SUPPORTING YOUTH IN THEIR EMPLOYMENT JOURNEY

A guide for youth-serving practitioners

CALGARY YOUTH EMPLOYMENT INITIATIVE

Opportunity Youth

are people between the ages of 18 and 29 who are not engaged in school, training, or the labour force. Many have experienced challenging circumstances in their lives that keep them disconnected from employment opportunities.

Finding work can be challenging for Opportunity Youth who, despite their many strengths, often lack the experience or training that would make them competitive. Many Opportunity Youth also struggle with life circumstances that create additional barriers to employment, including poverty, trauma, racism, addictions, homelessness, and mental health issues, and therefore may struggle with employment-readiness.

This practitioner's guide is designed to help build the capacity of youth serving professionals interested in supporting youth employment to engage with these young people and support them on their employment journey. The goal is to enable Opportunity Youth to find and maintain meaningful and sustainable work. Drawing on formal research as well as insights from Calgary-based youth employment professionals,* we outline three important principles for working with this population and then explore how those principles are put into practice at each point of the service journey, including outreach, intake, skill development, assessments, coaching/supports, and follow-up.
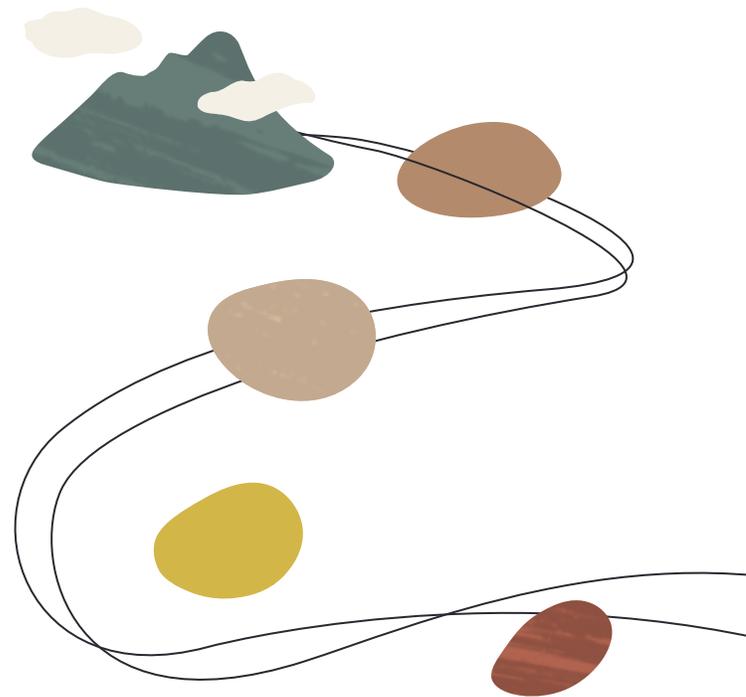
Stay tuned!

Working with youth is only one side of the supply and demand equation; helping employers to effectively recruit and retain Opportunity Youth is equally important. Watch out for an upcoming learning brief where we will explore promising practices for working with employers.

*Special thanks to representatives from the following organizations for their contributions to this learning brief: Miskanawah, NPower Canada, Trellis, and the City of Calgary Youth Employment Centre.
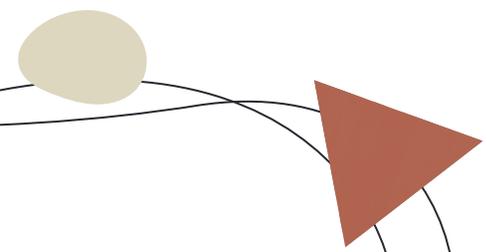
Key principles

Youth employment professionals and other youth-serving practitioners can play a significant role in supporting Opportunity Youth to achieve employment by helping to remove barriers, develop skills, build confidence, and make connections. Effective youth employment professionals draw on three key principles to guide their work:

- **Individualized support**
- **Safe, caring learning environment**
- **Doing with, not for**

1 **Individualized support**

2 **Safe, caring learning environment**

3 **Doing with, not for**

1

KEY PRINCIPLE ONE

Individualized support

Opportunity Youth are not a homogenous group. They range from highly barriered youth who may be struggling with homelessness, trauma, addictions, or mental health issues, to Indigenous youth who have had limited opportunities living on reserve to gain relevant work experience, to young people who are employment-ready but are not satisfied with the options available to them. Given the wide range of individual challenges and circumstances, individualized support is the cornerstone of employment services for Opportunity Youth.

Effective individualized support is dependent upon strong relationships and well-executed assessments so that youth employment professionals can tailor supports to each youth's specific strengths, needs, interests, challenges, and levels of readiness. In practice, this can take many forms, including:

- Meeting youth where they are at rather than imposing standardized timelines and agendas.[1]

> "Meet them where they're at – Although this phrase may be interpreted in a variety of ways, providers used it as a way of describing an approach that recognizes and accepts a young person's current readiness and willingness to take steps toward positive change related to employment and other goals. For example, a number of providers noted that youth experiencing homelessness or involved in the justice system are in 'survival mode' and are not yet ready to commit to seeking employment or other positive changes. 'Meeting youth where they are' means accepting their current situation, state of mind, and most pressing needs and helping them move forward from there toward stability and self-efficacy through employment. It often requires balancing the need to maintain high expectations of young people and the need to acknowledge their current situation. Deliberate and mindful attempts to meet young people where they are with regard to employment typically require understanding their readiness to change and having tools to help them make commitments to change."
>
> WARLAND, C., ET AL. (2015). PROVIDING TRUE OPPORTUNITY FOR OPPORTUNITY YOUTH: PROMISING PRACTICES AND PRINCIPLES FOR HELPING YOUTH FACING BARRIERS TO EMPLOYMENT, P. 13. AVAILABLE BIT.LY/3BISDBY

- Providing more intensive supports to those youth experiencing the greatest barriers (see Addressing Barriers on page16). [2]

- Providing 'vocational and work-based learning options'[3] as an alternative to classroom training.

