have HSEs and are seeking employment with paid job readiness preparation, career-specific training, 240 hours of paid work exp.[1], mentorship for some, and supportive services[2]

- Increased career exposure and work experiences from pathways 1 to 4; participants can be referred to subsequent pathways and can only complete a given pathway once
- **Employer engagement** with high growth and high opportunity sector employers to design trainings and build pipelines for work experience**
- **Outreach and Enrollment** of Opportunity Youth in relevant pathway**

INPUTS

- **Service providers:** 10-20 competitively selected community-based organizations who meet program delivery and performance requirements
- **Admin & Tech Systems:** Third-parties for consolidated system of record and payroll management
- **Funding:** LA County (incl. JJCPA, DPSS, etc.), philanthropy, and potential employer co-investment and service provider co-investment
- **Target customers:** Eligible opportunity youth and high-growth and opportunity sector employers

1. Work experiences should be in a high-growth and opportunity sector particularly for pathways 3 and 4. High-growth and opportunity sectors include: Aerospace & Defense, Biotech and Life Sciences, Construction & Infrastructure, Creative Sector, Early Care & Education, Healthcare, Hospitality & Tourism, Information Tech., Trade, Transportation & Logistics, Government, and Social Services. Exceptions are permitted, particularly for pathways 1 and 2, if worksites offer a high-quality work experience. Per youth focus groups and stakeholder interviews, high quality includes 1) clear expectations, 2) no more than 2-3 hours w/o direct oversight, 3) day-to-day responsibilities aligned with specific work experience sector or pathway to gain skills and experience where job shortages exist, and 4) regular feedback and coaching
2. Non-financial supportive services include a bank account, CalWORKS (incl. childcare), CalFRESH, health insurance, and housing assistance if eligible**Indicates targets will be set in future state

VISION

The target state vision positions Youth@Work to provide opportunity youth with customized education and training, paid work experiences, and support in high-growth sectors that increases immediate educational attainment and employment and both advances long-term economic mobility and reduces the opportunity youth gaps in LA County. Building on the strengths of the current program[11], this vision provides impactful supports in alignment with DEO's broader commitments to advancing economic opportunities, promoting inclusive and sustainable growth, and building thriving local communities in LA County.[12]

IMPACTS

The redesigned Youth@Work targets six long-term impacts through a dual-customer lens that benefits the entire system: advancing individual economic mobility for opportunity youth, strengthening employer access to qualified local talent, and closing opportunity youth gaps across LA County. For opportunity youth, the program aims to secure employment at living wages and increase financial stability and economic resilience. These outcomes are anchored in the Urban Institute's Upward Mobility Framework, particularly the dimension of rewarding work, which encompasses (1) living wages earned, linked to job stability, well-being, and long-term economic security, and (2) increased income and financial resiliency, linked to savings and reduced vulnerability to economic shocks.[13] At the employer level, Youth@Work will enhance access to qualified, local talent for high-road employers in legacy and emerging industries. At the broader system level, Youth@Work seeks to advance equitable employment outcomes and workforce representation across all LA County communities, reduce reliance on public benefits and decrease recidivism among program participants, and increase civic engagement among opportunity youth. Together, these impacts provide a measurable north star for the program and connect directly to the LAP3 Horizons 32K goal of reducing opportunity youth disconnection across LA County. With successful implementation of this new model, DEO and partners could measure the direct impact of Youth@Work on Horizons 32K goals in five years or less, notwithstanding dynamic, contributing interventions as part of the broader strategy.

Achieving these impacts requires a shift in Youth@Work's program design, delivery, and measurement and management of performance. DEO will provide more centralized and standardized program oversight through direct procurement of providers at job centers and among other youth and workforce providers. The program will offer pathways that recognize the unique circumstances of opportunity youth at different ages and points of connection to school and work and offer pathways that meet them where they are. The program will target a broader range of opportunity youth than was seen in the review numbers, shifting the primary focus from in-school youth to those in need of training and transitional work for quality jobs. To track progress, DEO will both measure provider-level performance as well as shared system-level goal achievement, adjusted to reflect the realities of the local economy (e.g., emerging or thriving sectors, focused demographic or geographic participant recruitment). It will also integrate provider and funding partner goals, such as decreased reliance on the safety net and reduced recidivism, alongside Youth@Work's own outcome targets. The program will also establish clearer connections to Countywide Youth Bridges with system goals and impact communicated publicly to the County and broader community. With that foundation in place, Youth@Work can better contribute to the County's broader goal of reducing opportunity youth disconnection.

11. Current state Youth@Work vision: Provide young adults with barriers to employment with support and paid work experiences that increase work readiness, career exposure, and financial empowerment as well as long-term connection to the public workforce system for education and employment outcomes.
12. Your Career with DEO Starts Here!, LA County Department of Economic Opportunity, 2025
13. Urban Mobility Framework, Urban Institute, 2025

OUTCOMES AND OUTPUTS

The redesign shifts from a one-size-fits-all model to four differentiated pathways, each tied to a distinct intermediate outcome. Participants are enrolled in one of four pathways based on criteria such as their age, educational status, and employment goals to achieve one of the following intermediate outcomes: career exploration (Pathway 1), high school equivalency credential attainment (Pathway 2), postsecondary education enrollment (Pathway 3), or steady employment in a high-growth sector (Pathway 4). Across all four pathways, skills and educational credential attainment serve as the key outputs linking program activities to these intermediate outcomes (see figure on the next page). At the same time, the dual emphasis on employers as well as opportunity youth means that the redesigned theory of change will lead to an output of a stronger, more consistent pipeline of opportunity youth placed in high-growth and opportunity sectors.

Figure 7: Additional details on eligibility, activities, and costs for each pathway

INTERMEDIATE OUTCOMES FOR OY	Career exploration for 14–15-year-old youth	High school equivalency (HSE) credential attainment	Postsecondary education enrollment	Steady employment in high-growth and opportunity sectors[1]
OUTPUTS	Consistent pipeline of placements in high growth and opportunity sectors			
	Skills attainment			
	Education attainment			

	10% of total participants	*15% of total participants*	*15% of total participants*	*60% of total participants*
ACTIVITIES	**Pathway 1: Career exposure for 14–15-year-olds**	**Pathway 2: High school equivalency credential attainment**	**Pathway 3: Post-secondary education**	**Pathway 4: High Growth and High Road Employment**
	Cohort: 1x/year (~6 weeks) **Eligibility:** 14–15-year-old in- or out-of-school opportunity youth1 in LA County, with a targeted focus on foster and probation youth from partner agencies **Activities:** • Recruit eligible in-school or out-of-school youth • Provide paid PET (incl. navigating careers, labor market info) via online tool • Provide 80 hours of work experience, ideally in a high-growth and opportunity sector[2] • Provide $80 financial and non-financial supportive services[3] **Cost:** ~$2,800	**Cohort:** 2x/year (~8 weeks) **Eligibility:** 16–24-year-old opportunity youth[1] in LA County who do not have a high school equivalency credential (HSE), with a mix between out-of-school youth and those in school but at risk of not receiving HSE **Activities:** • Provide paid career-oriented PET • Partner with service provider who provides HSE training • Provide 100 hours of work exp. ideally in a high-growth and opportunity sector[2] • Provide $100 financial and non-financial supportive services[3] **Cost:** ~$3,300	**Cohort:** 2x/year (~8 weeks) **Eligibility:** 16–24-year-old opportunity youth[1] in LA County who have HSEs and are seeking post-secondary education, with a focus on those out of school **Activities:** • Provide paid career-oriented PET (incl. navigating careers, labor market info, FAFSA) via an online tool • Provide 10 hours of paid local college exposure (counselors, FAFSA, etc.) • Provide 120 hours of work exp. ideally in a high-growth and opportunity sector[2] • Provide $130 financial and non-financial supportive services[3] **Cost:** ~$3,900	**Cohort:** 2x/year (~1 year) **Eligibility:** 16-24-year-old opportunity youth[1] in LA County who have HSEs, and are seeking employment, with a targeted focus on out of school youth or vulnerable in school youth, such as foster youth **Activities:** • Provide paid career-oriented PET • Partner with service provider who provides career-specific training • Provide 240 hours of work exp. in a high-growth and opportunity sector[2] • Provide $500 financial and non-financial supportive services[3] • Offer mentorship to some youth **Cost:** ~$6,500

