Recruitment Strategies and Practices for Disconnected Youth

Findings from an Implementation Study of the Department of Labor *Urban Employment Demonstration Grants*

Dr. Erika Gordon and Susan Ullrich, MPH, 2M Research Services   September 2017

STUDY BACKGROUND

This issue brief series explores emerging findings from a 2-year implementation study of the *Urban Employment Demonstration Grants for Youth and Young Adults,* funded by the U.S. Department of Labor (DOL), Chief Evaluation Office (CEO). In 2015, DOL's Employment and Training Administration (ETA) awarded seven urban cities with 2-year grants to develop projects to address the workforce needs of disconnected youth and young adults (ages 16–29) in U.S. cities and communities experiencing high unemployment, crime, and poverty rates, and low high school graduation rates.

Youth workforce development programs that serve disconnected youth often struggle with the recruitment and engagement of potential program participants.[1] It may be challenging to attract youth participants due to various issues, including lack of trust; the pull of gang activity, violence, and the code of the streets; transportation barriers; and a lack of job opportunities that are both engaging for the youth and sustainable in the long-term job market. Even the most well-designed programs may not be successful if they cannot bridge the culture gap with youth and make a meaningful connection to participants.

This issue brief describes approaches used by the seven communities that received DOL's *Urban Employment Demonstration Grants for Youth and Young Adults* to recruit and engage disconnected youth.[2] The findings draw from semi-structured conversations with the programs' principal leaders and observations during site visits conducted for the study. This issue brief focuses on the strategies the grantees used for program recruitment and engagement/retention.

KEY FINDINGS

- Programs that were able to overcome initial challenges in recruiting disconnected youth to workforce development programs typically used a combination of recruitment strategies simultaneously.
- According to site staff, leveraging staff or community partners with street-corner presence and credibility to engage in word-of-mouth conversations to build trust and invite participation helped grantees overcome recruitment challenges.
- Sites reported finding that developing youth-based community service centers that reflected youth culture and youth successes, located in places where youth could easily access them, helped improve youth retention and engagement.

While all seven sites noted recruitment and engagement of disconnected youth as a challenge, three of the sites developed strategies that staff perceived as allowing them to confront the challenges of program recruitment within their local environments. In addition to such approaches as leveraging a relationship with a social service agency for referrals, emerging strategies that were used by sites, and that program staff indicated could develop and sustain a pipeline for youth recruitment, included the following:

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[1] Treskon, L. (2016). *What works for disconnected young people: A scan of the evidence.* New York: MDRC.
[2] The *Urban Employment Demonstration Grants for Youth and Young Adults* were awarded by the DOL's ETA to Baltimore, MD, Camden, NJ; Detroit, MI; Houston, TX; Long Beach, CA; North Charleston, SC; and St. Louis, MO.

- Utilizing community members and/or community-based organizations who have knowledge of the local neighborhoods and credibility with disconnected youth as recruiters for the program
- Developing a youth-based community center as an intake and workforce development program location[3]

The following is a summary of how these two approaches were developed and implemented.

Community-based strategies for recruitment of disconnected youth. Four of the grantee sites reported developing recruitment strategies that included hiring program staff from local communities who have personal history as a disconnected youth (and/or similar background experiences), and the intimate knowledge of the dynamics of local neighborhoods, to engage in word-of-mouth conversations to build trust and engage youth in program activities. These young adult staff members canvased the targeted neighborhoods, engaged in conversations with disconnected youth about their situations, and shared information about the program. The program recruitment strategy was based on the perceived neighborhood credibility of the community member and their likely ability to connect to youth through shared experiences as a former disconnected youth from the local community.

