On February 25, 2016, the Self-Sufficiency Research Clearinghouse (SSRC) hosted the Connecting Opportunity Youth to Education and Employment Webinar. This free Webinar explored research on assisting opportunity youth with obtaining the education, services, and work experience they need to become self-sufficient as they transition to adulthood. Opportunity youth are young people ages 16-24 who are disconnected from work or school. Speakers from MDRC, Georgetown University, and the Gateway to College National Network discussed research-based strategies for serving opportunity youth. Dr. Harry Holzer, Mr. Nick Mathern, and Ms. Farhana Hossain co-presented on the subject. Ms. Venessa Marks moderated the discussion.

This document contains answers to questions asked during the Webinar. View additional Webinar materials.

QUESTIONS AND ANSWERS

**Do you know of any programs that are strong in teaching executive function skills?**

**Dr. Harry Holzer:** There’s a few programs that I know of. There’s been a little bit of research evidence on what works, but there’s a program in New Haven called the New Haven Moms that was studied and showed some success rate. And there’s some interesting work being done by the Crittenton Women’s Union in Boston that tries to target women, moms at different skill levels and work with them. So we’re starting to see some beginnings of some efforts in that area and some evaluation research.

**Is Gateway to College available in any rural areas?**

**Mr. Nick Mathern:** Right now we don’t have a lot of partnerships in rural areas. Our programs do tend to be in urban and suburban areas, although the program can be adapted for a rural area. The reality of it would be it would be a much smaller program probably and have a scaled down staff. But we’re happy to work with communities that don’t currently have this type of an option to bring a program in at a scale that works for the level of need in a community.

**What percentage of your students complete the program?**

**Mr. Mathern:** Right now I mentioned that we have experienced a lot of growth and then saw uneven outcomes. And so you saw in a slide I showed that we’ve got a benchmark of 50%, and our objective is that we want to make sure that by 2017, all 40 of our programs are exceeding that benchmark of 50% completion. Right now it’s not there. I would say, I don’t have the number directly in front of me, but I think that if we did an aggregate, you know, there’s a range and you saw some of them were on the high end. But I think on average probably about 35% right now for a high school, excuse me, for a high school diploma. Some other number of students who ultimately will complete a GED, and we don’t have that included.
because our – we hadn’t previously been collecting that data. So, like I said, I think on average we’re about 35% for a high school diploma right now. Some additional amount for a GED. And, by 2017, because we’re implementing an effort to bring more balance to the K-12 and the college instruction, we’re going to bring up some of those programs that had been struggling with an all-college implementation.

**What role do public housing authorities play in helping opportunity youth? And, what kind of partnerships could be created with the labor unions to help support opportunity youth?**

**Ms. Farhana Hossain:** This is Farhana. Yes, one example of a union partnership is the Center for Energy Workforce Development and the International Brotherhood of Electric Workers have – it’s the Center for Energy Workforce Development, it’s a nonprofit consortium. It’s formed by the electric, natural gas, and nuclear utilities and their trade associations. And they essentially wanted to develop solutions to the, you know, workforce shortage in the energy industry. And their employers worked with educators and the International Brotherhood of Electric Workers to create pathways for different types of energy carriers. And, also, another one that comes to mind is in Washington State, where Boeing and the International Association of – I believe it’s the Association of Machinists and Aerospace Workers, but don’t hold me to it. But they operate a joint training program and, you know, that’s actually financed by setting aside some money per work hour in the union contract. So there are examples out there of collaboration between unions and workers and employer associations to, you know, create a mechanism that can pay for training to move workers up the ladder.

**Dr. Holzer:** I’ll add a few more to that list. Several construction locals run apprenticeship programs and they have pre-apprenticeship programs into which disconnected young people can enter to try to prepare them, give them the skills preparation to actually enter an apprenticeship program. There is also a union local on the East Coast – Philadelphia, New York – called 1199C that helps prepare young people for jobs in the healthcare industry and in the eldercare industry. And so those are good examples of union involvement as well.

**Mr. Mathern:** And I’ll just pile on, if I can. Sorry, Venessa. Because Farhana is doing an evaluation of YouthBuild, I want to make sure she is aware of an important program. YouthBuild program has a direct entry agreement with several unions based on these pre-apprenticeships that Harry spoke to.