Increased career exposure and work experiences from pathways 1 to 4; participants can be referred to subsequent pathways and can only complete a given pathway once

1. Opportunity youth is defined as 14–24-year-old youth who are out-of-school and unemployed or are at high risk of disconnection due to homelessness, justice system involvement, foster involvement, or other structural barriers (e.g., low income, English Language Learner, immigrant, refugee, LGBTQIA+, disability, veteran)
2. Work experiences should be in a high-growth and opportunity sector particularly for pathways 3 and 4. High-growth and opportunity sectors include: Aerospace & Defense, Biotech and Life Sciences, Construction & Infrastructure, Creative Sector, Early Care & Education, Healthcare, Hospitality & Tourism, Information Tech., Trade, Transportation & Logistics, Government, and Social Services. Exceptions are permitted, particularly for pathways 1 and 2, if worksites offer a high-quality work experience. Per youth focus groups and stakeholder interviews, high quality includes 1) clear expectations, 2) no more than 2-3 hours w/o direct oversight, 3) day-to-day responsibilities aligned with specific work experience sector or pathway to gain skills and experience where job shortages exist, and 4) regular feedback and coaching
3. Non-financial supportive services include a bank account, CalWORKS (incl. childcare), CalFRESH, health insurance, and housing assistance if eligible. Financial supportive services differs by pathway

ACTIVITIES

The four pathways each deliver a distinct set of activities tailored to participants' educational status and employment goals. This shift reflects evidence that segmented workforce interventions produce stronger employment and earnings outcomes than uniform approaches, and directly addresses the review finding that the current model may not be designed to best serve the most disconnected opportunity youth.[14] Each pathway carries its own set of goals and desired outputs, establishing clear expectations across the full participant journey. The sections below begin with cross-cutting program enhancements that apply across all four pathways, before describing the specific activities of each pathway. Opportunity youth may engage in multiple pathways over time – first engaging in pathways 1 and 2 as they finish school or high-school equivalency and then engaging in pathways 3 and 4 as they move to postsecondary education or employment, though they can only complete a given pathway once.

Cross-cutting program enhancements

The following enhancements apply across all four pathways, collectively strengthening the quality and consistency of the participant experience, raising the bar for employer engagement, and establishing the system-level accountability infrastructure the program has lacked.

- **Outreach and enrollment:** The redesign introduces clear, measurable goals across the full participant journey for the first time. Youth@Work will establish targets for outreach, acceptance, enrollment, completion, and post-program outcomes across all four pathways, tracked at the system level as well as at the level of contracted providers. This gives DEO a unified view of program performance and enables data-driven management of the redesigned program.

- **Personal Enrichment Training:** Personal Enrichment Training will be revamped to strengthen the soft skills, job and career readiness, and financial empowerment curriculum. Specifically, it will include the necessities of a job portfolio, including a focus on resume development, preparation of key interview questions, guidance on compilation of basic employment documents, transcripts, and references, deeper financial literacy education, banking support through the Center for Financial Empowerment and BankOn, and local LA County labor market information, with a trauma-informed delivery and facilitation model. Pathways 2 through 4 will also receive additional training supports, from high-school equivalency support (Pathway 2), to postsecondary program navigation support (Pathway 3), or sector-specific training through HRTP providers (Pathway 4). More details on these additional trainings and support are provided in the pathway specific information below.

- **Mentorship:** Mentorship will be integrated as a structured core component of Pathway 4, sourced and trained through LA County partnerships.

- **Employer Engagement:** The redesign substantially raises expectations for employer engagement, moving from an ad hoc worksite recruitment and matching model to a structured, standards-driven approach. DEO will implement new worksite quality standards covering clear expectations for worksites with meaningful responsibilities for youth, direct oversight, and regular feedback that ensure positive participant and employer experiences. DEO will launch a dedicated employer marketing and business development campaign to onboard hiring employers in high-growth sectors that align with program outcomes of interest. Sector-specific goals and a formal schedule for securing employer commitments will ensure a diverse and sufficient supply of worksites across pathways, including County departments. Minimum standards for employer participation will apply across all pathways. Importantly, Pathway 4 placements will be restricted to employers actively seeking to hire post-placement. This is a distinct

14. A Review of the Evidence on Youth and Young Adult Workforce Development Programming, Amin et al., 2020

shift from the current model where driving post-program economic mobility outcomes was not an explicit goal of the program.

- **Work Experience:** In each pathway, participants will learn clear expectations for how they engage in their workplace and be placed for specific differentiated time periods to align with the goal of their specific pathway, from exposure to a career (Pathway 1) to extensive experience with employers that are seeking to make permanent post-placement hires (Pathway 4).

- **Supportive services:** Supportive services will be deepened through close collaboration with partner LA County agencies, connecting eligible participants to housing, food, childcare, medical insurance, and mental health support. Clearer referral pathways and utilization targets will ensure funds are deployed toward participants who need them most.

- **Post-Program Retention & Advancement:** Across pathways, there will be an intentional focus on tracking post-program outcomes. In addition, in Pathways 3 and 4, there is at least one year of post-program support of continued touchpoints with service providers to ensure retention in secondary education and careers.

The following section provides more specifics for each proposed pathway. Pathway 1 will engage fewer youth overall for a shorter period of time with fewer hours. The subsequent pathways add more hours of work experience and more intensive, differentiated support – from HSE instruction in Pathway 2, to college readiness support in Pathway 3, and added mentorship support in Pathway 4.

Pathway 1: Career Exposure (ages 14-15)

Pathway 1 serves 14- to 15-year-old in-school and out-of-school youth, with the goal of proactively mitigating the risk of future disconnection. DEO will also intentionally make connections to the DYD and partners like the Los Angeles Unified School District (LAUSD) to offer this pathway available for youth who may not typically have access. The pathway retains paid Personal Enrichment Training, shifting its focus toward early career readiness and exploration, including financial literacy and an overview of high-demand jobs in LA County. Paid work experience is set at 80 hours, with an emphasis on high-quality placements in high-growth and opportunity sectors. DEO will work with both WDBs and AJCCs as well as the contracted providers to ensure worksites in Aerospace & Defense, Biotech & Life Sciences, Construction & Infrastructure, Creative Sector, Early Care & Education, Healthcare, Hospitality & Tourism, Information Technology, Trade and Transportation & Logistics, and Government and Social Services. Shorter work experiences are more developmentally appropriate for younger youth while still offering meaningful exposure to the world of work. Pathway 1 is designed to serve approximately 10% of total program participants, delivered as a six-week summer cohort once annually.

