

Building Employment Pathways for Youth Experiencing Homelessness



NATIONAL NETWORK
 for **YOUTH**

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About the National Network for Youth

The [National Network for Youth](#) (NN4Y) is the national nonprofit dedicated exclusively to preventing and ending youth, young adult, and young parent family homelessness. NN4Y works alongside organizations and individuals on the frontlines of ending youth homelessness: youth with lived experience, youth-serving providers, advocates, and policymakers.

NN4Y believes that young people are experts in their own lives. Their experiences, leadership, and solutions are essential to building policies that work. Founded in 1974, NN4Y's core mission has not changed: to transform systems so that no young person in America experiences homelessness.

Thank you to our amazing partners who contributed to this report: [Ali Forney Center](#), NN4Y's [National Youth Advisory Council](#), and NN4Y's [Policy Advisory Committee](#), the providers who offered spotlights, and NN4Y's Policy Intern, Camryn Adams.

Introduction

All young people deserve the opportunity to build a stable future, pursue meaningful careers, and achieve their fullest potential. Without a steady income, young people may struggle to afford housing and meet their basic needs. At the same time, the instability of homelessness creates significant barriers to finding and maintaining employment.

Stable employment is about more than securing the first available job. Young people need opportunities that provide livable wages, meaningful work experience, education and training, and pathways to careers that can support long-term economic and housing stability. They also need flexible support that recognizes that basic needs must often be addressed before a young person can focus on building a career. As the providers highlighted in this brief demonstrate, the most effective approaches do more than help young people find a job, they help young people build the foundation for lasting stability.

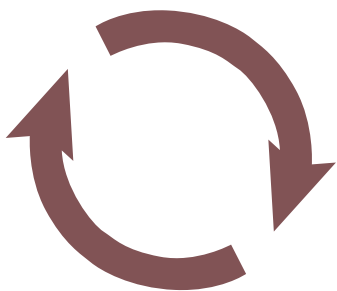
This policy brief examines the unique employment barriers facing young people experiencing homelessness and identifies solutions to address them. It offers federal policy and program recommendations to strengthen youth workforce opportunities and highlights promising approaches from communities across the country that are helping young people move beyond immediate employment toward sustainable careers, economic security, and stable housing.

The Urgency of the Issue

An estimated 3.5 million young adults ages 18 to 25 experience homelessness in the United States each year.¹ These youth face exceptionally high rates of unemployment—approximately 75 percent of youth experiencing homelessness are unemployed.²

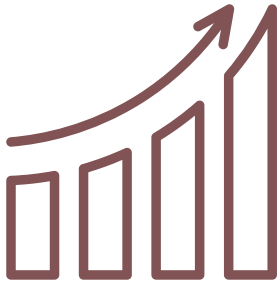
Young people experiencing homelessness often struggle to meet their basic needs, including food, water, and stable shelter. They are also at a higher risk of experiencing physical and mental health issues³ and substance use disorders.⁴ When young people are focused on daily survival, it can be impossible to prioritize finding, applying for, and maintaining employment. This creates a catch-22: Steady employment could help them exit a crisis situation, but being in crisis makes it incredibly difficult to find and maintain steady employment.

Unemployment Can Perpetuate Homelessness and Poverty



- Without stable employment, young people may be unable to meet their basic needs and maintain housing. They may also struggle to build savings or respond to unexpected expenses, increasing their risk of prolonged or recurring homelessness.
- Lack of stable employment is strongly associated with poverty.⁵
- Prolonged unemployment can contribute to poor mental health outcomes, increased stress, and reduced overall well-being, making it difficult for young people to transition successfully to adulthood.

Stable Employment Promotes Long-Term Stability.



- Expanding access to employment opportunities can help interrupt cycles of poverty and homelessness, particularly when paired with fair wages, education, training, and jobs in underserved communities.
- Employment is associated with improved mental well-being, independence, and long-term economic mobility.⁶
- Stable employment is a key protective factor against homelessness and can promote long-term housing stability.⁷

Challenging Harmful Narratives

Too often, youth experiencing homelessness are unfairly labeled as lazy, unmotivated, or unwilling to work. In reality, most young people experiencing homelessness want the same opportunities as their stably housed peers: to earn an income, build independence, and pursue their goals, but significant barriers related to homelessness make finding and maintaining employment far more difficult.

These barriers are compounded by intersecting identities and experiences. Young people who are Black, Indigenous, or of color; LGBTQ+; immigrants; parenting; living with disability; survivors of trafficking or family violence; or involved in foster care or legal systems often experience overlapping forms of discrimination that increases both their risk of homelessness and the obstacles they face in the labor market.



