



Opportunity Youth: Coming into Focus

Texas builds momentum toward reengaging opportunity youth with education and career pathways.



GREATER TEXAS FOUNDATION

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“Before coming to American YouthWorks, I felt lost.

I missed a lot of high school while helping my mom care for my siblings. Then my credits didn’t transfer after moving from out of state and I was going to be held back. That’s when my aunt told me about [YouthBuild](#).

At YouthBuild, I felt supported and treated like an adult. The staff encouraged me to stay focused and I was proud to earn my GED. Through the HealthCorps program, I earned my Community Health Worker certification and recently completed an externship with CommUnityCare, where I shadowed registered nurses, CHWs, and physicians. It was inspiring to see how passionate they were about their work. I was impressed at how they collaborated across departments to meet patient needs.

Now, I am looking for a job and planning to enroll in college to pursue a career in dentistry, starting as a dental hygienist. **YouthBuild gave me direction and confidence that I needed to move forward.”**

– Honesty Lopez

Where it Started. Where it Stands Now.

Honesty Lopez was one of **500,000 opportunity youth (OY) in Texas**—youth and young adults aged 16-24 who are not in school and not working. Thanks to programs at American Youthworks in Austin, Honesty is now on the path to postsecondary education and a fulfilling career.

In recent years, there has been growing awareness of the huge cost of this youth disengagement, to individuals and to our society and economy. In 2021, Greater Texas Foundation partnered with Trellis Foundation and T.L.L. Temple Foundation to convene more than 80 people to answer the question, “What would it take to reconnect opportunity youth to education and work equitably and at scale across Texas?”

In the years since the convening, educators, nonprofits, and funders have been working in concert to better serve opportunity youth, even in the face of significant changes in the economic and policy environment.

In this report, we check back with some of the partners from our 2021 convening to provide an update on the initiatives that serve opportunity youth.



What would you say is the major headline about how support for opportunity youth in Texas has evolved in the years since the 2021 convening?

We posed this question to several leaders who are working on behalf of opportunity youth. Here were their thoughts:

“ For me, the major headline is that this formerly invisible population is now visible and a growing priority among state and local leaders.”
– **Dr. Hannah Gourgey, Texas Opportunity Youth Forum**

“ In short, Texas stood by its own. Texas is proving that we must (and can!) come together to focus on helping the next generation – especially those that need it most.”
– **Michael Sack, Jobs for the Future**

“ Having a facilitated network of stakeholders in the Texas Opportunity Youth Network has led to better connections, examples of strategy and practice, and general knowledge of who’s doing what and where.”
– **Kristin J. Boyer, Trellis Foundation**

“ Since 2021, Texas has expanded policies and funding to support opportunity youth initiatives within the school system. These changes provide opportunities for school districts to use Average Daily Attendance (ADA) funding to reengage and support high school dropouts to high school completion and postsecondary certification.

The term opportunity youth is slowly gaining awareness. More people are becoming aware of the specific issues and challenges that this population of young people face in our school systems, often leading to disconnection. Likewise, the ADA funding available is helpful in incentivizing schools to develop special programming to reengage these disconnected youth to complete their education.”
– **Charlie Glover, T.L.L. Temple Foundation**

“ I’m particularly encouraged by the growing opportunities for young adults across the state to cultivate their leadership aptitude, and I’m delighted funders have come to the table united in their resolve and the insight that the work of reconnection takes time, skill, and patient capital.”
– **Carolyn Watson, The William Stamps Farish Fund**

What has contributed to this positive shift for OY programs and policy?

- The 2021 Opportunity Youth convening served as a powerful touchpoint for collaboration.
- With the creation of the Texas Opportunity Youth Network (TOYN) there is a formal state network to tell the story and leverage the different kinds of collaborative community actions that are taking place across the state. This was especially helpful in educating state representatives during the 89th Texas legislative session.
- TOYN has raised the level of awareness of opportunity youth in the state by engaging with state agencies that directly impact opportunity youth and young adults: Texas Education Agency, Texas Higher Education Coordinating Board, Texas Workforce Commission, and the Texas Juvenile Justice Department.
- The Ray Marshall Center at the University of Texas at Austin received a multi-year grant award from the JP Morgan Chase Foundation to launch the nation’s first cohort analysis of opportunity youth based on education data. This provided, for the first time, real numbers, not estimates, [about this population](#).

By the Numbers

13% of Texas youth
are disconnected from school and work

At 28 years old, Texans who had been disconnected make on average only \$20,894 annually—over **\$16,000 less than their peers** who had not experienced disconnection.

See OY data by legislative district [here](#).

“There's a very different tone when a deeply respected Texas funder steps in and says, “This is something that we know is a big issue.”
– Hannah Gourgey

GET THE 2021 CONVENING REPORT

Read the [full report](#) from the April 2021 opportunity youth convening.

From Pilot Projects to Policy Progress

In 2021, the Aspen Institute launched the Texas Opportunity Youth Network, to build the expertise and capacity of communities working to reengage and support their opportunity youth. And in 2022, with the help of a \$1 million grant from Greater Texas Foundation, the Aspen Institute established the Texas Opportunity Youth Innovation Fund to scale and sustain reconnection programming for opportunity youth.