- Providing paid work experience and training opportunities so that financial needs are not a barrier.'

- Keeping entrance requirements at a minimum.

- Providing holistic support to address the range of barriers and life circumstances that might impede employment.

- Ensuring flexibility in program delivery. This might include:

  - Rolling admission dates or open-door enrollment policies,
  - Drop-in services,
  - Working with youth for as long as it takes, knowing that some will require longer periods of engagement,[4] and/or
  - Providing 'staged employment opportunities'[5] (e.g., offering the option of starting with odd jobs vs. steady employment).

> "Too often employment programs are offering great content, but youth can't participate [...] as they are trying to keep a roof over their heads and food on their plates – so they need to receive compensation for their time."
>
> CALGARY YOUTH EMPLOYMENT PROFESSIONAL

[1, 2, 3, 4] Warland, C., Applegate, D., Schnur, C., & Jones, J. (2015). Providing true opportunity for opportunity youth: Promising practices and principles for helping youth facing barriers to employment. Chicago, IL: Heartland Alliance's National Initiatives on Poverty & Economic Opportunity. Available bit.ly/3bISdBY

[5] Raising the Roof. (n.d.). Youth Employment Toolkit – For Community Agencies. Available bit.ly/3qQWL2a

KEY PRINCIPLE TWO

2 Safe and caring learning environment

Many Opportunity Youth have been subjected to experiences of violence, racism, and homelessness – experiences that can impact trust, confidence, and self-esteem. While all youth will benefit from a safe and caring learning environment, it is particularly important for those who have experienced trauma.

"When we interviewed [Indigenous youth in our program], all we heard over and over again was that they just want to be treated with respect and kindness. With the amount of racism that they encounter every day, just someone treating them like normal human beings was all it took. They tend to have so much more going on in their lives than your typical youth."

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"Youth who have been involved in the justice system, experienced poverty or homelessness, or have been victims of violence, abuse, or discrimination are likely to have been subject to trauma that may impact their ability to successfully enter or keep employment. It is important to understand how opportunity youth who have experienced trauma may respond to events or situations in workplace settings that trigger responses to trauma and to ensure that programming and work experience do not re-traumatize participants. Moreover, it is critically important to educate employer partners about how to avoid and respond to triggers in the workplace."

WARLAND, C., ET AL. (2015). PROVIDING TRUE OPPORTUNITY FOR OPPORTUNITY YOUTH:
PROMISING PRACTICES AND PRINCIPLES FOR HELPING YOUTH FACING BARRIERS TO EMPLOYMENT,
P. 14. AVAILABLE BIT.LY/3BISDBY

Some of the ways that Calgary-based youth employment professionals create effective learning environments include:

- Hiring staff who are skilled in relationship-building and trauma-informed practice.

- Drawing on a strength-based approach, which includes 'looking for what [youth are] doing right,' and identifying transferable skills.

- Taking a relationship-based, non-hierarchical approach.

- Investing in 'who they are as a human being.'

- Creating an environment that does not replicate traditional classroom experiences. (For youth who didn't feel safe or experience success at school, classroom environments can be triggering.)

- Making it safe to 'fail', which includes framing mistakes as an inevitable and necessary part of learning, offering lots of chances, and providing caring feedback.

- Creating peer groups comprised of others who have had similar experiences and/or share a common identity. In one Canadian study, for example, Indigenous youth reported that they "were appreciative of programs that focused on Aboriginal participants. They felt these programs created a safer and more welcoming atmosphere for them to learn and participate in, and where they could build relationships and a support network." [6]

- Offering 'timely feedback [to help] address any uncertainties early on.' [7]
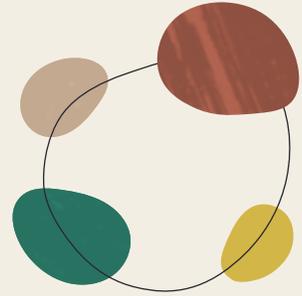
> "We rely a lot on the *Developmental Relationships Framework* – so investing in how you build a relationship with someone, [...] investing in who they are as a human being – 'Yes I'm your employment coach, but if there's stuff going on for you, I need to know' – so taking that time. Letting people be themselves [...], being aware and responding appropriately to that."
>
> CALGARY YOUTH EMPLOYMENT PROFESSIONAL

> "Maintaining successful employment requires a complex set of skills and habits that take time to learn, practice, and internalize. Young people who have little or no prior work experience and face barriers to employment are often unlikely to master this success in the first or even second try. Many successful employment programs serving youth anticipate and plan for failure and offer structured pathways back into programming and employment for youth who have been terminated from jobs or removed from programming. Learning involves making mistakes, and making mistakes can disrupt and delay program flow for participants. Maintaining engagement with participants over an extended period of time lets programs plan for and accommodate failure, and allows young people to make mistakes—and even get fired—and then take the necessary steps to re-enter programming and employment, even multiple times."
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> WARLAND ET AL. [2015.] PROVIDING TRUE OPPORTUNITY FOR OPPORTUNITY YOUTH: PROMISING PRACTICES AND PRINCIPLES FOR HELPING YOUTH FACING BARRIERS TO EMPLOYMENT, P. 12 BIT.LY/3BISDBY.

6, 7 McCreary Centre Society. (2014). Negotiating the Barriers to Employment for Vulnerable Youth. Prepared for the BC Centre for Employment Excellence by McCreary Centre Society. Available bit.ly/2Z1jZqB

KEY PRINCIPLE THREE

3 Doing with, not for

Working collaboratively with youth rather than doing things for youth is important for at least three reasons:

Young people are more likely to work towards goals if they feel a sense of ownership (i.e., if the goals they are working towards are goals they've identified rather than ones that have been identified for them).