**Ms. Marks:** And, Harry, do you have any thoughts around housing authorities? Relationships that programs can build with housing authorities or programs run by housing authorities?

**Dr. Holzer:** I think YouthBuild is also an example of that, because YouthBuild does focus a lot on housing rehabilitation.
How can we learn more about models that combine work with interventions to promote behavior change and non-cognitive skills, for instance the CBT subsidized job example that Farhana gave? Anyplace you can direct this person to get additional information on those kinds of models?

Ms. Hossain: Sure. This is definitely an emerging area of work. There isn’t a lot out, I mean that’s proven out there that’s….I mean, CBT has been proven in many, in different contexts to, for example, reduce recidivism. But in terms of promotion of employment, there is not, you know, rigorous evidence there because it’s still emerging. In 2012, I believe, the University of Chicago did a study of their summer employment program there called One Summer Plus that combined a part-time summer job with a cognitive behavioral therapy based curriculum. And that showed a reduction in violence in some of their youth outcomes, improvement in some of their youth outcomes. So that’s one example. We are currently working, I can’t speak much about it, but we are currently exploring ways to develop…CBT is an umbrella term that’s used for, as I said, kind of a way of thinking about restructuring thoughts to promote positive behavior. But there are many, there are different types of interventions that, you know, that can fit within that umbrella term. So we’re trying to assess which interventions would work well to promote employment. But that’s an area of work that’s developing.

Is there any literature on engaging youth for evidence-based programs combined with WIOA? Are programs starting to partner with workforce development boards in new ways because of WIOA?

Dr. Holzer: I don’t know. I don’t know of any literature on that or any evaluation evidence. I know that there’s activity, important activity going on, but I haven’t seen any summaries of that activity for this population specifically.

Ms. Marks: Great. And, Farhana, is there any additional information you’d like to add in about WIOA for folks who might not be as familiar with it?

Ms. Hossain: Not in that specific. I’m not aware of – I mean this is still, as I said, this is going on on the ground but I’m not aware of partnerships that are successful.

Ms. Marks: Great.

Ms. Hossain: Yes.

Ms. Marks: Yes, yes, exactly. It’s very new. Fantastic. Well, for those who aren’t familiar, the Workforce Innovation and Opportunity Act requires much more funding than ever before to be spent on out-of-school youth. And so it really is an opportunity for workforce development boards and training providers, businesses, to work together in a much more targeted and now more funded way to serve opportunity youth. So there’s soon more information hopefully to be coming, and certainly a lot more practice to be coming down the pike there.

Are there any efforts to determine if students have learning disabilities? Is that something that your program strives to do, to learn about individual education plans, such as IEPs?

Mr. Mathern: That’s an important part of the individualized services that our programs provide. And I’ll
acknowledge that it can be a challenge to provide services to students with an IEP in a college setting because colleges, by law, are governed by a different set of rules, by ADA (Americans with Disabilities Act) rather than IDEA (Individuals with Disabilities Education Act) when it comes to individualized services for dealing with disabilities, etcetera. What we find is that if during the enrollment process there is explicit efforts to connect with families in a school district if a student is referred who has an IEP, most of our programs will set up an IEP meeting at that time and determine whether or not the additional services that are available on a college campus, or simply the case management services that are available via the coach or the resource specialist, meet the needs of the student’s IEP. About 10% of our students do have an IEP, so it’s not kind of out of proportion to what you might find in a mainstream high school. But what we do find is that there are students who, you know, fit there very well. And actually, that doesn’t tend to be any type of a barrier that holds those students back relative to the rest of our population.

Ms. Hossain: I was going to say I didn’t speak earlier about the – when the housing question, and I believe Dr. Holzer answered about YouthBuild and he’s exactly right. But I also wanted to point that person to our website for our Jobs-Plus study. This is a study that’s not specifically for youth, but it tried to incentivize – I mean, it was very effective in increasing earnings among public housing residents and it had three components, including a, you know, obviously employment-related services like job search assistance, some rent-based incentives, and also a strategy called Community Support for Work, which consisted of efforts to involve residents in neighbor-to-neighbor information sharing about like work opportunities, you know, in the community. So I would encourage them to look at that. Even though it’s not specifically for youth, it is a public housing based initiative that has shown results.