Figure 8: Description and rationale for Pathway 1 (sources can be found in the footnote below)[15]

PATHWAY 1 — EARLY CAREER EXPOSURE FOR 14-15-YEAR-OLDS

PARTICIPANT PROFILE

14-15-year-old opportunity youth in LA County (in or out of school), of which a majority are referrals from LA County Dept. of Children and Family Services and Probation Dept.

COHORT
1x/year (~6 weeks)

ENROLLMENT TARGET
10% of total Youth@Work participants

ACTIVITIES
Outreach and enrollment: Recruit eligible youth
Trainings: Provide PET (incl. soft skills training, financial literacy support)
Work experience: Provide 80 hours of work experience, ideally in a high-growth and opportunity sector
Supportive services: Provide $80 financial and connect to six core services if eligible

INTERMEDIATE OUTCOME
Career exploration for 14-15-year-old youth

OBJECTIVE
Provide youngest work-eligible youth exposure to high-quality work experiences and reduce the risk of future disconnection

SUPPORTING EVIDENCE FOR PATHWAY 1

RATIONALE FOR TARGETING 14-15-YEAR-OLDS:

Research shows that youth who engage in part-time work between ages 14 and 16 are approximately 1.3 times less likely to be unemployed in young adulthood than peers without early work experience (link a)

RATIONALE FOR NO SET IN- OR OUT-OF-SCHOOL TARGETS:

California law mandates full-time school attendance for youth ages 6-15, with exceptions for specific situations, such as graduation from high school

RATIONALE FOR OFFERING PAID WORK EXPERIENCE:

Research shows youth from low-income households who gain paid work experience have an increased chance at obtaining higher-paying, full-time jobs (link e). Coupled with stakeholder interviews wherein employers stressed the importance of exposing younger youth to work, pathway 1 provides a lighter-touch (~80 hour) paid work experience to help such youth build early professional competencies

RATIONALE FOR CHANGES TO SOFT-SKILLS TRAININGS:

During the evaluation's youth focus groups, 14 and 15-year-old youth stated the current personal enrichment training is generic and lacks career-specific information, further exacerbated by the lack of job diversity observed in some local neighborhoods. Target state will include an enhanced career readiness training (e.g., stronger financial literacy module, more emphasis on navigating different job scenarios) and net-new information on the local LA County job market

RATIONALE FOR A SUMMER PROGRAM:

Cohort timing aligns with research that summer programs yield the best outcomes for younger youth (links b, and c). While shorter work experiences typically offer limited measurable gains in hard or soft skills, they allow youth to demonstrate motivation, persistence, and reliability—traits not always observable through academic performance alone (link d)

RATIONALE FOR OFFERING A FINANCIAL STIPEND AND NON-FINANCIAL SUPPORTIVE SERVICES:

Research shows programs that provide stipends have been linked to higher program demand, improved school day outcomes, and more positive participant feelings about the program and themselves (link f). Target state will also connect participants to six core services (e.g., housing assistance) to address findings from youth focus groups and LA County partners that workforce programming is fragmented and not holistic enough (link g)

15. The following sources are listed sequentially from top to bottom of the Pathway 1 figure: [a] Experiencing the workplace: the importance and benefits for teenagers, OECD, 2021; [b] Adolescent Work Intensity, School Performance, And Academic Engagement, Staff et al., 2010; [c] An Introduction to the World of Work: A Study of the Implementation and Impacts of New York City's Summer Youth Employment Program, Valentine, et al. for MDRC, 2017; [d] The Impact of Short-Term Employment for Low-Income Youth, Beam et al., 2021; [e] Chronic Poverty Among Youth in the United States, Reed, 2020; [f] Stipends As A Tool To Advance Economic And Educational Equity In Youth Development Programs, After School Matters, 2021; [g] Addressing Youth Disconnection in the Los Angeles Region: Challenges & Opportunities for Change, Malka et al., 2025

Pathway 2: High School Equivalency Credential Attainment (ages 16-24)

Pathway 2 addresses a critical gap in the current program: limited support for youth seeking to complete their high school equivalency credential. The pathway serves 16- to 24-year-old in-school and out-of-school opportunity youth who are at risk of not obtaining a high school equivalency credential. It includes paid Personal Enrichment Training with the same base of soft skills training, job readiness training, and financial literacy curriculum as in Pathway 1, but with a sharper focus on workplace preparation and local labor market navigation. In addition to Personal Enrichment Training, contracted service providers will also work with high school equivalency programs and alternative high schools to support participants in completing their credentials while gaining paid work experience. The reduction to 100 hours of work experience, compared to 140 hours in the current model, allows participants to devote time to their studies. Pathway 2 is designed to serve approximately 15% of participants, delivered as an eight-week cohort twice annually.

Figure 9: Description and rationale for Pathway 2 (sources can be found in the footnote below)[16]

PATHWAY 2 | **HIGH SCHOOL EQUIVALENCY CREDENTIAL ATTAINMENT FOR 16-TO-24-YEAR-OLDS**

PARTICIPANT PROFILE

16–24-year-old opportunity youth in LA County who do not have a high school equivalency credential (HSE), of which at least 50% are out-of-school without HSEs and remaining are in-school at risk of not attaining HSEs

COHORT
2x/year (~8 weeks)

ENROLLMENT TARGET
15% of total Youth@Work participants

ACTIVITIES
Outreach and enrollment: Recruit eligible youth
Trainings: Provide PET (incl. navigating careers), and partner with service provider who provides HSE training
Work experience: Provide 100 hours of work experience, ideally in a high-growth and opportunity sector
Supportive services: Provide $100 financial and connect to six core services if eligible (e.g., bank acct)

INTERMEDIATE OUTCOME
High School Equivalency credential attainment

OBJECTIVE
Guide youth to complete high school diplomas or equivalent to drive future career readiness

SUPPORTING EVIDENCE FOR PATHWAY 2

RATIONALE FOR TARGETING 16-24-YEAR-OLDS WHO DO NOT HAVE HIGH SCHOOL EQUIVALENCY CREDENTIALS:

Research shows that youth who earn a high school equivalency credential experience higher employment rates, wages, and rates of full-time, year-round employment over time (link a, b, c, d). For example, of young people who were employed at age 25, those who graduated on time earned 35% more annually compared to those who left high school without a diploma, suggesting the job market values a high school diploma more so than an early employment history (link d). Therefore, target state will provide HSE trainings for eligible participants in pathway 2

RATIONALE FOR TARGETING 50% OF YOUTH WHO ARE IN-SCHOOL:

While out-of-school youth tend to be more disconnected compared to in-school youth, pathway 2 also targets in-school youth who are at-risk of dropping out as a preventative measure. Another reason for this is in-school students' high school experiences too often do not effectively prepare them for post-secondary education nor the rigors of work, as evidenced by employers reporting difficulties with finding workers with skills that they require (link e, f)