Harmful stereotypes can influence hiring decisions and obscure the skills, potential, and determination that young people experiencing homelessness can bring to the workforce. Challenging these narratives and changing systems is essential to creating equitable employment opportunities and ensuring every young person has the chance to succeed.

Unique Challenges Youth Face in Accessing Employment

Youth experiencing homelessness encounter unique challenges that shape their ability to secure, maintain, and advance in employment. These often stem from instability, unmet basic needs, disrupted education, limited access to transportation, and systems-level barriers.

Safety and Health

Young people experiencing homelessness often struggle to meet their basic needs, including food, water, and stable shelter. They are also at a higher risk of experiencing physical and mental health issues and substance use disorders.⁸ Many also experienced significant trauma even before experiencing homelessness, including abuse, neglect, family rejection, or involvement in the child welfare or juvenile legal systems. When young people are grappling with these challenges while also focused on daily survival, it can be impossible to prioritize finding, applying for, and maintaining employment. And yet, steady employment is critical to exiting survival mode.

Without safe alternatives, too many young people are forced to resort to unsafe or exploitative means of earning income.⁹ Housing instability and unmet basic needs can increase a young person's risk of criminalization for engaging in survival behaviors,¹⁰ such as trespassing or shoplifting to meet basic needs, as well as criminal exploitation or gang involvement. Some young people may feel they have no choice but to remain in abusive relationships simply to survive, or exchange sex for a place to stay and other basic necessities, placing them at great risk for trafficking—one in five young adults ages 18 to 25 experiencing homelessness have also experienced trafficking for sex, labor, or both.¹¹

These survival strategies are responses to extreme economic hardship and the absence of safe alternatives, but they can also create additional barriers to employment, further entrenching young people in the very circumstances they are trying to escape.

Vital Documents

Vital documents, like birth certificates, government-issued identification (ID), and Social Security cards, are essential for navigating everyday life. However, many young people experiencing homelessness do not have access to their vital documents.¹² Typically, employers require a Social Security number and ID verification at hire. This can pose a significant barrier to employment for youth who are unable to procure official copies of their vital documents.

Need Help? Call the Vital Document Hotline!



1-888-870-DOCS

The [I Am Here: Vital Document Legal Hotline for Youth](#) is a free, dedicated legal hotline for youth experiencing homelessness to help obtain essential identification and vital documents.

If you call or text on **Wednesdays between 9:00 – 5:00 PM ET**, you will be connected for free with a legal professional or lawyer. If you call or text outside of operating hours, you will leave a message that will be returned as soon as possible.

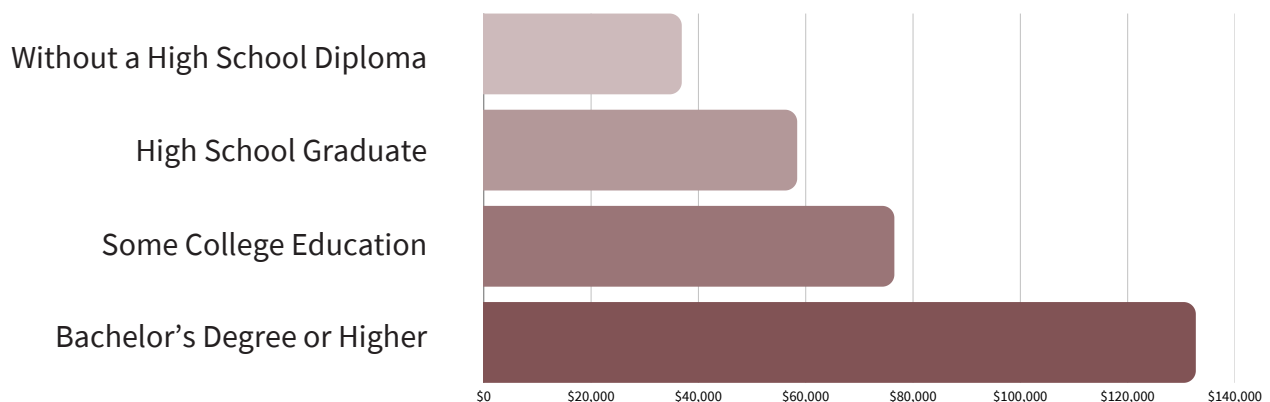
Transportation

Reliable transportation is essential to maintaining employment and exiting homelessness,^{13, 14} and research has shown that more public transportation options, including bus and rail, are linked to increased employment among young people.¹⁵ Despite this, transportation remains one of the most prominent barriers faced by young people across the country. Many youth who have experienced homelessness do not have access to a vehicle, the means to purchase or maintain a vehicle, and may not have their driver's license. Public transportation is not always a viable alternative—especially in rural or suburban areas—and even in some urban centers, public transportation can be limited both in routes and schedule. Cost is also a significant factor, and the availability of long-term free passes for young people who have experienced homelessness varies widely by community.