How can we pass knowledge or train workforce development providers in positive youth development? Does positive youth development approach come naturally to workforce development providers? Or is there capacity building that’s needed in that space?

Dr. Holzer: Well, my guess is that some workforce development specialists are better at it than others. Some are more familiar with youth issues than others. So when you look around the country, for instance, there was and is a Philadelphia Youth Network that combines a lot of the youth WIA (Workforce Investment Act) funds and integrates a lot of these programs. And that’s a great mechanism for making workforce development specialists aware of youth issues and targeting better towards them. And there are other such efforts around the country. Now, of course, the budgets are very, very constrained – the WIOA budgets in this area – so it’s hard to put a lot of money into training individuals. But there are some nice efforts around the country to make people more aware and to target people more effectively. Some of the youth, the former Youth Opportunity sites that have survived over time and gotten their own funding also provide some mechanisms for doing that.
How can local communities or states do to address the increasing automation or shift to more skilled jobs?

Dr Holzer: Well, I think what automation has done so far – automation has really eliminated middle wage jobs that used to go to high school graduates or less. A lot of production jobs. A lot of clerical jobs. Those jobs have either disappeared or pay a lot less than they used to because of automation. What that means is that we have to now better target other kinds of jobs that pay well but that have higher skill demands in industries like healthcare, advanced manufacturing, IT, transportation and logistics, hospitality, some of the higher ends of retail trade. Of course, many community colleges are trying to do that. Farhana talked about sector-based strategies and career pathway programs that often target those sectors that continue to have good paying jobs but that now simply require more skill than they used to in the past. And efforts to get our disconnected young people into those postsecondary programs, efforts like Gateway and others to do that, I think are the best efforts we know of to try to deal with that issue.

How do we advocate for additional funding in this arena, and advocate for policy changes that would support further work with opportunity youth? What can we do as practitioners or researchers, policymakers, but what also can youth do to further advocate for themselves and for these kinds of programs?

Dr. Holzer: Yeah. I think a couple of things. Number one, what all of us have talked about, having evidence, having rigorous evidence of impacts is very important. I mean, it’s virtually impossible at the federal level and even at most state level programs that if you don’t have rigorous evidence, you’re not going to make a very effective case for your program. So that’s really important to have. And secondly, there’s an argument about just how costly it is not to address this problem, the costs of healthcare for this population, the costs in the criminal justice system are just massive. And, interestingly, I think on criminal justice there’s actually been a big political change. Conservatives are now really reaching the same conclusion that this is a huge waste of money, that we need to treat these young people differently and not just rely on incarceration. So I think that gives us all an opportunity. But in terms of the last part of your question, what can young people do for themselves? Sometimes there have been some very powerful stories told by young people who had a really rough start in life and who disconnected and maybe got in trouble with the law, and who managed to reconnect with the aid of one of these programs. And I found those – I find those stories just as powerful as the evidence. And a few well-placed stories like that I think can make a difference as well.

Ms. Marks: Thank you, Harry. Nick, any final thoughts to add?

Mr. Mathern: Yeah, I’ll just tag on that. I agree 100% with Harry. We were down in our state capital, Salem, earlier this week working with legislatures on a bill to have more reengagement options for out-of-school youth, and having a lobbyist – excuse me – a legislative aide there who was a former Gateway to College student was a very compelling part of that. So that’s absolutely critical. And then I’ll just say, you know, I think that the economic argument that Harry’s talking about is critical. And there’s a really crass workforce argument to be made, which is that our economy no longer has those positions that Harry was talking about for young people who don’t have a high school diploma. And so if we’ve got an expectation that everyone has a high school credential and postsecondary training, we just don’t get there if we leave 20%
behind.

**Ms. Marks:** Thank you, Nick. Farhana?

**Ms. Hossain:** I’m going to obviously stress the need for adoption of interventions and programs and practices that have some rigorous evidence behind them, especially when we’re thinking about adopting them at scale. But also, you know, isn’t there a saying called “all politics is local?” So I’d like to adopt that saying to this context to say I think there can be a lot done on a local level, as Nick was saying, reaching out to local policymakers, reaching out to local employers, reaching out to – whether it’s for, whether it’s youth, whether it’s the programs. I just think that local engagement can make a huge difference.