16. The following sources are listed sequentially from top to bottom of the Pathway 2 figure: [a] Report on the Condition of Education 2024, U.S. Department of Education, 2024; [b] High School 21+ Outcomes Report, Washington State Board for Community and Technical Colleges, 2019; [c] Employment Projections, Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2024; [d] What happens to teens who leave high school and work, Urban Institute, 2016; [e] Beyond hiring: How companies are reskilling to address talent gaps, McKinsey, 2020; [f] Fixing America's broken talent pipeline: Bridging education and industry for workforce success. 2024 Workforce Report, YouScience, 2024; [g] YouthWorks Program, MassHire, 2025

Pathway 3: Postsecondary Education (ages 16-24)

Pathway 3 facilitates enrollment into postsecondary education in a field that both aligns with participants' interests and meets local labor market demands. ~3% of Youth@Work participants in FY23-24 exited the program to pursue a postsecondary credential, a significant gap given the role of education in long-term employment outcomes.[17] Pathway 3 addresses this by supporting 16- to 24-year-old opportunity youth with high school equivalency credentials in making informed decisions about postsecondary education in fields that align with their interests and local labor market demand. The pathway pairs the same base Personal Enrichment Training which includes specific emphasis on workforce preparation and labor market navigation with additional hours of postsecondary preparation, including college visits, applications, registration, and financial aid as well as 120 hours of paid work experience in a high-growth and opportunity sector. Work experience in this pathway is designed to give participants early career exposure to help clarify the field they wish to pursue in postsecondary education. Pathway 3 is designed to serve approximately 15% of participants, delivered as an eight-week cohort twice annually. In this pathway, there is particular emphasis on at least one year of post-program support to drive retention in postsecondary education.

17. Note: Due to lack of data availability, it is unclear whether such participants were enrolled in college or postsecondary credentials prior to joining Youth@Work

Figure 10: Description and rationale for Pathway 3 (sources can be found in the footnote below)[18]

PATHWAY 3 POSTSECONDARY EDUCATION FOR 16-TO-24-YEAR-OLDS

PARTICIPANT PROFILE

16-24-year-old opportunity youth in LA County who have HSEs and are seeking post-secondary education, of which at least 80% are out-of-school

COHORT
2x/year (~8 weeks)

ENROLLMENT TARGET
15% of total Youth@Work participants

ACTIVITIES
Outreach and enrollment: Recruit eligible youth
Trainings: Provide PET (e.g., local labor market information), and local college exposure (e.g., meet counselors)
Work experience: Provide 120 hours of work experience in a high-growth and opportunity sector
Supportive services: Provide $130 financial and connect to six core services if eligible (e.g., bank acct)

INTERMEDIATE OUTCOME
Post-secondary education enrollment

OBJECTIVE
Support youth with post-secondary education enrollment in a topic area / pathway aligned with where job shortages exist today

SUPPORTING EVIDENCE FOR PATHWAY 3

RATIONALE FOR ENROLLING YOUTH IN POST-SECONDARY EDUCATION:

The rationale for Pathway 3 is grounded in research showing that access to postsecondary education, including two-year degrees, vocational certificates, and four-year degrees, can unlock better job opportunities for opportunity youth. By 2030, it is projected that 40% of jobs in California will require a bachelor's degree (link a). However, only 19% of opportunity youth have completed at least a bachelor's degree in LA County today (link b). Youth without postsecondary attainment face lower median incomes & higher rates of unemployment compared to their peers who pursue further education (link c, d)

RATIONALE FOR TARGETING 80% OF YOUTH WHO ARE OUT-OF-SCHOOL:

This pathway primarily targets youth who have high school equivalency credentials but are out-of-school (i.e., not already enrolled in postsecondary education), but allows for exceptions as needed (e.g., youth who are in a transition program for English learners but not in a college)

RATIONALE FOR OFFERING PAID WORK EXPERIENCE IN A HIGH-GROWTH AND OPPORTUNITY SECTOR:

The Youth@Work evaluation revealed nearly 60% of work experiences were in non-profit, retail, and food and hospitality sectors, signaling a lack of sector diversity. During youth focus groups, participants expressed dissatisfaction with the lack of job diversity and quality work experiences. In target state, pathway 3 will offer a diversity of work experiences across high-growth and opportunity sectors that all meet a minimum set of quality standards, and in sectors where job shortages exist, to allow youth to begin developing sector-specific skills while honing in on their educational pursuits

RATIONALE FOR CHANGES TO TRAINING:

During youth focus groups, youth stated the current personal enrichment training is generic, and some youth specifically sought out "opportunities that can lead you to careers that are long-term and that you want," and "courses that can help you with your career path." Therefore, target state will include 1) an enhanced career readiness training (e.g., stronger financial literacy module, more emphasis on navigating different job scenarios), 2) net-new information on careers that have strong job growth in the LA County labor market and the specific education and work experience credentials required to attain such jobs, 3) steps to enroll in a local college (including FAFSA), and 4) paid local college visits for postsecondary immersion. This will help youth actively plan for a postsecondary education pathways in a desired sector where frontline worker shortages exist

RATIONALE FOR PROVIDING POST-PROGRAM SUPPORT:

Tailored post-program outreach, particularly on academic topics and youths' academic performance, has been shown by programs such as Year Up United and OpportunityWorks to lead to benefits, such as 10% higher rates of retention for Year Up United (link e, f). Therefore, pathway 3 offers one year of post-program support to youth to drive retention at post-secondary education

18. The following sources are listed sequentially from top to bottom of the Pathway 3 figure: [a] Higher Education in California: Meeting California's Workforce Needs, Public Policy Institute of California, 2019; [b] Los Angeles County Disconnected Youth, Malka et al., 2023; [c] Two Futures: The Economic Case for Keeping Youth on Track, Lewis et al., 2018; [d] The Workforce Innovation and Opportunity Act: Supporting "Successful" Transitions into Adulthood, Palmer, et al., 2021; [e] Improving Academic Success and Retention of Participants in Year Up's Professional Training Corps, Britt et al., 2021; [f] New Insights into the Back on Track Model's Effects on Opportunity Youth Outcomes, Anderson et al., 2019

Pathway 4: High Growth and High Road Employment (ages 16-24)

Pathway 4 is the program's most intensive offering, designed for 16- to 24-year-old out-of-school opportunity youth who have earned a high school equivalency credential and are actively seeking work. Placements are concentrated in high-growth, high-road sectors: industries where job opportunities are expanding and where there are clear career trajectories and pathways to advancement, offering participants the best prospects for long-term economic mobility. These will align with DEO's target sectors as part of the public workforce modernization efforts and new centers of excellence at the AJCCs. It includes the same base of paid Personal Enrichment Training covering soft skills training, job readiness training, and financial literacy curriculum. In addition, participants will have access to intensive career-specific technical training delivered in partnership with education and training providers. Here, DEO will leverage training partnerships developed through its HRTP program in particular. Paid work experience is extended to 240 hours, giving participants more time to build and demonstrate both foundational and career-specific skills in real-world settings. Building off the success of the Elevate pilot, participants will also have access to mentorship as well. Work experiences are offered exclusively through employers actively hiring in high-growth and opportunity sectors, and contracted service providers are required to conduct business development and collaborate with AJCCs to secure employer commitments for both worksites and permanent hiring opportunities. Pathway 4 is designed to serve approximately 60% of all Youth@Work participants and directly support their transition into unsubsidized employment in a high-growth and opportunity sector. In this pathway, there is particular emphasis on at least one year of post-program support to drive unsubsidized employment retention and earnings for youth.