Education and Work Experience

Education is a key predictor of employment opportunities and long-term economic stability,¹⁶ but the experience of homelessness often disrupts both PreK-12 and postsecondary education. However, jobs that provide a livable wage increasingly require at least some education beyond high school.¹⁷ The economic consequences of lower educational attainment are substantial: Median annual earnings are approximately \$36,900 for individuals without a high school diploma compared with \$58,410 for high school graduates, \$76,520 for those with some college education, and \$132,700 for those with a bachelor's degree or higher.¹⁸

Median Incomes Based on Educational Level



Furthermore, many entry-level jobs increasingly expect applicants to have prior work experience, internships, or other hands-on experience.¹⁹ Youth experiencing homelessness have often had limited or no opportunity to build this experience. As a result, they can be screened out of jobs that require prior employment or experience history.

Many higher-paying jobs also increasingly require postsecondary education, industry-recognized credentials, apprenticeships, or other specialized training.^{20, 21} However, young people experiencing homelessness often cannot afford to delay earning income while completing these programs, even when they would lead to greater long-term stability. Expanding access to paid apprenticeships, work-based learning, and other "earn while you learn" opportunities can help young people gain the education and experience needed for higher-wage careers without sacrificing their immediate financial needs.

Without access to educational opportunities and workforce preparation, young people experiencing homelessness are more likely to remain in low-wage jobs or face unemployment, making it more difficult to achieve long-term housing and financial stability.

Rural and Tribal Areas

Youth experiencing homelessness in rural and Tribal communities face additional barriers to employment. These communities tend to have fewer youth-serving or other social service organizations, workforce development programs, and employment opportunities.²² Young people in rural and remote communities may need to travel long distances—or leave their communities altogether—to access what services are available, while limited public transportation can make those opportunities difficult or impossible to reach. Additionally, finding and applying for jobs online can be difficult due to lack of broadband access.²³ As a result, youth experiencing homelessness in rural and Tribal communities may have fewer pathways within their own communities to stable employment and long-term economic security.

Systems-Level Barriers

Beyond individual challenges, broader economic and systemic factors can make it difficult for young people experiencing homelessness to achieve financial stability through employment. Many entry-level jobs pay low wages that do not keep pace with the rising cost of housing and other basic needs.^{24, 25} Young people may also face discrimination during the hiring process due to the stigma associated with experiencing homelessness and other forms of bias, including discrimination based on race, gender identity, sexual orientation, disability, or criminal record. Together, these systemic barriers can make it difficult for youth to secure jobs that provide a sustainable pathway out of homelessness.

Know Your Rights: Employment Protections

There are several federal laws that help young people access employment and protect them against discrimination in the workplace. Every worker in America—including undocumented workers—has the rights to:

- Be in a fair, protected workplace, including to receive minimum wage, safe working conditions, and protection from labor exploitation.
- Be free from discrimination on the basis of race, ethnic group identification, ancestry, national origin, color, religion, sex, sexual orientation or gender identity, mental or physical disability, or HIV status.
- Receive reasonable accommodations that allow you to do your job under the Americans with Disabilities Act.

For more information about your rights to shelter and housing, health care, public benefits, education, employment, and more, visit NN4Y's Know Your Rights for Youth Experiencing Homelessness webpage at nn4youth.org/learn/know-your-rights.

Recommendations

To ensure young people experiencing homelessness have meaningful pathways to employment and long-term economic stability, coordinated public policy reforms, targeted investments, and program improvements are urgently needed.

Federal Policy

Reauthorize the Workforce Innovation and Opportunity Act (WIOA).

- WIOA is the primary federal program that funds job training, workforce development, and employment services for individuals—including youth—facing barriers to employment.
- In 2024, a bipartisan reauthorization of WIOA, A Stronger Workforce for America Act (ASWA), almost passed Congress.²⁶ ASWA would have made several key updates to WIOA youth programs.

Reauthorize the National Apprenticeship Act (NAA).

- NAA is a federal program that funds high-quality “earn while you learn” programs to get young people started on pathways to high-quality careers, including through paid, structured training, supportive services, and nationally-recognized credentials.
- Updating NAA to support youth would include expanding apprenticeship opportunities that specifically target youth, increasing employer participation through strategies like financial incentives, and ensuring that apprenticeship programs are marketable, high-quality, and compensating participants fairly.

Continue investments in youth workforce programs.

- Annual appropriations for WIOA include funding for youth-specific workforce programs, apprenticeships, YouthBuild, and Job Corps.²⁷
- The Trump Administration’s budget requests have repeatedly recommended significantly reducing funding for workforce programs through block granting and cutting key programs like Job Corps.