When we do things *for* youth, we can create a dependency on our services and limit the opportunity for them to learn how to do things for themselves. When we do things *with* them, on the other hand, they have an opportunity to practice skills in a safe and supportive environment.

When their autonomy is respected, youth are more likely to trust agency staff and engage in programming.

Action plans or learner success plans are a great way to cultivate ownership and accountability, and are therefore key to practicing the principle of 'doing with, not for.' Developed with the support of an youth employment professional, action plans usually outline goals, resources, current skills/strengths, needs, actions, and achievable targets. Action plans are an important accountability tool and can be used as a basis for assessing progress.

> "Plans are always developed in conjunction with them – it's their plan and we always emphasize that. We use Google Docs so it's shared – we can go in and see what they've done, and they can go in and see what we've done. It holds us accountable as well as them. Action plans allow us to collaborate in a way that's meaningful. It really shows that it's a partnership and how we want to work alongside them."
>
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> "Action plans are an invaluable tool for us. They not only hold our team accountable, but also hold the young person accountable. For example, we can make an appointment for a clothing place, but they might not follow up. We [check the plans weekly and] ask 'How did we do?' 'How are they moving forward?' If they're not moving forward, what else do they need to support them? [...] And everyone will have an action plan. Some might have one area that they're working with, some will have ten – the number of action items determines how many times we will meet with them."
>
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Practices

In the sections that follow, we explore promising practices at each point in the service journey. Effective youth employment professionals apply the principles set out above to each of these practices. These include practices related to:

- Outreach
- Intake
- Skill development
- Addressing barriers
- Ongoing assessments and learning supports
- Coaching and mentoring
- Follow-up

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PRACTICE ONE
Outreach

Opportunity youth are often disconnected from traditional sources of connection like youth-serving agencies or schools – so those channels are not always effective in reaching them. They may also be reluctant to engage in services. These factors, combined with the range of diversity within this population, suggest that outreach efforts need to be both varied and persistent.

Diversified efforts

When we think about reaching out to young people, online engagement is often top of our list – and for many young people, that can be very effective. However, some youth prefer connecting in-person, so online engagement efforts need to be complemented with physical outreach. Spending time in settings where youth congregate (e.g., malls, grocery stores, outdoor basketball courts, community centers, etc.) not only helps to get the word out, it also offers opportunities to build relationships, motivation, and trust, making it more likely that youth will access your services. Some outreach workers put up signs at various locations announcing when they'll be there; this can be helpful for youth who don't have a phone. Developing partnerships with sites or organizations where Opportunity Youth are likely to be found can be helpful as well.

Persistent outreach

Some young people will require a lengthier engagement process to build trust and motivation: 'For some Opportunity Youth, particularly those who are involved in the criminal justice system or experiencing homelessness, just convincing them to accept services can require a lengthy process of engagement. It is often necessary to dedicate weeks or months to outreach, gradually engaging young people with offers of services and eventually enrolling them in employment services and other structured programming. Many providers practice assertive and persistent outreach to identify and serve the young people who need their services the most. In some cases, programs employ street outreach teams that canvass the service area in vans to engage young people, offer help or rides, and educate them about available services.' [8]

" Our outreach worker has been working with tenant liaisons – going door to door with them to chat about employment with youth and natural supports. He connects with the household, provides his cell phone number, and arranges to follow up with the youth."

CALGARY-BASED SERVICE PROVIDER
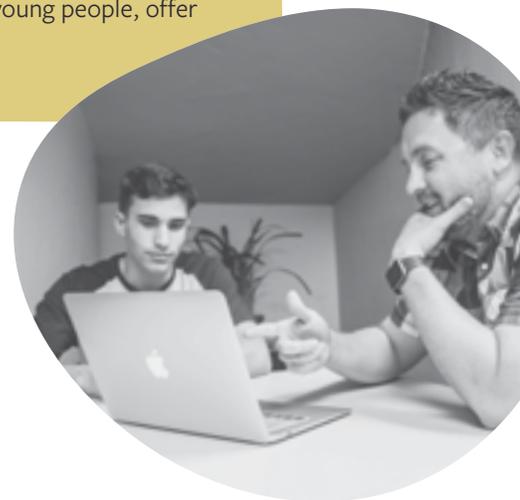
[8] Warland, C., Applegate, D., Schnur, C., & Jones, J. (2015). Providing true opportunity for opportunity youth: Promising practices and principles for helping youth facing barriers to employment. Chicago, IL: Heartland Alliance's National Initiatives on Poverty & Economic Opportunity. Available bit.ly/3bISdBY

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PRACTICE TWO

Intake

The intake process provides the foundation for an individualized approach. By better understanding each person's goals, needs, strengths and preferences, we can more effectively tailor services and supports to their unique circumstances. Key elements to explore and assess at intake include:

Short and longer-term goals

Questions like 'What would you need now to pay the bills? What would get you excited over the longer term?' and 'Where would you like to be in a couple of years?' can be helpful here.

Motivation

Understanding a young person's motivation for accessing your agency can be helpful in identifying the types of supports they might need. (For example: Are they wanting to address immediate financial needs? Do they struggle with keeping a job? Is job-seeking a condition of their Employment Insurance?). Motivational Interviewing (MI) can be a useful tool for assessing and building motivation. Research suggests that MI helps to 'build confidence, draw out strengths, and bolster commitment toward the goal of succeeding in employment.' [9]

