



## POLICY PLATFORM

### Who We Are:

In the United States, there are over 2 million opportunity youth, ages 16 to 24 who are living in poverty and are neither in school nor employed. All are in urgent need of the opportunities that YouthBuild offers—pathways to careers, education, leadership and life skills. YouthBuild USA is the national nonprofit support center for over 250 programs across 46 U.S. states.

Students spend roughly half their time in the classroom working to earn a high school diploma or equivalent credential and prepare for post-secondary success (including college, apprenticeships and employment). The balance of their time is spent gaining hands-on work skills by building affordable housing and other community assets in their neighborhoods. Students can also learn job skills in other high-demand careers like healthcare, culinary, hospitality, manufacturing and IT. Additionally, during an 8-10 month average enrollment, they become part of a strong global community by engaging in community service and leadership training. YouthBuild includes support systems, such as mentoring, follow-up education, employment, personal counseling services and participation in civic engagement.

U.S. Department of Labor YouthBuild grants competitively awarded are a primary funding source for community-based non-profit, college and governmental sponsors of local YouthBuild programs. Participants represent a population that spans many different initiatives and programs at the federal level. In addition to the U.S. Department of Labor grants and workforce funding, federal funding and policies of the U.S. Department of Education and the Corporation for National and Community Service are important to YouthBuild. Roughly 35% of YouthBuild enrollees are women, and participants are a racially and ethnically diverse group.

### YouthBuild USA Policy Agenda:

YouthBuild USA advocates for a policy agenda that not only supports YouthBuild students and alumni and the work of local YouthBuild programs, but also promotes equity and assistance for opportunity youth more broadly. The policy recommendations below focus on improving existing funding streams and public policies to better address the population that YouthBuild serves and support opportunity youth by providing new opportunities for the program.

**Workforce Training and Access:** Opportunity youth thrive with a diverse set of credentialing, certification and training opportunities. We support policies that:

- Enable YouthBuild and other opportunity youth-serving programs to connect

students to the full range of in-demand industries, including expanded industry-recognized credentials.

- Incentivize private business funding partnerships to develop opportunity youth training programs that are aligned with local labor market and business needs.
- Create greater access for graduates of YouthBuild and other opportunity youth-serving workforce programs into apprenticeship programs leading to careers in in-demand industries.
- Expand youth voice throughout the workforce training, placement and funding system to better inform federal, state and local workforce strategies and effective services.

**Education:** Opportunity youth benefit from a wrap-around service approach as they first complete their secondary education and then may transition into postsecondary education. We support policies that:

- Provide resources enabling YouthBuild and similar programs to offer their graduates services and support the smooth transition from educational and career programs to postsecondary education or work. This should include one-on-one pathway mentoring and academic counseling for opportunity youth program graduates aimed at increasing postsecondary and career retainment.
- Fund partnerships between institutions of higher education (IHEs) and local YouthBuild programs and other support organizations with expertise in working with opportunity youth to better equip those students with financial aid, academic and mental health counseling, career advisors, mentorships and other supportive services while enrolled in postsecondary education.
  - In particular, incentivize IHEs to partner with opportunity youth using Federal TRIO program funding, both to increase access to and retention in higher education.
- Ease statutory and regulatory barriers for opportunity youth, many of whom are first-generation college students, to gain access to financial aid in a manner and through a system that works for them. This will include, among other recommendations, simplification of the Free Application for Federal Student Aid (FAFSA) to support students to secure financial aid for postsecondary education.
- Increase inter-department coordination, partnerships, funding, and other resources from the U.S. Department of Labor, the U.S. Department of Education and State education departments and opportunity youth programs (reflecting the fact that successful opportunity youth programs must be both education and career focused).

**Service:** A core component of the YouthBuild model is the opportunity for students to rebuild their communities while rebuilding their lives, in part through meaningful community service. We support policies that:

- Expand AmeriCorps funding and support of opportunity youth access to service opportunities.
- Eliminate the current tax on Segal education awards.

**Research on opportunity youth:** As a 41-year-old program model that is constantly re-examining what works, YouthBuild supports expanded research to improve existing information and better program initiatives and outcomes, such as:

- Expand Institute of Education Sciences (IES) research opportunities to include research on opportunity youth.
- Initiate Federal research opportunities to gather more information and data on programs serving opportunity youth to ensure those programs are evidence-based and meet the needs of participants. In particular, funding is needed for longer-term research on two-generation impacts.

**Food insecurity:** The provision of food during programming addresses food insecurity widely experienced among participants and is a positive incentive for student attendance that will improve outcomes of opportunity youth programs. We support policies and federal funding that allows opportunity youth programs to provide their students with food during programming. In particular, we support regulatory or legislative changes that allow YouthBuild programs to purchase food using programmatic funds.

### **Other Issues of Priority:**

YouthBuild USA also focuses on policy improvements (in no specific order) in the following laws, policies and programs to better serve opportunity youth:

- Strengthen Workforce Innovation and Opportunity Act (WIOA) support for out of school youth.
  - Ensure that general WIOA performance metrics for all programs take into account the unique job experiences and circumstances of opportunity youth.
- Expanded access to State wage data systems while maintaining privacy controls.
- Participation in performance partnership pilots for disconnected youth.
- Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA) reform and implementation to more effectively serve opportunity youth and allow States greater flexibility in defining accountability systems for schools serving opportunity youth.
- Reforms to programs serving individuals with disabilities.
- Expansion of the Earned Income Tax Credit (EITC) to younger workers.

- Targeted training and employment for opportunity youth in any infrastructure initiatives.