Ensure that youth experiencing homelessness are explicitly named and supported as a priority population in all youth workforce policy.

- Too often, youth experiencing homelessness are left out of national policy conversation. When their needs are not explicitly recognized in policy, the unique barriers they face are often overlooked, and targeted solutions are less likely to be implemented.
- The U.S. Department of Labor (DOL) should issue guidance that prohibits DOL-funded programs from requiring a parent or guardian signature or a valid government ID before enrolling youth experiencing homelessness. DOL should provide technical assistance to train programs on how to help youth experiencing homelessness obtain the identification required to maintain enrollment and secure employment.

- DOL should allow for youth experiencing homelessness to use a temporary address to enroll in DOL-funded youth programs. For example, shelter stays within a state should suffice as proof of in-state residency for enrollment in WIOA programs until the program can help the young person obtain their state ID.
- Programs applying for DOL youth workforce funding should get bonus points (or some other incentives) for serving youth experiencing homelessness as a priority population. All programs applying for DOL youth workforce funding should be required to demonstrate, whenever possible, partnerships with local organizations serving youth experiencing homelessness.

Program Improvement

Ensure that youth are stabilized and their basic needs are being met.

- Young people cannot successfully pursue employment if their immediate needs—such as food, clothing, hygiene, health care, and housing stability—are not being met.
- Community organizations must coordinate to ensure that young people can seamlessly access employment services and broader stabilization support, including education, child care, or legal support, such as access to vital documents.
- Flexible financial assistance can help young people address urgent needs that may prevent them from obtaining or maintaining employment.

Offer flexible, youth-centered case management and support services.

- Individualized case management begins with each young person's immediate needs, strengths, and short- and long-term goals. If possible, offer flexible levels of engagement, recognizing that some young people benefit from intensive case management while others may only need periodic check-ins or targeted assistance.
- Supporting young people even after they have obtained employment helps them maintain housing, navigate workplace challenges, and pursue long-term career advancement.
- Programs see better retention and buy-in from youth when training opportunities are paid.

Build strong employer and workforce partnerships.

- Strong relationships with workforce development organizations, apprenticeship programs, trade schools, colleges, community-based employment programs, and local employers are critical to connecting youth with training and employment opportunities. Successful providers have staff members dedicated to building and maintaining these relationships.
- Employers' perceived risk of hiring youth who have experienced homelessness can be mitigated by developing partnerships that offer shared wages, pre-employment training, transitional employment opportunities, and ongoing support for both employers and young people.

Build Careers, Not Just Jobs

Across every provider highlighted in this brief, success was not only measured by whether a young person secured a job, but by whether they were able to retain employment, advance in their career, and achieve lasting economic and housing stability. Providers emphasized that young people often need continued support after they are hired, including career coaching, assistance navigating workplace challenges, connections to further education and training, and help addressing barriers that may threaten their employment or housing. By investing in long-term employment retention, career advancement, and ongoing supportive services—not just job placement—communities can help young people build sustainable careers and lasting pathways out of homelessness.

Consider transportation barriers in program design and work to expand access to transportation options.

- Help young people access reliable transportation through bus passes, transit vouchers, rideshare assistance, or other transportation support. Assist young people in obtaining driver's licenses, learner's permits, or other support to help them secure their own transportation.
- Consider program locations and service delivery models that reduce transportation barriers, including locations accessible by public transit, providers and services going to where young people are, or virtual service options.

Center youth voice in program design and implementation.

- Trusting relationships are essential to youth and program success. These are achieved by creating welcoming, trauma-informed environments where young people feel safe, respected, and heard.
- Compensating young people for sharing their expertise through advisory councils, peer leadership, public speaking, or program design is essential.
- Recognize lived experience as a valuable asset that warrants leadership and employment opportunities for young people within the program.

Conclusion

Young people experiencing homelessness face too many barriers that prevent them from accessing employment and achieving economic stability. By investing in policies and programs that remove these barriers, policymakers, employers, and communities can help ensure that every young person has the opportunity to build a stable future.

The recommendations in this brief outline practical steps to strengthen workforce systems, expand employment opportunities, and better support young people experiencing homelessness as they transition to independence. Employment is more than a means of survival. It is a pathway to ensure that every young person has the opportunity to achieve their full potential.

Community Models in Action

Across the country, providers are demonstrating what it takes to help young people experiencing homelessness access meaningful employment and build long-term economic stability. These organizations show that effective workforce development goes beyond simply connecting a young person to a job, it addresses immediate needs and barriers while creating pathways to education, training, career advancement, and lasting stability.