> " I like to know [...] why they're looking for work. Asking about their 'why' helps them to feel understood. Even if I don't want them to say they just need [a job] for the paycheck [...], getting to the truth helps in setting goals and understanding what they need. And it can be helpful to remind them of that when they're struggling."
>
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> " MI [motivational interviewing] is an evidence-based strategy that can help address an individual's ambivalence toward making the necessary changes to entering employment. MI is defined as 'a form of collaborative conversation for strengthening a person's own motivation and commitment to change' and consists of holding guided conversations about change in an accepting, compassionate manner that elicits an individual's own reasons for committing to change. Many employment programs serving opportunity youth use MI as an effective means to help participants move through the stages of change and commit to taking steps toward success in work."
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> WARLAND, C., ET AL. (2015). PROVIDING TRUE OPPORTUNITY FOR OPPORTUNITY YOUTH: PROMISING PRACTICES AND PRINCIPLES FOR HELPING YOUTH FACING BARRIERS TO EMPLOYMENT, P. 14. AVAILABLE BIT.LY/3BISDBY

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[9] Warland, C., Applegate, D., Schnur, C., & Jones, J. (2015). Providing true opportunity for opportunity youth: Promising practices and principles for helping youth facing barriers to employment. Chicago, IL: Heartland Alliance's National Initiatives on Poverty & Economic Opportunity. Available bit.ly/3bISdBY p. 13.

Interests, preferences, and strengths

Matching the job search to a young person's interests, preferences, and personality type increases the likelihood that they will get and maintain employment. Tools such as the Bolles' Job-Hunting Map, The Strong Interest Inventory, Holland Codes, or 16Personalities can be helpful, as can questions like 'What does your ideal work environment look like? Do you like working with customers or do you prefer to be behind the scenes? What do you like to do in your spare time? What <u>don't</u> you like?'

> "I find it's sometimes easier for them to say what they don't like [than what they do like], so often I'll start there."
>
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Strengths

Identifying the young person's strengths is important for at least two reasons. First, in contrast to deficit-based approaches, strength-based practices help to cultivate a sense of self-efficacy – something that is critical to the learning journey youth embark upon with your agency. Second, it creates an opportunity to identify transferrable skills. While many Opportunity Youth lack workplace experience, they do have skills that they have developed in other environments. They need to be able to translate those skills in ways that will resonate with employers and speak to them with confidence. Youth employment professionals can assist with this by drawing out the types of experiences or challenges that the individual has encountered and considering the capacities that were required to manage those situations.

Employment readiness

The support pathways for someone who is job-ready will look very different than the journey for someone who is struggling with significant barriers – so assessing where youth may be at on this continuum and what barriers they may be facing is an important part of working with this population. To draw out potential barriers to employment, you might ask questions like: 'If you were offered a job tomorrow, what (if anything) might prevent you from taking it? What barriers (if any) have prevented you from getting or keeping a job in the past?' Those who are job-ready can be assisted with employment searches, resume writing, skills development, and interviewing supports. Those who are not job-ready will need more extensive supports. (See Addressing Barriers on page 16).

Your agency might have a standard intake process; however, it's important to remain flexible in your approach as much as possible. For example, one outreach worker conducts initial assessments with hard-to-engage youth through a series of texts. This helps him to build trust and better understand the young person's needs until they are ready to visit his agency for a more formal assessment. Another important consideration at intake is making the assessment as conversational as possible and letting the client know that there are no wrong answers.
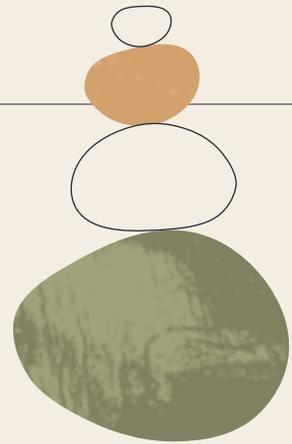
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PRACTICE THREE

Skill development

The skills required to develop employment-readiness, get, and keep a job are varied and complex, spanning well beyond job search skills like resume writing or interviews. They include:

- Life skills (Budgeting, setting up a bank account, keeping appointments, attending to personal hygiene, etc.)

- Social skills (Communication, collaboration/team building skills, interpersonal skills, anger management, conflict management, self-awareness, self-regulation, etc.)

- Job search skills (Resume writing, cover letters, Linked-In profiles, interview preparation, etc.)

- Technical Skills (Literacy, numeracy, technology, work certifications, employer-specific requirements*)

- Skills to stay employed (Reliability, learning agility, ability to accept feedback, confidence to ask questions, organization/time management, self-advocacy, working independently, punctuality, accountability, problem solving, work ethic). [10]

"

[When Opportunity Youth in British Columbia were asked what was missing from the employment supports that they had accessed] their most common complaint [was] that they had wanted to learn how to cope with anger and have healthy professional relationships, but these topics had not been part of the program."

MCCREARY CENTRE SOCIETY. [2014]. NEGOTIATING THE BARRIERS TO EMPLOYMENT FOR VULNERABLE YOUTH, P.9. BIT.LY/2Z1JZQB

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Effective listening skills are really key – all of us think we have great listening skills where the reality is 75% of us don't – learning how to listen to understand as opposed to listening to respond is an important skill. [...] And I also believe that those skills will flow over into their personal life in a lot of different areas."

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* Youth employment professionals need to build relationships with employers to better understand the specific skills and qualifications needed. The more they know, the better they can equip young people for the types of jobs that are available. This process will be explored further in an upcoming learning brief.

[10] Merrill Cooper, Guyn Cooper Research Associates. (2018). Improving Employment Outcomes for Vulnerable Youth. Burns Memorial Fund. Available bit.ly/2ZftNgK

Complex skill sets are best taught through experiential or applied learning opportunities that replicate the work environment as much as possible. NPower Canada offers a good example of how this can be achieved through project-based learning in groups:

● Early in the program, youth are assigned to scrum groups that work towards achieving weekly goals as a team. This includes technical training goals (e.g., completing a training module towards certification), personal skill development goals (e.g., identifying and implementing time management strategies), or professional development goals (e.g., resume building). Working together to achieve the goals requires many of the skills that they will need to demonstrate in the workplace – skills like collaboration, communication, self-regulation, and problem-solving – so young people have an opportunity to learn by doing.