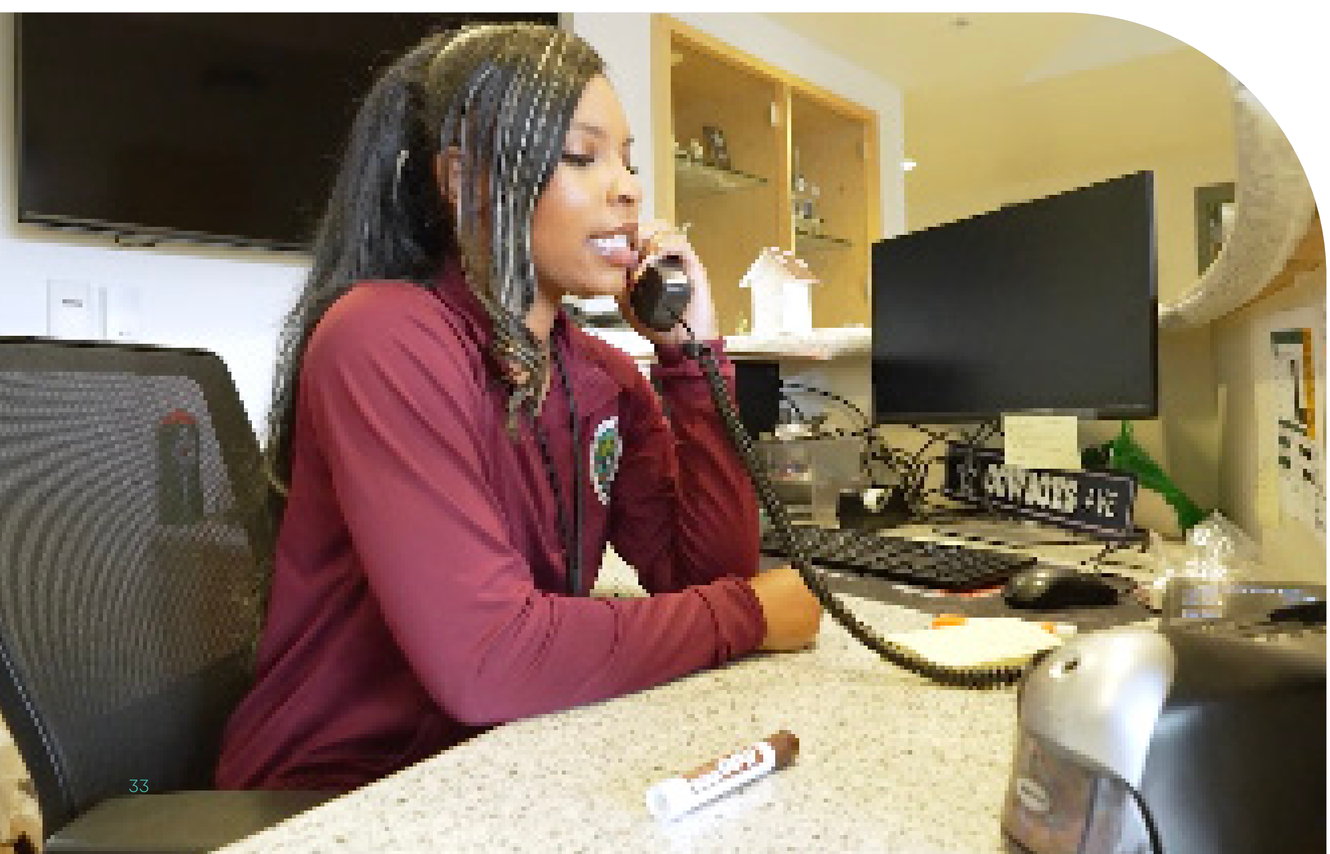


Figure 11: Description and rationale for Pathway 4 (sources can be found in the footnote below)[19]

PATHWAY 4 — HIGH GROWTH AND HIGH ROAD EMPLOYMENT FOR 16-TO-24-YEAR-OLDS

PARTICIPANT PROFILE

16-24-year-old opportunity youth in LA County who have HSEs and are seeking employment, of which at least 80% are out-of-school (in-school youth are allowed only if referred by LA County Dept. of Children and Family Services for transition aged foster youth)

COHORT
2x/year (~1 year)

ENROLLMENT TARGET
60% of total Youth@Work participants

ACTIVITIES
Outreach and enrollment: Recruit eligible youth
Trainings: Provide PET and partner with service provider who provides career-specific technical skills training
Work experience: Provide 240 hours of work experience in a high-growth and opportunity sector
Mentor: Provide mentorship to some
Supportive services: Provide $500 financial and connect to six core services if eligible (e.g., bank acct)

INTERMEDIATE OUTCOME
Steady employment in high-growth and opportunity sectors

OBJECTIVE
Support youth with finding steady employment in high-growth and opportunity sectors

SUPPORTING EVIDENCE FOR PATHWAY 4

RATIONALE FOR ENROLLING PATHWAY 4 PARTICIPANTS OVER A LONGER TIMEFRAME:

The rationale for pathway 4 is grounded in best practice peer programs that drive longer term employment outcomes. For example, Year Up United combines six months of technical training with six months of internships for a year-long intensive program. Year Up United participants experience a 30% increase in average annual earnings seven years after program completion (link a)

RATIONALE FOR TARGETING 80% OF YOUTH WHO ARE OUT-OF-SCHOOL:

This pathway primarily targets youth who have high school equivalency credentials but are out-of-school (i.e., not already enrolled in postsecondary education), but allows for exceptions only for transitioned aged foster youth to be inclusive to marginalized communities and maximize funds usage

RATIONALE FOR OFFERING PAID WORK EXPERIENCE IN A HIGH-GROWTH AND OPPORTUNITY SECTOR:

Only ~1% of participants left Youth@Work WBL for unsubsidized employment in Fiscal Year 2023-2024. In target state, pathway 4 will offer a diversity of work experiences across high-growth and opportunity sectors where job shortages exist, and with employers actively seeking employees, to allow youth to develop sector-specific skills over a longer period to facilitate a smooth transition into unsubsidized employment. This approach models peer best practices observed, such as with the Illinois Youth Investment Program (link d) or the Blue Valley Center for Advanced Professional Studies (link e), which place participants in industry sectors where demand for local jobs exists

RATIONALE FOR CHANGES TO TRAINING:

During youth focus groups, youth stated the current personal enrichment training is generic, and some youth specifically sought out "opportunities that can lead you to careers that are long-term and that you want," and "courses that can help you with your career path." Therefore, target state will include 1) an enhanced career readiness training (e.g., stronger financial literacy module, more emphasis on navigating different job scenarios), 2) net-new information on careers that have strong job growth in the LA County labor market and the specific education and work experience credentials required to attain such jobs, and 3) a hard skills certificate training in a high-growth and opportunity sector of interest, which has been shown via peer programs such as Per Scholas (link b, c) to enable 85% graduation rates and increase annual earnings for participants by 14-30% 2-7 years post-program. This will help youth gain skills needed for employment in a desired high-growth and opportunity sector with frontline worker shortages

RATIONALE FOR MENTORSHIP AND POST-PROGRAM SUPPORT:

Pathway 4 offers mentorship and one year of post-program support to youth to boost unsubsidized employment retention and earnings, similar to programs such as Big Brothers Big Sisters of America that had mentored participants experience a 15% increase in earnings (link f), and programs such as Year Up United that offer an alumni assistance program and network with career coaching (link g)

19. The following sources are listed sequentially from top to bottom of the Pathway 4 figure: [a] Year Up United's Groundbreaking Results, Year Up United, 2022; [b] About Per Scholas, Per Scholas, 2022; [c] Evidence Summary for Per Scholas Employment/Training Program for Low-Income Workers, Arnold Ventures, 2022; [d] Illinois Youth Investment Program, IDHS, 2023; [e] Center for Advanced Professional Studies CAPS, CAPS Network, 2025, [f] Big Brothers Big Sisters of America Launches Groundbreaking Research on the Long-term Impacts of Mentorship, Big Brothers Big Sisters of America, 2025; [g] Student FAQs, Year Up United, 2025

INPUTS AND RESOURCES

Input: Target Customers

The redesigned Youth@Work adopts a dual customer approach, treating both opportunity youth and employers as active participants in program success. Rather than defining eligibility by funding source as in the current model, the redesign defines eligibility by the intermediate outcome a participant is seeking to achieve, making it simpler for both youth and providers to identify the right pathway. DEO will braid funding sources across pathways to support delivery to reduce administrative burden for providers and enrollment barriers for participants alike. Contractual goals will incentivize enrollment of the most disconnected opportunity youth, including out-of-school, foster, and justice-involved populations, in line with the program's broader system-level goals, while preserving space for in-school participants. To reach both customers effectively, DEO will disseminate unified Youth@Work marketing materials across all partners; deepen outreach to the most in-need opportunity youth, consistently apply eligibility criteria; and build a systematic approach to engage high-road employers and match participants to the right program pathway, including through speed matching events with diverse employers, cohort-based opportunities with large employers, and connection to sector-based job training programs. On the employer side, DEO will establish sector-specific goals and a formal schedule for securing worksite commitments, ensuring a diverse and sufficient supply of placements across high-growth and opportunity sectors for both DEO and contracted providers.

Input: Partners

The redesign transitions Youth@Work to an open, competitive procurement process for organizations that meet baseline requirements. While the program has traditionally been operated by AJCCs and WDBs, broadening the contracted provider pool will enable other organizations with strong track records in youth workforce development and employer placement to deliver the program and various pathways. DEO will also create minimum standards for participant and employer customer experience, establish clear goals and timelines for worksite development and participant recruitment, ensure policy standards and oversight of program delivery with fidelity to the program model and pathways, and realign program contracts to a calendar year and allow for two-year terms to better match employer demand and reduce summer enrollment gaps.

Input: Admin & Tech Systems

Fragmented, manual systems will be replaced with unified, digitized processes across the provider network. Youth@Work will consolidate to a single system of record to maintain consistent and accurate program data. Payroll will be centralized through a third-party administrator, replacing the current fragmented model with a single digitized process disbursing wages and payroll cards to participants in place of manual checks. DEO will also establish new standard operating procedures for the redesigned program, with quarterly updates and training for provider staff to ensure consistent application across the network. Program reporting will also be enhanced to enable longer-term participant outcome tracking, including through a participant-facing portal for document uploads during enrollment.

Input: Funding and Resource Allocation

The redesign addresses the structural factors that drove underspend through several key changes. First, enrollment, completion, and hiring definitions will be clarified across all four pathways, correcting the overestimated cost-per-participant assumptions that contributed to funds going unspent and ensuring funds are not spent for misaligned program uses. Second, administrative costs will be reduced through competitive procurement, shifting a greater share of resources toward direct participant services rather than duplicative overhead. Third, WIOA funds will be integrated into the program pathways to increase enrollment capability, rather than being used solely to extend hours for existing participants. Fourth, planning and goal-setting with Probation, DPSS, DCFS, and other County partners will be strengthened through earlier coordination to reduce the gaps between allocated funds and actual enrollment that limited program reach in recent years. Finally, the contracting will be realigned to the calendar year versus fiscal year and allow for two-year contract terms to ensure more certainty for contracted providers.

With a more efficient funding model in place, program goals can be right-sized to what current funding can realistically support. Target state cost per participant estimates range from \$3,000 to \$6,000 depending on pathway, assuming worksites invest ~15% of participant costs for pathways 3 and 4 and service providers source the additional career-specific training in pathway 4 at no cost to DEO. With current funding of ~\$27 million and the estimations of how many youth will participate in each pathway, DEO can serve approximately 5,000-6,000 opportunity youth annually under the redesigned model. Another ~1,000 participants can be added with WIOA dollars to serve WIOA eligible youth ages 16-24. To reach 10,000 youth annually, the review estimates that DEO would require a total budget of approximately \$50 million. In the near term, DEO will continue to increase allocations in line with minimum wage growth and rising costs of program delivery, while demonstrating the case for the additional investment needed to reach the County's broader scale ambitions.

6. Path Forward

Target state Youth@Work represents a transformative redesign requiring coordinated efforts across LA County and continued external, third-party support. To enable a smooth transition, DEO intends to phase implementation across three stages: preparation and design, pilot with select providers, and full launch across the provider network. Each phase builds on the last, using a test-and-iterate approach to continuously learn and improve.

The preparation and design phase focuses on laying the foundation for the redesign, spanning approximately two quarters, starting in July of 2026 in FY26-27. DEO will develop unified Youth@Work branding and marketing materials, finalize the new service provider RFP, and release RFPs for relevant curriculum developers and delivery partners (such as enhancements to TAY WOW or new financial or digital literacy and mentorship), and a third-party payroll administrator. In parallel, DEO will conduct outreach to LA County partners to establish supportive services referral pathways and finalize the target state data needs and processes to ensure efficiency throughout the program. This preparatory work is critical to ensuring that the subsequent pilot is set up for success.

The second phase pilots the target state model with select service providers, starting in January of 2027 and over the subsequent two quarters before rollout in FY27-28. The pilot will test each major redesign component in sequence: launching the new eligibility and outreach strategy, piloting Pathway 4 mentorship and the new supportive services model, and beginning to source worksites against the new worksite quality standards. The pilot will also confirm the new cost-per-participant assumptions and funding model before broader rollout.

The third and final phase scales the target state across all service providers, beginning approximately one year after implementation starts in July of 2027 in FY27-28. New providers will be onboarded, all contracts finalized, and providers trained on updated requirements across outreach, eligibility, and worksite quality. Effective reporting functions will be established to track progress against system-level program outcomes for the first time. Throughout this phase, DEO will continue to monitor and adjust the model, ensuring the redesigned Youth@Work delivers on its potential for LA County's opportunity youth.