The following profiles highlight providers taking innovative and flexible approaches to employment, from paid training and apprenticeships to entrepreneurship and employer partnerships. Each meets young people where they are, builds strong community partnerships, and recognizes that there is no single pathway to employment success. Their experiences offer promising practices that can be adapted in communities across the country, while also highlighting where greater investment and systems change are needed.



Bench Mark Program ***Lancaster, Pennsylvania***

[Bench Mark](#), a youth-serving organization in Lancaster, Pennsylvania, launched its Future Readiness Program in February of 2026 to help young people ages 16 to 24 build pathways to employment, education, and careers. The program was developed after Bench Mark noticed a gap in their existing services: Young people needed more support not just to find a job, but to explore their career options, obtain the documents they need to work, and receive ongoing support as they pursue their goals.

The Future Readiness Program is designed to provide continuous support throughout a young person's employment journey. Young people begin by identifying their goals and immediate needs, including whether they have essential documents such as a birth certificate, state identification, driver's license, or learner's permit. Mentors then work with each young person to determine their interests and next steps. Some young people want to enter the workforce immediately, while others may be interested in trade school, college, or other training opportunities. The program has a strong dedication to not simply connect a young person to a job and end services once they are hired. Instead, mentors continue working with young people as they build skills, pursue education or training, and work toward their longer-term goals. For example, many of the young people served are interested in the trades, so Bench Mark connects youth to local trade schools, apprenticeship programs, and other training opportunities, including programs that allow young people to earn certifications while being paid.

Exploration is a central part of the program. The program also helps young people discover a range of options so they can make informed decisions about their futures, including information about four-year colleges or exploring potential careers through job tours and other hands-on experiences.

The new Future Readiness Program is also working to build strong relationships with local employers. One successful partnership connected a young person participating in Bench Mark's boxing program with Rhodes Energy, a Lancaster-based company. The young person began working as a temporary employee and gained hands-on experience while learning about the company's work. Through regular communication and positive feedback from the employer, the relationship developed into a longer-term opportunity. After the young person graduates from an HVAC program, Rhoads Energy plans to hire him permanently. Bench Mark hopes to build more partnerships like this with local businesses that are willing to invest in young people's development and provide opportunities to learn, gain experience, and advance into permanent employment.

The Future Readiness Program is built around the idea that young people need opportunities to explore their futures and consistent support as they work toward them. Bench Mark's long-term vision is to expand career exploration opportunities, including job tours and summer programming that introduces young people to local businesses, colleges, apprenticeship programs, and other career pathways. By combining mentorship, practical support, career exposure, workforce connections, and ongoing care, Bench Mark helps young people move from immediate needs toward meaningful employment and long-term independence.

Recommendations from Bench Mark Program

1. Provide ongoing support as young people address their immediate needs, obtain employment, pursue education or training, and build long-term careers.
2. Help young people explore a range of career pathways and educational opportunities so they can make informed decisions about their future.
3. Develop relationships with local employers to create opportunities for young people to gain hands-on experience, receive feedback and mentorship, and transition from temporary or entry-level positions into permanent employment.



Breaktime
Boston, Massachusetts

The Boston-based organization [Breaktime](#) launched its comprehensive employment program in 2019, which helps young adults ages 18 to 24 who are experiencing housing insecurity build the career pathways needed to remain stably housed long-term. Breaktime focuses on strengthening young people's economic security by partnering with housing providers throughout the region and ensuring participants have the employment, income, and ongoing support necessary to maintain housing over time.

Breaktime's model consists of three phases designed to support young people from their first job through long-term career success. The program begins with Launchpad, a three-week paid employment readiness program where young people develop workplace soft skills, strengthen financial literacy, and explore career pathways that align with their interests and goals. Participants then move into Liftoff, a three-month paid work experience with one of Breaktime's employer partners. During this phase, participants are guaranteed to earn at least \$20 per hour, with wages shared between Breaktime and the employer. For young people pursuing higher education instead of immediate employment, Breaktime has also developed partnerships that allow participants to earn income while attending school.

Following the transitional employment experience, participants enter the Stable Orbit phase, where Breaktime remains connected to them for up to three years through ongoing case management and career support. Staff provide monthly check-ins, assistance with housing, resume development, job searches, interview preparation, mental health referrals, and other support as young people's needs evolve. Breaktime has found that this long-term engagement is one of the most important contributors to lasting success, ensuring young people continue receiving support well after their initial employment placement ends.

Strong employer partnerships are also essential to Breaktime's model. The organization has built a dedicated workforce partnerships team responsible for recruiting employers and maintaining relationships across industries including health care, construction, and media. Breaktime reduces the risk for employers by serving as the employer of record during the transitional employment period, managing payroll, liability, and administrative responsibilities while sharing wage costs. Employers also know that Breaktime participants have already completed intensive workplace readiness training before arriving on site. This approach makes employers more willing to hire young people experiencing homelessness and increases opportunities for participants to transition into permanent employment.