● Daily scrum meetings and scrum notes help participants to evaluate progress on their goals and determine what challenges (if any) they are facing. The group designates a Scrum Master to facilitate the meeting and a Scribe to capture the notes and determine ways to support each other towards reaching the groups goals for the week. In addition to supporting accountability, cultivating communication skills, and providing leadership opportunities, these notes also help to keep staff apprised of successes and challenges within the group and to determine where further individual support may be needed.

● The scrum groups change every three to four weeks during the program *'so that they're not working with the same group all the time'* and have an opportunity to learn how to build rapport and work effectively with new people.

"Developing alternative and flexible learning opportunities – such approaches are particularly relevant to young people who do not benefit from a conventional classroom experience. They can provide targeted or specialised support, and seek to develop soft skills such as confidence, self esteem, trust and responsibility."

NELSON, J. [2011]. STRATEGIES TO RE-ENGAGE YOUNG PEOPLE NOT IN EDUCATION, EMPLOYMENT OR TRAINING: A RAPID REVIEW, P. 9. BIT. LY/3CFY1AC

"All of the participants have a Scrum Report that they do every week. And as a team, we can go into shared files and see 'How did the group work together – oh it looks like there were some challenges along the way.' So then we would circle back with the group and say 'Okay what happened? What worked well last week?' And the thing that we find is that is important is that people who are having challenges collaborating, we can help them understand what the challenges are and [...] how to work through them rather than just be upset about it and not work through them. It's really around behaviour – and how do we help people improve in areas that are really going to benefit them when they get into the workplace."

CALGARY YOUTH EMPLOYMENT PROFESSIONAL
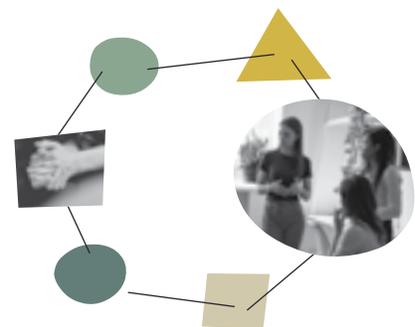
"When they're in their scrum meetings, they spend ten minutes assessing with each other 'Did we get through the learning yesterday?' They have to identify impediments and work as a group to get through those impediments – so it's a way of teaching problem-solving skills."

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Group learning is a common and effective way to cultivate skills and develop confidence among Opportunity Youth. Other ways of facilitating experience-based learning include:

- Providing casual work opportunities

- Supporting youth to do volunteer work or odd jobs

- Providing safe ways to learn on the job (e.g., placing them with a social enterprise that specializes in working with vulnerable populations)

- Conducting mock interviews

- Facilitating a noticing activity in one of their favourite shops

> "We ask them 'What's your favourite place to shop or eat?' – then we encourage them to go there and observe from perspective of being a consumer to find out what skills are they looking for. [Sometimes] we buy them gift cards so they can go and experience it without the pressure of them spending their own cash – so we tell them to go buy a t-shirt and then tell me what they learned from that experience. What were the staff wearing? What were the COVID protocols? Or if they were ordering food, how long did it take? What skills do you have that would communicate to the employer that you could whip that pizza into place in 20 minutes? It's a way for them to see first-hand that they have the skills to do the job."
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> CALGARY YOUTH EMPLOYMENT PROFESSIONAL

4 PRACTICE FOUR
Addressing barriers

Many Opportunity Youth experience barriers that impede their ability to find and keep jobs. For example, they might be homeless or living in poverty; they might struggle with mental health or addiction issues; they may be experiencing discrimination in their job search; or they may lack the confidence or skills to apply for work. A key part of the journey towards employment involves helping youth to surface and address whatever is standing in the way of their employment goals.

Some barriers can be addressed by youth employment professionals, while others require collaboration with other youth serving agencies and supports. The table below briefly outlines some of the ways that we can work with youth and other professionals to address key barriers.

● **Homelessness, addictions, mental health issues**

- Help youth navigate the complex system of services.

- Make a warm referral to an agency that can help.

- Follow up with unresponsive agencies and advocate on behalf of the youth.

- Have a sign-up sheet for odd jobs so that youth who struggle with homelessness or addictions issues can work on a casual basis without having to make a bigger commitment.

● **Financial issues**

- Use discretionary funds and/or bursaries to help youth access clothing, equipment, and/or required training.

- Help them gain access to computers/laptops, cell phones and Community Voicemail, as needed.

- Avoid full day programming so that young people can work part-time while in training.

- Provide bus tickets.

- Help eligible youth to apply for income support.

- Help them to find a way to address their immediate financial needs while in your program (e.g., find them casual or part-time work to pay the bills until they've developed the skills or completed the certification requirements for the job they're interested in).

"

A 'Discretionary Fund' [...] was used by Advisers [in two Opportunity Youth pilot projects] to fund activities and any specific costs, such as travel to activities, clothes for interviews or tools that a young person needed to progress. This could immediately lift a barrier to young people participating. For both pilots, the Discretionary Fund was seen as an important part of the financial support that worked very well; enabling Advisers to make quick, pinpoint financial interventions that made an immediate difference to young people's ability to participate."

DEPARTMENT FOR EDUCATION. [2010]. WHAT WORKS RE-ENGAGING YOUNG PEOPLE WHO ARE NOT IN EDUCATION, EMPLOYMENT OR TRAINING (NEET)? SUMMARY OF EVIDENCE FROM THE ACTIVITY AGREEMENT PILOTS AND THE ENTRY TO LEARNING PILOTS, P. 12 BIT.LY/2ZE79FZ

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Homeless youth in particular talked about feeling caught in a position where they could not get a job because they had no address or phone, but could not get these because they had no job to pay for them. Several were unsure about how to get identification and what steps they should take to get a SIN card."