Close collaboration with LA County partners, employers, and opportunity youth themselves will be critical to successful implementation. This work will also be aligned with and contribute to broader LA County objectives, including the Horizons 32K Strategic Plan to reduce youth disconnection by 32,000 young people in the near future.

Achieving the full potential of the redesigned Youth@Work will require additional, sustained investment. With the historic $27 million budget allocation for Youth@Work, DEO can support 5,000 to 6,000 opportunity youth with achieving program outcomes annually, assuming worksites invest ~15% of participant costs for pathways 3 and 4 and service providers source the additional career-specific training in pathway 4 at no cost to DEO. An additional $4.585 million for WIOA Youth paid work experience budgeted for FY2026-27 will increase that number from 6,000 to 7,000. Further investment for a total budget of $50 million would enable DEO to scale to 10,000 opportunity youth each year. This estimate assumes a cost per participant of ~$3-6K depending on their pathway and 25% reduction in admin costs relative to the current state, among other assumptions. DEO remains committed to unlocking economic mobility pathways for LA County's opportunity youth and will work closely with the LA County Board of Supervisors and other public and private partners to secure the funding necessary to achieve its goals.

Youth@Work's redesign puts economic mobility first. It is a direct response to what opportunity youth, employers, service providers, and community partners have said is needed. Grounded in the review's findings and informed by leading practices from youth workforce development programs across the United States, the redesign addresses each identified gap with a concrete, evidence-based solution. Its ambition extends beyond near-term program improvements. By connecting opportunity youth to living wages, financial resiliency, and careers in high-growth sectors, Youth@Work can contribute meaningfully to LA County's broader goal of reducing youth disconnection, strengthening the local workforce, and building a more equitable and resilient regional economy for generations to come.

7. Appendices

APPENDIX A: GLOSSARY

America's Job Centers of California: A network of job centers that provide a comprehensive range of no-cost employment and training services for employers and job seekers.

CalWORKs (California Work Opportunity and Responsibility to Kids): A California welfare program administered by the LA County Department of Public Social Services (DPSS) that provides temporary cash assistance and employment-focused services to eligible low-income families with minor children. Most adult recipients are required to participate in welfare-to-work activities as a condition of aid.

Center of Excellence (CoE): Centers of Excellence within the America's Job Centers of California (AJCC) network are designated AJCCs that provide specialized, expert workforce services targeted to specific priority populations or industry sectors. CoEs set ambitious goals, design and deliver tailored outreach and employment and training services, and serve as a resource and best-practice model for the broader AJCC system to improve workforce outcomes. Sector-based CoEs relevant to Youth@Work include Aerospace & Defense, Biotech & Life Sciences, Construction & Infrastructure, Creative Sector, Early Care & Education, Healthcare, Hospitality & Tourism, Information Technology, Trade and Transportation & Logistics, and Government and Social Services. Population-based CoEs include English Language Learners, foster and opportunity youth, individuals experiencing homelessness or at risk of homelessness, immigrants and refugees, justice-involved individuals, LGBTQIA+ individuals, individuals with disabilities, and veterans.

Department of Children and Family Services (DCFS): An LA County agency responsible for investigating child abuse and neglect allegations, administering foster care, and supporting family preservation. DCFS refers justice-involved and foster youth to workforce programs including Youth@Work.

Department of Public Social Services (DPSS): An LA County agency that administers federal, state, and county-funded programs providing financial assistance, food and nutrition benefits, health coverage, and employment services to low-income individuals and families. DPSS administers CalWORKs and GROW, two programs whose participants are referred to Youth@Work.

Economic Mobility Initiative (EMI): A $25 million LA County DEO initiative that provides integrated support to entrepreneurs, small businesses, and nonprofits across LA County, with a focus on communities most impacted by economic inequity. EMI offers education, technical assistance, and access to capital through a network of 15+ community-based partners.

GROW (General Relief Opportunities for Work): An LA County DPSS program that provides employment and training services to help employable General Relief recipients obtain jobs and achieve self-sufficiency. Participation is mandatory as a condition of receiving General Relief benefits. Note: DPSS has renamed this program START (Skills and Training to Achieve Readiness for Tomorrow); the report uses GROW to reflect program terminology in use during the review period.

High Road Training Partnerships (HRTPs): Industry-based, worker-focused training partnerships that bring together employers, labor organizations, training providers, and community organizations to design and deliver workforce training for quality jobs in high-growth sectors. In LA County, HRTPs are administered by DEO and align training with real employer needs while centering equity and worker voice.

High School Equivalency credential: An educational credential that has the same value and is a recognized alternative to a conventional high school diploma. An example of a High School Equivalency credential is the General Education Development test.

Horizons 32K Strategic Plan: A regional strategic plan developed by the LA Performance Partnership Pilot (LAP3) that sets a target of reducing the number of opportunity youth in LA County by 32,000 by 2027. The plan builds on prior LAP3 efforts and outlines strategies for reconnecting disconnected youth to education, training, and employment pathways.

LA Performance Partnership Pilot (LAP3): A cross-agency partnership between the City and County of Los Angeles, LA Unified School District, LA Community College District, and other public and private partners that coordinates and integrates education, workforce, and social services for disconnected youth ages 16 to 24. LAP3 developed the Horizons 32K Strategic Plan and DEO is an active member of the initiative.

Opportunity Youth: Sometimes referred to as disconnected youth, Youth@Work defines opportunity youth in current and target state as LA County youth, ages 14-24, who are neither in school nor at work, or are at high risk of disconnection due to homelessness, justice system involvement, foster care, or other structural barriers (e.g., low income, immigrant or refugee, LGBTQIA+, disability, veteran). This definition leverages the State of California's and the Los Angeles Performance Partnership Pilot's definitions.

Pathways: A combination of training and education strategies enabling participants to secure jobs and advance in their careers over time.

Personal Enrichment Training: 20 hours of paid, trauma-informed soft skills and job readiness preparation. The current curriculum is called Transition Aged Youth World of Work (TAY WOW), created by DEO and Columbia University. It includes an introduction to workplace policies and behavior, the job search process, resume and cover letter building, and interview skills.

Mentorship: A formal relationship between a youth and an adult mentor with structured activities where the mentor offers guidance, support, and encouragement, provided one-on-one or in a group setting.

Theory of Change: A Theory of Change is a description of how and why a desired change is expected to happen in a particular context.

Transition Aged Youth (TAY): Youth between the ages of 16-24 who have transitioned out of the foster care system or are in the process of transitioning out of foster care or juvenile detention facilities.

Trauma-informed support: Trauma-informed support for opportunity youth means recognizing the impact of trauma and creating environments that are physically, psychologically, and emotionally safe for such youth.

Workforce Development Boards (WDBs): Local Workforce Development Boards provide policy and oversight to their Local Workforce Development Area (LWDA), as mandated by the Workforce Innovation and Opportunity Act (WIOA) of 2014. In addition to the LA County WDB, which covers an area that includes 58 cities and approximately 150 unincorporated communities, there are six other WDBs that oversee AJCCs within the LA region. To ensure regional coverage, DEO provides Youth@Work WBL funding to all six other WDBs.