Breaktime also recognizes that employment cannot exist in isolation from other basic needs. After hearing from participants that navigating services across Boston was often overwhelming, the organization launched a new community hub in downtown Boston designed to bring essential resources together under one roof. Located in one of the region's most transit-accessible areas, the hub currently includes employment programming alongside free showers, laundry facilities, clothing and hygiene supplies, and meals. Additional floors will eventually house community partners providing health care and other services, creating a centralized location where young people can access the resources they need without traveling across the city. Since opening the hub, Breaktime has more than doubled the number of young people it serves from around 200 participants in 2024 to 444 young people in 2025.

Throughout its work, Breaktime intentionally designs programming to meet the realities of the young people it serves. More than 80 percent of participants identify as Black, Indigenous, or other people of color, approximately one-third identify as LGBTQ+, and many have experienced foster care, family rejection, or hidden homelessness. These experiences shape every aspect of the organization's trauma-informed, culturally-responsive approach, from staff training to employer engagement. By pairing paid employment, strong employer partnerships, comprehensive support services, and long-term case management, Breaktime helps young people build careers and lasting pathways out of homelessness. The organization's early outcomes are promising: while only 15 percent of participants in Stable Orbit reported stable housing when they entered the program last year, 60 percent currently report stable housing.

Recommendations from Breaktime

1. Utilize workforce partnership teams to build relationships with employers, share wage costs, and manage administrative responsibilities of youth in employment training.
2. Combine paid job training, transitional employment, and ongoing case management to help young people build lasting careers and maintain housing stability.
3. Bring employment programming together with basic needs resources and community partners in one transit-accessible location.



Detroit Phoenix Center ***Detroit, Michigan***

The [Detroit Phoenix Center](#) (DPC) recognizes that there is no single pathway to employment for young people experiencing homelessness or housing instability. Instead, DPC has developed a number of different workforce programs to meet the diverse needs and goals of young people, from early career exploration and paid summer employment to entrepreneurship, fellowships, and individualized employment supports. By combining workforce development with housing, transportation, food, and other supportive services, DPC helps young people overcome barriers while building long-term economic mobility.

One entry point is DPC's Summer Leadership Academy, a prevention-focused program that employs young people ages 14 to 24 in paid positions throughout the organization. Participants receive transportation, meals, and opportunities to explore different career interests while building workplace experience. For young adult participants who have experienced housing instability, DPC offers six- to twelve-month paid fellowships that combine meaningful work experience with individualized support, including housing assistance, career coaching, resume development, and other services that prepare participants for long-term employment.

For young people participating in DPC's Rapid Rehousing program, employment services are integrated into broader case management. Staff work closely with participants to identify and remove barriers to employment, including transportation challenges, legal issues such as needed expungement, and access to food and stable housing. Young people participate in regular job readiness workshops, attend job fairs, and connect with employers throughout the Detroit community while receiving the support needed to maintain employment.

One of DPC's most innovative workforce initiatives is their Beyond the Ashes program, which introduces young people to entrepreneurship as another pathway toward economic stability. Through paid weekly workshops, participants learn about the fundamentals of starting, managing, and growing a business. Young people have the opportunity to design and sell their own apparel and Detroit-themed products through community pop-up events while earning a living wage. Some participants have even received seed funding to launch their own businesses. The program was developed in direct response to young people who expressed interest in becoming entrepreneurs, demonstrating the importance of designing workforce programming around youth voice and aspirations.

Recognizing that stable employment depends on more than job readiness alone, DPC places significant emphasis on employer engagement. The organization actively builds relationships with businesses, employment agencies, and corporate partners to expand job opportunities while encouraging employers to better understand the experiences of young people who have navigated homelessness and trauma. Rather than viewing young people through a deficit-based lens, DPC works to highlight their resilience, strengths, and potential, helping employers create more supportive workplaces that increase retention and long-term success.

By offering multiple career pathways, investing in entrepreneurship, and building strong employer partnerships, DPC helps young people move beyond immediate employment toward long-term careers, financial independence, and lasting housing stability.

Recommendations from Detroit Phoenix Center

1. Recognize that every young person's goals are different by providing a range of opportunities, from traditional employment and skilled trades to entrepreneurship, internal fellowships, and career exploration.
2. Create opportunities for young people to build businesses, develop financial literacy, and generate income while gaining transferable career skills.
3. Work with employers to create trauma-informed workplaces, reduce barriers to hiring, and expand opportunities for paid employment and long-term career growth.