MCCREARY CENTRE SOCIETY. [2014]. NEGOTIATING THE BARRIERS TO EMPLOYMENT FOR VULNERABLE YOUTH. PREPARED FOR THE BC CENTRE FOR EMPLOYMENT EXCELLENCE BY MCCREARY CENTRE SOCIETY, P. 7. AVAILABLE BIT.LY/2Z1JZQB

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* 'Warm referrals' are particularly helpful. They involve "providing anticipatory guidance and then working collaboratively with the client to actively navigate the referral process, including setting up and getting to the appointment, and following-up with respect to 'next steps. (S.M., & Wathen, C.N., on behalf of the PHN-PREP Project Team (2021). Trauma- and violence-informed care: Making warm referrals. School of Nursing, McMaster University.bit.ly/3CC6Hi4

Motivational Issues

- Use Prochaska and DiClemente's Stages of Change model to help you target supports to your client's level of readiness and desire for change.
- Use Motivational Interviewing.

Not sure what they want to do

- Support career exploration using tools like *Bolles' Job-Hunting Map, The Strong Interest Inventory, or Holland Codes.*

Lack of confidence, experience, and/or pre-employment skills

- Work with youth to cultivate pre-employment skills (e.g., life skills, socioemotional skills)
- Identify transferrable skills and coach youth on how to frame these for employers.
- Draw on a strength-based approach.
- Identify job-shadowing opportunities.
- Provide opportunities for youth to develop skills in a safe and supportive work environment (e.g., a social enterprise designed for vulnerable populations).

Administrative issues

- Help youth to acquire photo ID and apply for a SIN.
- Help them to open a bank account.

Further training required

- Help youth to complete enrollment forms and gather supporting documentation.
- Provide bursaries for courses.

Racism/Discrimination

- Coach youth on ways to challenge racism and advocate for themselves.
- Advocate on behalf of youth, coaching employers on ways to mitigate bias.
- Help youth to develop a support network.

Problems on the job/problems keeping a job

- Engage in joint problem-solving.
- Coach and support youth to deal with problematic work situations; advocate on their behalf as needed.
- Help them to identify peer mentors that can coach them on the job.
- Help employers to better understand Opportunity Youth and how to support them in the workplace.

Program-related barriers

- Ensure flexibility in program structure and delivery (e.g., rolling admission, flexible start dates, multiple pathways).
- Provide childcare during training.

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Inflexible start dates were repeatedly cited as a barrier to young people's progression. The lack of opportunities outside the main September-October intake and the desire for roll-on roll-off provision meant that participants were less likely to be able to reengage as soon as they were ready."

DEPARTMENT FOR EDUCATION. [2010]. WHAT WORKS RE-ENGAGING YOUNG PEOPLE WHO ARE NOT IN EDUCATION, EMPLOYMENT OR TRAINING (NEET)? SUMMARY OF EVIDENCE FROM THE ACTIVITY AGREEMENT PILOTS AND THE ENTRY TO LEARNING PILOTS, P. 13. BIT.LY/2ZE79FZ

"
We also help to advocate and problem-solve when youth are not paid properly. Industries like landscaping and roofing are notorious for that, and often young people won't advocate for themselves because they're afraid of losing their job."

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PRACTICE FIVE

5 Ongoing Assessments and Learning Supports

Developing effective individualized supports is dependent upon ongoing assessments: the more you learn about the young people you're working with, the better you can tailor your supports, offer helpful feedback, and address barriers as they arise. These assessments can be formal or informal.

● **Formal Assessments**

Formal assessments include tools that are used at both the beginning and end of a program or service to measure increases in knowledge, skills, and confidence, and to understand the degree to which barriers to employment have been addressed. In many longer-term programs, mid-point surveys are also used to help the team adjust their program offerings to better meet the needs of the individuals they're working with.

Some agencies conduct longer-term evaluations as well via follow-up surveys or check-ins. These assessments can serve as a 'report card' on the program so that youth employment professionals can continue to improve their services and supports.
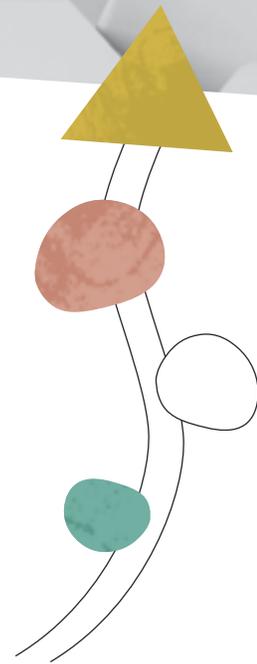
"We also do an end of program survey – which is a report card for us as well – i.e., as a team, how did we do? One of the things that's amazing about this team is [...] they are constantly looking at ways to improve."

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"We do a mid-program survey [...]. We ask a lot around are you more comfortable collaborating with team mates now? Reaching out to the instructor? We measure communications style, collaboration, etc. The purpose of that is so we can circle back on anything we need to in the program, so we know if we need to rejig. If they not comfortable collaborating in group we have to focus on that more, because in [the industry we're training them for], you have to collaborate, there's no getting around that. So it helps us to know what to do in the second half of the program to support them better."

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Informal Assessments

Informal assessments can be conducted via observations and check-ins, and by measuring progress on the goals identified in the youth's employment plan. While it is important to support youth to address behaviours that may be problematic in the workplace (e.g., consistently showing up late, unprofessional behaviour, etc.), it is also important to look for what they are doing right and offer positive feedback whenever possible. Behaviours that can be assessed through observation include:

- **Team-work/collaboration:** How do they communicate with others? Are they comfortable working in a group? How do they address conflict? Are they honouring the commitments?

- **Professionalism:** Are they showing up on time? Are they using appropriate language? Are they dressed in a way that will be acceptable in the industry they want to work in?

- **Learning Capacity:** How do they respond to and integrate feedback? Do they have a growth mindset? Are they able to reach out to the instructor when they need help?