Youth@Work: DEO and the County's dedicated youth workforce development program. This includes Work-Based Learning (WBL) as well as connection to broader youth services offered through the AJCCs and public workforce system with WIOA funds. Provides work experience with a comprehensive and strategic set of employment, training, and support services provided through a network of service providers.

APPENDIX B: ANALYTICAL INPUTS

Throughout this engagement, Dalberg Advisors researched numerous peer organizations, held 50+ stakeholder interviews, and ran five youth focus groups across supervisorial districts 1, 2, 3, 4, and 5. The figure below lists the organizations included in these engagements.

Figure 12: Organizations interviewed and focus groups held

PEER RESEARCH AND INTERVIEWS

- Baltimore YouthWorks
- Blue Valley Center for Advanced Professional Studies Network
- Career Connected Learning
- Enterprise for Youth
- KentuckianaWorks
- Ladders for Leaders
- MassHire Metro North
- New York City Summer Youth Employment Program
- One Summer Chicago
- Overland Chamber of Commerce
- Overland Park Chamber Real World Learning
- Seattle Youth Employment Program
- Work2Future
- Year Up United

STAKEHOLDER INTERVIEWS

Workforce Development Boards (WDBs) and America's Job Centers of California (AJCCs)

- Antelope Valley AJCC
- East San Gabriel Valley AJCC
- Northeast San Fernando Valley AJCC
- Los Angeles City WDB
- Pacific Gateway WDB
- Pomona Valley AJCC
- Rancho Dominguez AJCC
- Rio Hondo AJCC
- Southeast L.A. AJCC
- Verdugo WDB

Youth@Work partners

- Community Software Solutions
- L.A. City Economic and Workforce Development Department
- L.A. County Department of Children and Family Services
- L.A. County Department of Parks and Recreation
- L.A. County Department of Youth Development
- L.A. County Probation Department
- L.A. County Unified School Districts
- L.A. County Youth Commission
- L.A. County Workforce Development Board
- L.A. Opportunity Youth Collaborative
- Leaders Up
- Transition Aged Youth Collaborative

Youth@Work employers

- California State University, Los Angeles
- Dominguez High School
- El Nido Family Centers
- Heavenly Angels
- LA-Tech.org
- Lynwood Unified School District
- Para Los Niños
- Studio MLA

FOCUS GROUPS

- Antelope Valley Comprehensive AJCC
- West LA AJCC
- Rio Hondo Comprehensive AJCC
- Rancho Dominguez Comprehensive AJCC
- East San Gabriel Valley Comprehensive AJCC

In addition to stakeholder interviews and focus groups, Dalberg Advisors designed and launched a youth non-participant survey, which generated over 200 responses from youth who expressed interest in Youth@Work but did not enroll, offering insights into barriers to access and initial perceptions of Youth@Work. Dalberg Advisors also conducted extensive quantitative analyses using raw data from CalJOBS, the Youth@Work portal, the Automated Referral System (including foster and probation referrals), the W.O.R.K.S. invoicing platform, and PowerBI dashboards. External datasets, including those from the L.A. Opportunity Youth Collaborative, supplemented our analysis, along with a review of budget utilization, training progression, and service provider performance.

APPENDIX C: YOUTH@WORK REVIEW STANDARDS

Dalberg Advisors conducted the Youth@Work review using the standards outlined in the figure below. These standards were derived from existing program documentation, including technical assistance guides, standard operating procedures, and relevant contracts.

As referenced in Section 4, while the Youth@Work review revealed that the program is meeting or nearly meeting its internal performance standards, those standards are not fully aligned with DEO's goal of unlocking economic opportunity and potential. For example, Youth@Work does not currently track any economic mobility outcomes in the longer-term for up to five years post-program (e.g., living wages). Perhaps more importantly, these standards were often not clear to service providers and were not consistently enforced. Refer to Section 5 for a description of how these findings are addressed in the redesigned Youth@Work.

Figure 13: Core review components and questions (continues on next page)

	OUTREACH & ENROLLMENT	PERSONAL ENRICHMENT TRAINING (PET)	MENTORSHIP	WORK EXPERIENCE	POST-PROGRAM OUTCOMES
Question	**Is Y@W reaching and enrolling its intended opportunity youth populations into its programs?**	**Is Y@W's PET model developing employable skills in participants?**	**Is mentorship preparing youth for high-quality job placements and careers?**	**Is Y@W successfully placing youth into high-quality and meaningful jobs?**	**Are youth graduates finding meaningful employment / education post-program?**
Definition of 100% of standards achieved	• Y@W is reaching and enrolling opportunity youth efficiently • **[Elevate]** >800 enrollments; 25% enrollees are foster, 25% justice-impacted, 25% LGBTQ+, and 25% unhoused youth • **[WBL]** 45% enrollees are OUY, 19% SIY, 18% CalWORKS, 7% foster, 5% prob., and 1% GROW[1] • **[WIOA]** >1,930 enrollments; 70% are target demographics[2]	• **[Elevate, WBL]** All participants who complete training gain employable skills and feel work readiness	• **[Elevate]** All participants prepared for high-quality job placements and careers • **[Elevate]** >800 youth complete weekly 2-hour group mentoring sessions	• All participants placed in high-quality and meaningful worksites • **[WBL]** >7k participants are placed in worksites • **[Elevate]** >800 placements • **[WIOA]** >1,014 placements	• All participants find meaningful employment / education post-program • **[Elevate]** >480 participants complete program with unsubsidized placements • **[WIOA]** ~60% of participants hired in high-growth sectors / pathways[3]

Note: DEO = Department of Economic Opportunity; Y@W = Youth@Work; PET = Personal Enrichment Training; 1. OUY = Other Underserved Youth; SIY = System Impacted Youth; GROW = General Relief Opportunities for Work; 2. Defined on WIOA PowerBI as low income, receiving public assistance, system impacted, homeless, veteran, individual with disability, foster child, and English learner; 3. While other WIOA post-program targets exist, per discussions with DEO, this metric was deemed a priority post-program metric for this evaluation Sources: Stakeholder interviews, Logic Model, Theory of Change, Planned vs. Actual reports, Technical Assistance Guide, and Dalberg analysis

Figure 13. Core review components and questions

	SERVICE PROVIDERS	FUNDING ALLOCATION MODEL	SUPPORTIVE SERVICES	TOOLS AND PROCESSES
Question	**Are service providers effectively administering Y@W?**	**Is funding being allocated being used efficiently and in-full?**	**Are supportive services useful for Y@W participants most in-need?**	**Are tools / processes enabling effective measurement and mgmt. of Y@W?**
Definition of 100% of standards achieved	• All service providers are effectively administering Y@W • All service providers fully adhere to the technical assistance guide / contract	• Allocated funding used efficiently and 100% in-full • >=10k youth target achieved each year	• Supportive services useful for most in-need participants • **[WBL]** AJCCs make every effort to fully spend supportive services	• Data / tools / processes enable effective Y@W mgmt. and measurement • Limited risk of data errors / manual processes

LA County's Youth@Work Program Review and Redesign

BUILDING YOUTH PATHWAYS TO ECONOMIC MOBILITY IN THE COUNTY OF LOS ANGELES

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COUNTY OF LOS ANGELES