We talked with **Hannah Gourgey, Director of the Texas Opportunity Youth Network**, about the progress of the Network and the Innovation Fund.

Communities Empowered through the Texas Opportunity Youth Network

“TOYN was launched to help communities leverage state policy and public/private funding partnerships to build sustainable and scalable opportunity youth pathways statewide. As of July 2025, eight communities successfully planned, piloted, and launched programming within this initiative:

- Austin
- Amarillo
- Corpus Christi
- El Paso
- Dallas
- Houston
- San Antonio
- Waco

In each case, these communities developed blended revenue models to help support and sustain their programs.”

“Over 420 youth enrolled in programming directly across our participating communities and we are on course to meet our year end projection of 880.”

Impact of the Innovation Fund

“The TOYN Innovation Fund achieved its goal of increasing community expertise in drawing down public funding to support opportunity youth. Furthermore, by launching this initiative in the early stages of TOYN’s own growth, the Innovation Fund helped to establish the state network’s credibility as a trusted partner and supporter of community organizations doing the hard work on the ground.

Because of the changes underway in funding at the federal level, several of these community partners have experienced disruptions or cessation of public funding and are in the process of identifying new resources to continue to sustain their programs. Even in the face of these enormous challenges, our community partners were able to exceed their matching grant goals by close to 200% and secure over \$1 million in the first six months of 2025.”

Disruption in the Federal Funding Landscape

“With half of our partners experiencing changes to their public funding source, we have pivoted to provide technical assistance in working with them to identify new philanthropic supports.

The key takeaways in this environment:

- No funding stream, public or private, is guaranteed and therefore all revenue models must consider all strategies that diversify their streams of support. Some of our partners are looking at “fee for service” models that provide much needed unrestricted funding, in addition to the blended public/private funder model.
- Public funding restrictions make private philanthropic contributions essential to help ensure that all those who need support have access and that there is a broad range of supports that include critical stabilization goals.”



Opportunities for Systems Change in the Policy Landscape

“We have several policies in Texas that are very supportive of opportunity youth. We just need to leverage them more effectively. For example:

- The community college finance bill (HB8) that was passed in the 2023 legislative session is a very supportive bill for opportunity youth and young adults.
- Texas is the only state in the nation that allows young people to go to high school up until the age of 26 and the vast majority of school districts aren’t aware of this. There are a few innovative places, like the Rio Grande Valley, where they are working to reengage this population. So now it actually can become a revenue generator if they re-enroll this population and have them get their diploma versus a GED.
- Adult charter schools are being established and a community college high school is being piloted in a few colleges across the state as a result of legislative changes.
- There is greater attention being paid to work-based learning and career-based learning, and this is a population that will benefit from these strategies being scaled in the state of Texas because if you ask any opportunity youth what their greatest need is, they will say, ‘I need to work and I need to make money.’

The effort to help opportunity youth has widespread and bipartisan appeal. The visibility of this population has been lifted greatly, so much so that the governor and the Texas Workforce Investment Council included them in their [strategic plan](#) for business success in the future. I think we’re seeing a clear understanding that they are integral to sustained economic prosperity of the state and of the communities in which they live.

One of the greatest forces for systems change is new legislation that requires workforce investment boards (WIBs) to be transparent about their spending on youth and young adult services and to include opportunity youth in their annual strategic plans. This means that in every region in the state, local WIBs will need to attend more closely to community partners who serve this population directly. This change was accomplished in collaboration with policy partner [Children at Risk](#).”

Putting Youth at the Center

Time and time again, experience shows the OY programs that are most successful listen to their young people. Engaging youth and young adults to co-design programs makes the content much more relevant, increases retention, and provides essential leadership building.

And, the best recruiters for a program are young people so it’s important to honor that contribution and compensate them if possible.

Opportunity youth often need nonacademic “wrap around” supports as they pursue postsecondary credentials, including affordable childcare, transportation, food, housing, and healthcare. Participants at the 2021 OY convening cited mental health care as the greatest need, since opportunity youth are often coping with heavy levels of stress and trauma.



Constructing a Solid Future

An estimated 60% of those leaving prison remain unemployed a year later. In this environment, Albert (named changed to protect identity) faced headwinds as he tried to transition from prison and build a new life with a career. His prior work experience was a single week at a Waffle House before he was arrested. He turned to the JustCareers program at Lone Star Justice Alliance (LSJA) for help and hope.

When Albert came to LSJA, he was on probation and wanted to find a career that provided financial stability and growth not available in the restaurant industry. LSJA first helped Albert obtain his driver’s license through an accelerated program. With license in hand, he was eligible to enroll in the construction training program through JustCareers.

Albert took to heart the LSJA value of “trust the process,” taking advantage of all the opportunities JustCareers offered. He worked with staff to create an updated resume and obtain OSHA 10, Heavy Equipment Operator, and Flagger certifications.

He eagerly participated in financial literacy courses and established an emergency savings account, which he used during times when construction work was slow.