- **Well-Being:** Is there a sudden drop-off in engagement? Does their appearance suggest a change in their mental wellbeing? (e.g., 'Do we have some one who used to be really well groomed and now we find that they're not brushing their hair or they're wearing same clothes for several days in a row?')

- **Engagement:** Are they struggling to engage in the service or program? Do engagement levels vary?
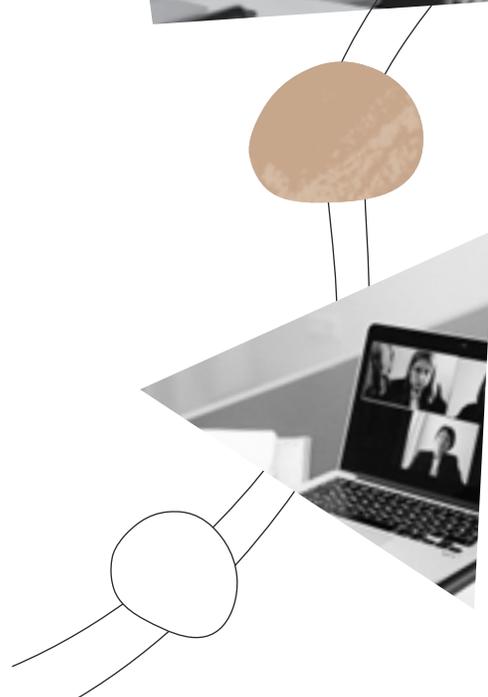
"Each staff member is observing participants and sharing their observations with the team [at the end of each session]. So things like 'Joe did great today – he showed up on time, dressed well, and he was helping Suzy with something she was struggling with.' Lots of it is based on observations. And we're looking for people doing things right versus just trying to spot people doing things wrong. […] We use the same process during the online piece where we're looking at things like, 'Is their camera on during whole training? Are they using appropriate language in chat boxes? In group meetings, did they engage with others well?'. They can offer context – for example, they might say 'I have three kids at home and might not have my camera on the whole time.' We take that into account as well."

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"The observations we make are shared with participants through a process we call Employment Readiness Meetings. Every participant meets with a career counsellor a minimum of two times during the program. They do two of those, but they can also do up to eight more informal meetings based on what they need. [...] We also have a case management meeting every weekw here we ask ourselves 'Who needs us the most right now'"

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Getting at the 'why' behind the behaviours you're observing is important in addressing potential barriers. This is one of the reasons that individual check-ins are helpful. Drawing on a trauma-informed approach, youth employment professionals use check-ins to try to understand what is happening that might be impacting a young person's behaviour. Many agencies take a flexible approach to check-ins, so that they are apportioning more one-on-one support to those who need it most.

6

PRACTICE SIX

Coaching and Mentoring Supports

Coaching is associated with many positive outcomes, including enhanced personal and work-related outcomes, potentially enhancing learning, performance, self-efficacy, goal attainment, self-regulation, and psychological wellbeing. [11] In the context of working with Opportunity Youth, coaching also provides opportunities for applied learning and individualized, real-time supports. Offering on-call coaching can be particularly effective because it helps to support problem-solving, keep young people engaged in programming, and prevent work-placement breakdowns.

> "I was working with a participant […] who had an interview for the next morning. I gathered the team together and we met with her at 8:00 am before her interview at 10:00 to do coaching – and I think it really helped to ease her fears and increase confidence. [Another] example is one of our participants was experiencing bullying in the workplace and she was feeling stressed about going to work. We did some coaching around how to approach her supervisor – because she was really anxious to go into work. So how do we support her so she's not just calling in sick and avoiding the situation? Because that was a pattern, we already knew from working with her. We were able to help her real-time so that she was able to have conversation with her supervisor. We also helped to reframe the use of the term 'bullying' because that's very triggering for many people. We suggested looking at it as a challenge she's having."
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Mentoring can also be an important source of learning, development, and support. In fact, when asked to design their ideal employment program, Opportunity Youth in BC identified mentoring as key [12] – particularly workplace mentors. This means working with employers to identify potential mentors and set them up for success.

Peer mentoring programs within the workplace can be especially effective for Opportunity Youth because it is often less intimidating to ask questions of a peer than a supervisor. When an agency in Calgary organized peer mentors at Cineplex, they received very positive feedback from youth who said that it was easier to ask questions of someone 'who is on an equal playing field'; they were able to build relationships and weren't afraid of looking like they didn't know what they were doing.

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[11] Wang, Q., Lai, Y.-L., Xu, X. and McDowall, A. (2021), "The effectiveness of workplace coaching: a meta-analysis of contemporary psychologically informed coaching approaches", Journal of Work-Applied Management, Vol. ahead-of-print No. ahead-of-print. bit.ly/3cJwyu1

[12] McCreary Centre Society. (2014). Negotiating the Barriers to Employment for Vulnerable Youth. Prepared for the BC Centre for Employment Excellence by McCreary Centre Society. Available bit.ly/2Z1jZqB

7

PRACTICE SEVEN
Follow up

> "Let's say someone is employed and doesn't want to hear from us [by phone] – we still send an email once a month to say we're thinking about you, so they know they're still front of mind for us."
>
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Getting a job is only part of the equation – so most youth employment professionals offer some form of follow up. This can be challenging as youth tend to disengage once they have a job. However, following up in unobtrusive ways can help to "keep the door open" for young people so that they feel more comfortable accessing services again if they are struggling to keep their job or experiencing issues at work. Follow up can take many forms, including:

- Regular check-ins by phone, text or email to find out how the new job is going (some do this bi-weekly for a period of three months and then move to quarterly check-ins)

- Cohort 'reunions' (i.e., bringing the same group together for a check-in after a few months)