Transition Resource Action Center *Dallas and Fort Worth, Texas*

The [Transition Resource Action Center](#) (TRAC), which serves 19 counties across the Dallas/Fort Worth area, helps young people ages 18 to 25 move beyond crisis by connecting them to employment, education, housing, and long-term career opportunities. Originally established to support young people aging out of foster care, TRAC is expanding its workforce programming to serve a broader population of young adults experiencing homelessness.

TRAC recognizes that employment cannot be separated from housing stability. The organization offers a continuum of housing services, understanding that many young people are not yet in a position to think about long-term careers when they are focused on meeting their immediate needs. Once a young person has achieved greater stability, TRAC works with them to explore career pathways, education, and training opportunities that align with their interests and long-term goals rather than simply helping them secure the first available job.

Employment services often begin with foundational support. Many young people first need to earn a high school diploma or GED before pursuing additional education or training. TRAC connects youth to workforce partners that offer certifications, trade training, and other career preparation opportunities while also providing workshops on resume development, workplace communication, conflict resolution, and other employability skills. Staff recognize that helping young people imagine what is possible for their future is just as important as helping them find immediate employment. In 2025, 266 young people enrolled in TRAC's workforce program, and 76 percent maintained employment for at least three months.

Partnerships play a central role in TRAC's employment model. The organization works closely with Workforce Solutions and other workforce development partners to connect young people to job training, certifications, and employment resources. TRAC also hosts quarterly resource fairs where employers, education providers, workforce organizations, and health and behavioral health providers come together in one location, allowing young people to explore multiple opportunities at once. Strong employer partnerships also create opportunities for paid internships and permanent employment. One partnership with Associa has connected young people to paid internships in communications, maintenance, and other corporate roles, with several participants ultimately transitioning into full-time employment.

TRAC also emphasizes the importance of flexibility, recognizing that progress is rarely linear, particularly for young people navigating homelessness. One young person participating in both housing and workforce programming initially transitioned into an independent apartment but later realized they needed additional support. Rather than viewing this as a setback, TRAC helped the young person transition back into supportive housing while remaining connected to employment services. This approach reflects the organization's belief that young people should have the flexibility to adjust their plans without losing access to the support they need to ultimately achieve stability.

Accessibility is another defining feature of TRAC's model. In addition to serving young people through referrals from schools, hospitals, child welfare agencies, and community organizations, TRAC operates a centrally located drop-in center and conducts regular street outreach to connect with young people where they are. In 2025 alone, TRAC served 1,660 unduplicated young people across its programs and recorded 4,246 visits to its drop-in center. These services help build trust and ensure young people can access support before a crisis worsens.

Throughout its work, TRAC reinforces that employment is not simply about earning an immediate paycheck. By combining housing stabilization, individualized case management, career exploration, workforce partnerships, and flexible long-term support, the organization helps young people build the skills, confidence, and opportunities needed to achieve lasting economic and housing stability. The connection between these supports is reflected in TRAC's outcomes: in 2025, 76 percent of workforce participants maintained employment for at least three months, while 80 percent of housing participants maintained housing for at least six months.

Recommendations from Transition Resource Action Center

1. Recognize that progress is rarely linear and allow young people to adjust their housing, employment, or education plans without losing access to the support they need to succeed.
2. Help young people move beyond immediate employment by providing career exploration, education, workforce training, and opportunities that promote lasting economic stability.
3. Build strong relationships with workforce agencies, employers, educators, and other community partners to create internships, job opportunities, and centralized access to employment and supportive services for young people.



Youth Improvement Services ***Jackson, Mississippi and Tampa Bay, Florida***

[Youth Improvement Services](#) (YIS) takes a flexible, individualized approach to help young adults address immediate needs while building pathways to housing, employment, and independence. Founded by a workforce development professional and former Job Corps leader, YIS serves young adults ages 18 to 24 with a particular focus on young people experiencing homelessness and disconnected youth. The organization began in 2018 by serving young people statewide in Mississippi, with a particular focus on Jackson, and expanded to the Tampa Bay area in 2020.

One of YIS's strengths is accessibility and meeting young people where they are. Youth can connect with the organization through referrals from health care providers, schools, homeless service providers, and other community organizations, as well as through online outreach. Because many young people may not be able or ready to engage with traditional in-person services, YIS provides remote support through video calls, text messaging, and other virtual tools. This flexibility allows young people to access assistance in ways that work for them and remain connected to services even when their housing, transportation, or other circumstances are unstable.