Albert also took advantage of individual and group mental health sessions to address his past trauma experienced both at home and during incarceration. He created bonds with peers and displayed leadership during Community Engagement events with various community volunteers.

After graduating from the JustCareers program, he received a full-time job offer from Road Solutions, a local construction company, and, based on his work ethic, earned a raise after only one month. Albert continues to pursue his life goals and overcome past barriers.



Hope for the Future

What are you most hopeful about? Where do you see momentum in serving this population?

Partners from across Texas told us they are looking to the future with hope.

“ I think the Houston/Gulf Coast region has made great strides by focusing on employment pathways for OY. While they’ve taken a holistic approach, acknowledging the importance of basic needs support (including transportation and mental health), their ultimate focus on family-sustaining wages has generated momentum in that region of the state.

– Kristin J. Boyer, Trellis Foundation

“ I am hopeful that recent school funding opportunities will encourage more small rural schools to develop and implement customized initiatives, such as the Jobs for the Future Back on Track framework, that encourage out-of-school students to reconnect to complete their high school diploma along with a workforce credential.

I am especially hopeful that new efforts also include helping students to simultaneously complete a meaningful workforce credential that leads to a middle-to-high-wage job. Having both a high school diploma and a meaningful workforce credential opens opportunities for a better life for these highly at-risk students.”

– Sylvia A. Leal, T.L.L. Temple Foundation

“ I’m most hopeful about the momentum toward developing new reengagement programs and centers, in the form of expanded capacity in Corpus Christi, Dallas, El Paso, and Houston and in emergent efforts in Waco and Central Texas.”

– Andrew Moore, National League of Cities

“ The Texas Opportunity Youth Network is putting this population front and center—driving real change in regional programs and statewide systems. We’re ready to use that momentum to create clear, attainable pathways to postsecondary and workforce success for every Texas student.”

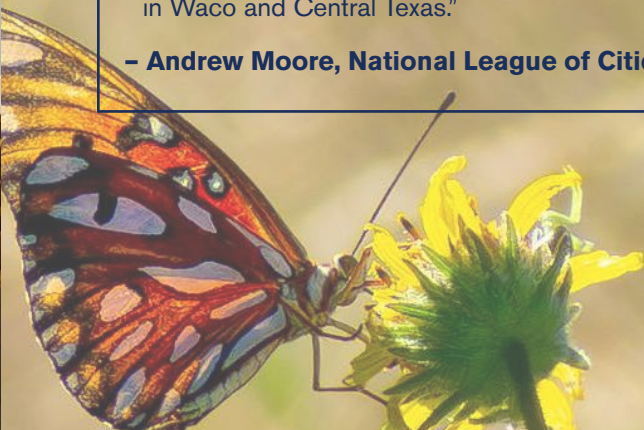
– Leslie Gurrola, Greater Texas Foundation

“ Collaboration- powered by the Texas Opportunity Youth Network - has turned the giant state of Texas into a tight-knit team focused on creating stellar opportunities for young adults who need our support in plugging into education and employment pathways. Employers drawn to Texas’ business-friendly environment need talented people, and the Network and its on-the-ground partners will keep spreading the word that the people necessary to power Texas’ economy are already here!”

– Carolyn Watson, The William Stamps Farish Fund

“ While 1 in 10 American Opportunity Youth are Texans, Texas has made significant strides in lowering the disconnection rate through strategic policies, strong local collective impact work, and unique state-level inter-agency policy agenda. In addition, youth leadership is another cause for hope in Texas. For example, the Texas Network of Youth Services’ Emerging Leaders Board is a reminder that next gen Texans will ensure there are reconnection opportunities and supports for all young Texans. Their state youth leadership council is a structural beacon of hope for all young talent.”

– Michael Sack, Jobs for the Future



More Resources

From Texas Network of Youth Services	Unique Stories of opportunity youth who are served by the Texas Emerging Leaders Board.
From Texas Rural Funders	A library of resources about OY.
From Aspen Institute	<p>The Texas Guide to Supporting Opportunity Youth through Leveraged Public Funding includes a primer on public funding, a public funding resource list, and tools for grant writing.</p> <p>Mapping the Diversity of OYF Collaboratives: A Guide to Understanding the OYF Network explores how a diverse set of collaboratives within the Opportunity Youth Forum conceptualize their work and pursue systems level change.</p>
From Trellis Foundation	Trellis supported Children at Risk to advocate for OY support and to prepare one-pagers for each legislative district. Examples can be found on their website at Advocacy Action Center: 89th Legislative Session - CHILDREN AT RISK (see right-hand column for OY district samples) as well as an issue brief at SB-1143-HB-3173-Children-at-Risk-OYYA-2.pdf .
From the Ray Marshall Center	A deeper dive into the ESTOY website yields actionable data that will aid in finding opportunity youth who are likely to benefit from services or preventative measures.
From Jobs for the Future (JFF)	<p>Policy suggestions that contribute to ideal career navigation systems.</p> <p>Models that provide learners with unique blended experiences for grades 11-14, nondegree opportunities, and apprenticeships.</p>



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For more information, contact [Leslie Gurrola](#), Vice President of Programs and Strategy.