- Alumni and networking events

- Surveys

- Regular emails or texts that briefly offer an employment-related strategy or personal development tip
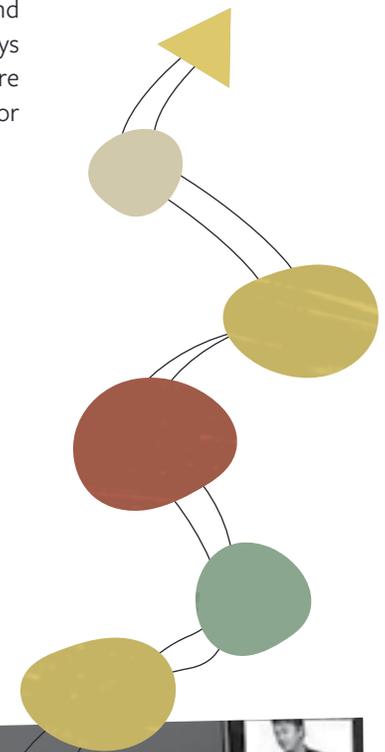
> "We have a group meeting where everyone from the cohort meets with an alumni placement specialist. It's another opportunity to carry on the camaraderie and then we use break out rooms for them to have individual coaching with that. They want to stay connected."
>
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Conclusion

Opportunity Youth have often encountered challenging circumstances and environments. Having a youth-serving professional 'in their corner' can be transformative – especially one that understands that 'the journey to employment is not a straight line' and that 'most youth regress and progress through employment readiness several times before fully thriving and being self sufficient.' By ensuring individualized support, safe and caring learning environments, and an ethic of 'doing with, not for' throughout the service journey, we can help youth to address barriers, cultivate skills, and make connections that support employment and enhance wellbeing.

Further Resources

Interested in more? Check out these great resources:

- Warland, C., Applegate, D., Schnur, C., & Jones, J. (2015). Providing true opportunity for opportunity youth: Promising practices and principles for helping youth facing barriers to employment. Chicago, IL: Heartland Alliance's National Initiatives on Poverty & Economic Opportunity. Available bit.ly/3bISdBY

- Youth Research & Evaluation eXchange (YouthREX). (2019). Seven Promising Practices for Engaging & Supporting NEET Youth. Toronto, ON: Author. Available bit.ly/3oQKyQ2

- McCreary Centre Society. (2014). Negotiating the Barriers to Employment for Vulnerable Youth. Prepared for the BC Centre for Employment Excellence by McCreary Centre Society. Available bit.ly/2Z1jZqB
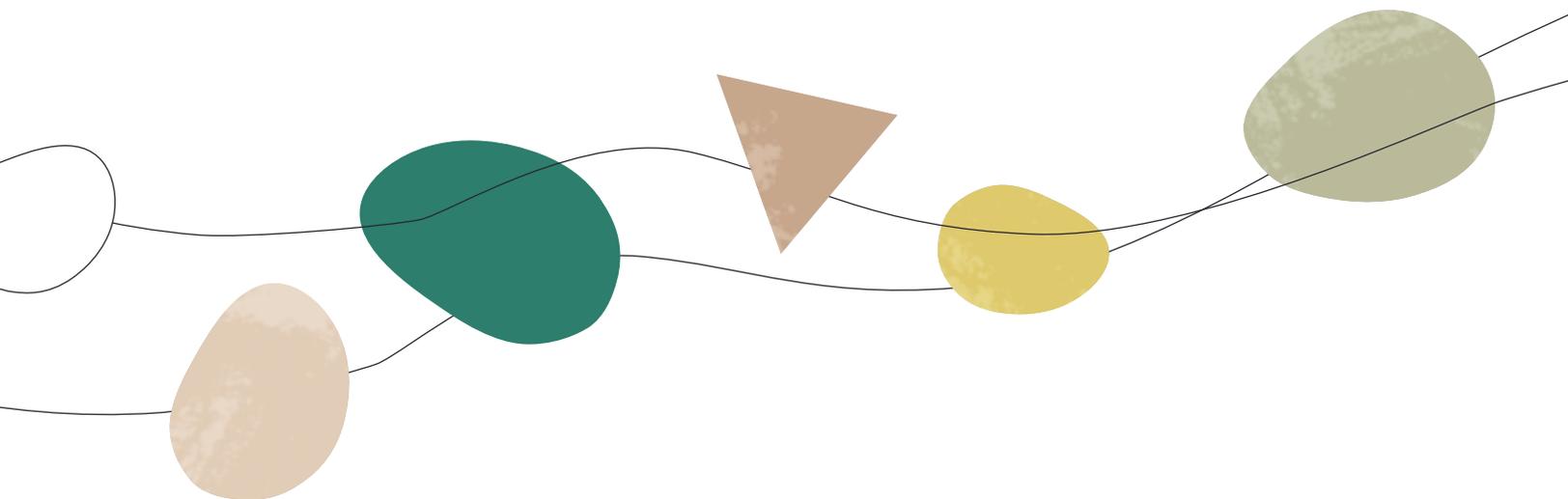
About the Collaborative Funders' Table

In 2017, the Collaborative Funders' Table (CFT) launched a collaborative funding initiative with the goal of improving employment prospects for Opportunity Youth in Calgary. The initiative focuses on the interface between 'supply' (youth and youth serving agencies) and 'demand' (employers). The goal is to ensure that youth seeking work are better prepared to meet the needs of employers, and that employers are better able to recruit and retain youth. The Collaborative Funders' Table includes: the Calgary Foundation, the United Way of Calgary and Area, Burns Memorial Fund, the RBC Foundation, the City of Calgary, JPMorgan Chase Foundation, and other anonymous donors.

Suggested Citation:

Dozois, E. (2021). Supporting youth in their employment journey: A guide for youth serving professionals. Calgary's Collaborative Funders' Table, Calgary, AB. Available bit.ly/3dbFeJO

CALGARY YOUTH EMPLOYMENT INITIATIVE

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