YIS provides youth with direct cash transfers to help them meet their immediate needs, but recognizes that assistance alone cannot create lasting stability if a young person has no way to support themselves. YIS works one-on-one with young people to connect them to employment, workforce training, and education opportunities, and their partnerships are a key part of this model. In Mississippi, the organization works closely with the Refill Jackson Initiative, a workforce training provider serving young adults ages 18 to 26. In the Tampa Bay area, YIS collaborates with partners including Ybor Youth Clinic and the Healthy Start Coalition. These relationships allow YIS to provide individualized support while connecting young people to organizations with specialized expertise in workforce development, health care, and other services. The organization also maintains relationships with corporate partners and funders, including companies such as Walmart and Enterprise Mobility, to help connect young people with stable employment opportunities.

The organization also offers optional online activities designed to build employability skills. Through eight self-paced modules, young people can learn about budgeting and finances, applying for jobs, maintaining employment, and other skills that support long-term independence. Participation is optional, but youth receive a cash incentive for completing the modules. YIS also offers young people optional case management services. Approximately 60 percent of young people opt into ongoing case management, while others may only need one-time assistance or a connection to a specific resource.

At the heart of YIS's model is the belief that services should be flexible enough to respond to what young people actually need. Rather than requiring every young person to follow the same rigid intervention, YIS regularly seeks feedback from youth and adjusts its approach accordingly. For some young people, that may mean immediate financial assistance or a temporary hotel stay. For others, it may mean connecting to a workforce training program, applying for a job, enrolling in college, or accessing health care. By combining flexible assistance, virtual access, individualized support, and strong partnerships with workforce providers and employers, YIS helps young people move from immediate crisis toward employment, housing stability, and long-term independence.

Recommendations from Youth Improvement Services

1. Offer a range of flexible, remote services that can adapt to young people's individual needs and level of engagement.
2. Build relationships with corporate partners and workforce development organizations to connect young people to employment opportunities.
3. First help young people address immediate needs through direct cash transfers and other targeted assistance, then support longer-term stability through employment and workforce connections, skill-building, and case management.



Youth Link *Minneapolis, Minnesota*

[Youth Link](#), which has served young people ages 16 to 24 in the Twin Cities for nearly 50 years, takes a comprehensive approach to helping youth move from immediate survival toward long-term stability. Its Minneapolis-based drop-in center serves as an all-in-one, one-stop resource where young people can access basic needs, housing support, health and mental health services, case management, connection to education, and employment assistance.

Youth Link's drop-in center serves approximately 120 young people each day, including 10 to 15 new young people daily. Young people begin with an intake process to identify their immediate needs and goals and are then connected to the services and case manager best suited to their circumstances. Youth Link's specialized case managers support young people with a range of needs, including housing, mental health, chemical health, education and careers, and support for young people who have experienced exploitation or trafficking.

This focus on stabilization is central to Youth Link's approach to employment. Young people may need housing, food, health care, transportation, or identification before they are ready to focus on finding a job. Once a young person is ready to pursue employment, the education and career case manager helps them identify their goals and build a plan. This may include creating or updating a resume, exploring career options, developing job readiness skills, completing training, and connecting to employment opportunities, most of which can be done from Youth Link's drop-in center. Youth Link also provides an array of transportation options to help young people get to interviews or shifts, including through bus passes and rideshare credits.

Youth Link emphasizes that employment should be about more than earning a paycheck in the short term. While a young person may initially need an immediate job to meet basic needs, case managers also help them explore opportunities that can lead to long-term employment and economic stability. At the drop-in center, young people can participate in workshops led by professionals and case managers, complete career-readiness and skills-development training, and earn cash incentives for completing certifications and other training opportunities. Youth Link also partners with youth employment organizations that provide training, navigation, internships, and other workforce support.

Paid internships are another important part of Youth Link's model. For example, young people have worked as interns with Youth Link's outreach team, using their lived experience to connect with and support other young people. This creates an opportunity for youth to build professional experience and develop a career pathway in youth services without being expected to share their trauma for free. Other young people gain experience working alongside Youth Link's chefs in the kitchen or supporting case management and residential teams. These opportunities allow young people to earn income while building the skills and experience needed for future employment.

Employment is central to Youth Link's vision for helping young people move beyond survival. In 2026, more than 600 young people have sought support related to employment, including resume assistance and job readiness. Through its one-stop model, Youth Link helps young people first address the barriers that make employment difficult, then connects them to the training, work experience, and career opportunities that can support long-term stability.

Recommendations from Youth Link

1. Bring together the bulk of your services into one centralized location, making it easier for young people to access all the support they need.
2. Help young people move beyond immediate jobs by connecting them to career exploration, training, certifications, paid internships, and long-term employment opportunities that support true economic independence.
3. Through opportunities like paid internships, peer outreach opportunities, and a compensated Youth Advisory Council, recognize young people's lived experience as a valuable skill and create opportunities for them to build professional experience within your organization.

Endnotes

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