Two sites—including two that also utilized the strategy described above—implemented a community-based approach by leveraging relationships with community partners that were widely acknowledged by community members and community organizations as having perceived credibility with disconnected youth and a presence in local communities. Typically, organizations that had significant history within the communities previously had success in engaging local youth. At one site, the program partnered with a community, anti-violence, street outreach organization comprising young adults who teach and provide conflict resolution and who work in the neighborhoods where they grew up. This outreach organization was leveraged to become a feeder for recruitment by utilizing the organization's relationships with the local community, and their status as credible messengers (based on members' previous experiences), to invite and refer disconnected youth to the grantee's workforce development program. Other partnerships used to implement this approach also included very small, local nonprofits and community-based organizations with perceived street credibility, such as church groups. In one site, these partners hosted special open houses 1 day a week, and engaged in word-of-mouth campaigns to recruit disconnected youth for workforce development programs.

Developing youth-based community centers. This strategy was developed by two sites in response to previous experiences of program staff who encountered disconnected youth during recruitment who indicated that they were uninterested in seeking workforce development services at traditional One-Stop (or similar) locations because they perceived that these locations were government buildings meant for others and that there were no services for them. Additionally, program staff described hearing from disconnected youth about negative experiences with intake staff at these "traditional" locations, and the unwillingness of youth to return to them. The sites instead chose to adapt spaces originally used for other purposes to develop new, youth-focused, local community centers for recruitment and service provision, with the goal of increasing participant recruitment, engagement, and retention. These community centers were developed to create an ongoing experience of connection with a supportive adult, in a safe space, primarily

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[3] These community centers were generally adapted spaces not previously utilized for youth workforce services; i.e., no grantee site built a new building for this grant, but found formerly occupied spaces and created a new hub of workforce services for youth in local neighborhoods.

through a combination of team-building activities, individual counseling, and a supportive staff embedded in these locations.

The data from site visits suggest that specific resources and relationships are needed for the development of local, youth-focused community centers. According to program staff, for this strategy to be implemented, programs need to identify and develop staff and/or partners who have specific knowledge and an "authenticity" in local youth culture to tailor community center offerings. Some features of these youth-based community centers included the following:

- Locations that are easily accessible to youth
- Integration of positive youth culture in the activities and the design of the community center space (e.g., student-created artwork, logos branding the program created by youth participants, vision/wish boards, and student achievements)
- Locations that are visually appealing to youth and branded as safe youth environments, based on local assessments of relative crime, local practices, and gathering patterns of youth in local neighborhoods
- Program staff in the community centers who have specific knowledge and understanding of local youth culture

Sites that reported more successes with recruitment using this approach located their youth community centers in areas youth were willing to travel to, or were already passing by, based on a local assessment of public transportation resources and barriers, and the understanding of local neighborhood dynamics. For example, one site strategically placed its youth-based community centers in locations where youth could access them without having to cross gang lines; another placed the center along a major public transportation route.

With the overall goal of increased participant engagement and retention, program implementers developed these youth community centers so that they could be "branded" by youth as a youth space, reflecting a welcoming aesthetic and the local youth culture. Sites included displays of youths' art and wish boards, and a participant-developed logo for the center was used on posters and promotional materials for the program. Additionally, program offerings at the community centers were framed to be sensitive to the pull of street culture by offering safe spaces, and often incentives, so that program participation was a more attractive activity than street culture. The programs developed by implementers also provided opportunities for youth to learn about and embrace their own empowerment.

In sites that were perceived as encountering fewer implementation challenges, ground-level and program management staff stated that the staffing of the community centers was another important aspect of success for participant recruitment, and staffing should reflect authenticity in local youth culture while also providing a caring and understanding environment.

In conclusion, program staff looking to improve recruitment and engagement (and thus retention) indicated that these three strategies—hiring credible, relatable staff who have local context knowledge; leveraging community-based organizations with history and influence within the community; and creating new, youth-based community centers and spaces designed for (and sometimes by) youth participants—helped them to meet their recruitment goals. The two sites that employed all three of these approaches (hiring program staff from local communities who have personal history as a disconnected youth, leveraging the perceived credibility of local community organizations with disconnected youth, and developing youth-based community centers), reported only a few challenges with recruitment, as well as very high retention rates.

For additional information regarding these approaches and other findings from the Urban Employment Demonstration Grants, please see 2M's Urban Employment for Youth and Young Adults Demonstration Grants Implementation Evaluation: Final Report.