

# Addressing the Needs of Youth with Disabilities and Other Intersecting Identities:

## State Strategies for Program Implementation

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## Summary

Youth and young adults with disabilities (Y&YADs) face significant barriers to accessing employment and are employed at lower rates than their peers without disabilities. Y&YADs with additional intersecting social identities (e.g., those who are experiencing homelessness or who belong to racial or ethnic minority groups) may experience even greater barriers to accessing employment supports and attaining and maintaining employment. Yet Y&YADs can also experience protective factors as a result of their intersecting identities, or “conditions or attributes in individuals, families and communities,” that promote positive outcomes.<sup>1</sup> Protective factors can include access to mentors and strong social support from adults, which youth belonging to certain communities may experience.<sup>2</sup> States have taken a number of approaches to address the challenges Y&YADs with intersecting identities face and to leverage the unique perspectives and experiences their identities can bring. By designing and implementing programs and services that meet the needs of Y&YADs who have intersecting identities, states are working to increase employment rates for Y&YADs and satisfy the Workforce Innovation and Opportunity Act’s (WIOA) purpose to improve workforce services and outcomes for vulnerable populations.

This brief focuses specifically on how states can implement programs and services to meet the needs of Y&YADs with intersecting identities. State approaches include:

- 1** | Adapting existing workforce programs to serve Y&YADs with intersecting identities;
- 2** | Creating new workforce programs for Y&YADs with specific intersecting identities;
- 3** | Coordinating with community organizations to enhance services for Y&YADs with intersecting identities;
- 4** | Hiring more diverse and culturally competent workforce system staff; and
- 5** | Developing the cultural competency of existing workforce system staff.



# Introduction

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Y&YADs can face multiple barriers to employment and are employed at lower rates than youth without disabilities. Barriers include lack of education or training, lack of transportation, need for workplace accommodations,<sup>3</sup> employer or coworker attitudes, lack of job counseling and loss of government assistance.<sup>4</sup> These barriers contribute to comparatively low rates of employment for Y&YADs. In 2020, only 44.2% of individuals with disabilities aged 20 to 24 were engaged in the workforce, compared to 70.4% of their peers without disabilities.<sup>5</sup>

Youth with intersecting identities may face numerous additional barriers to employment,

which can have compounding effects. For example, women with a behavioral disability or who belong to a racial minority group experience increased risk for negative employment outcomes and disability-related harassment compared to peers who do not belong to these social categories.<sup>6</sup> Additional employment barriers for Y&YADs can include lack of access to adequate employment supports and services, family support structure, broadband, technology and opportunities for work-based learning or training. Youth with disabilities may also have intersecting identities that are invisible to service providers, making it difficult to address barriers without youth disclosing the particular challenges they may face.

## Understanding Intersectionality

Kimberlé Crenshaw coined the term “intersectionality” in 1989 to refer to the various identities each person has and how they intersect or overlap in ways that can be empowering or oppressive.<sup>7</sup>

For example, a Black woman can encounter both race and sex discrimination in employment, which is unique from discrimination experienced by either Black men or white women. This was the focus of the case *DeGraffenreid v. General Motors*, which inspired Crenshaw’s framework.<sup>8</sup>

Many Y&YADs have intersecting identities that can combine to either increase or mitigate the barriers to employment they may face. These identities include:

- ▶ belonging to racial minority groups;
- ▶ being from low-income households;
- ▶ being members of the foster care system;
- ▶ having involvement in the justice system;
- ▶ experiencing homelessness or being a runaway;
- ▶ being a member of the LGBTQIA+ community;
- ▶ being immigrants or English language learners; or
- ▶ belonging to other marginalized populations.

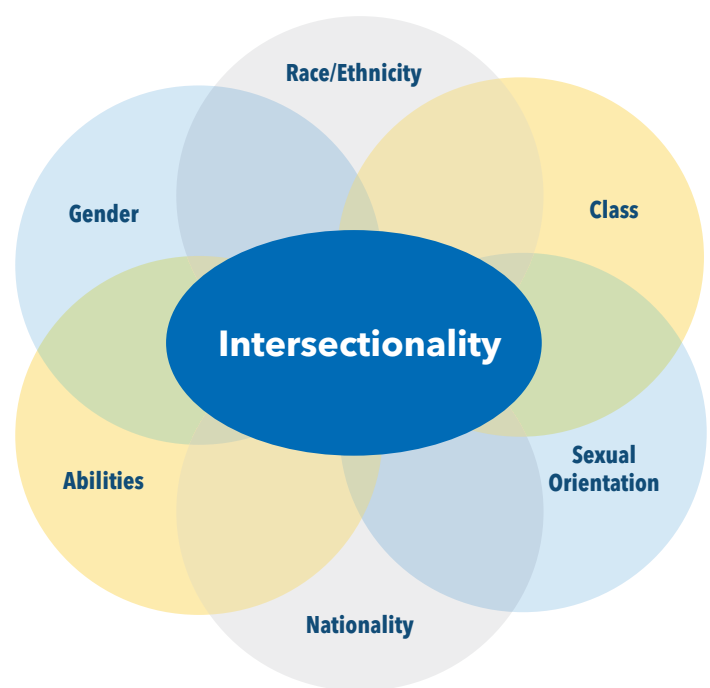


At the same time, Y&YAD with intersecting identities can experience specific protective factors that, if appropriately identified and leveraged, can mitigate the employment barriers they face. Protective factors refer to characteristics within an individual, family, school or community that are associated with a lower likelihood of negative outcomes (including employment outcomes).<sup>9, 10, 11</sup> For example, Latino firms in a community might be specifically seeking Latino workers, or non-Latino firms may be interested in hiring Latino youth to increase their diversity. If appropriately leveraged, these connections and resources can serve as protective factors for Latino Y&YAD in attaining employment.<sup>12</sup>

States can face systemic issues in supporting Y&YADs with intersecting identities and leveraging their unique attributes. This includes insufficient federal and state investment in supporting Y&YADs with intersecting identities; inadequate provision of education, training and transition services; insufficient coordination, collaboration and accountability for the systems involved in serving these youth; and issues around data and information collection and sharing.<sup>13, 14</sup>

By addressing the workforce needs of Y&YADs who have intersecting identities and leveraging their unique strengths and resources, state policymakers can work to improve employment outcomes for

Y&YADs and increase the pool of diverse workers for employers. In addition, by understanding and addressing the unique needs and strengths of Y&YADs with intersecting identities, state policymakers can better meet the purpose of the Workforce Innovation and Opportunity Act (that is, to “strengthen and improve our nation’s public workforce system and help get Americans, including youth and those with significant barriers to employment, into high-quality jobs and careers”).<sup>15</sup>



# State Strategies

State policymakers can consider several strategies for implementing programs to address the needs of Y&YADs with intersecting identities.

## 1. Adapt existing workforce programs to serve Y&YADs with intersecting identities

States already offer a range of programs that serve Y&YADs, and they can modify these to better serve youth with specific identities. These modifications relate to how, where and by whom services are delivered, to address barriers that specific communities face in accessing services. States can:

- **Translate resources, tools and other materials into languages commonly used by a state's Y&YADs**



The **Rhode Island** Office of Rehabilitation Services has made efforts to improve services with individuals who are minorities by providing an array of agency materials in accessible formats and translation into other languages.<sup>16</sup>

- **Deliver existing services in non-traditional settings to meet Y&YADs with intersecting identities where they are**



The **West Virginia** Division of Rehabilitation Services provides outreach and services for youth with disabilities in non-traditional settings, such as juvenile centers and facilities, and Youth Reporting Centers. The youth in these settings are afforded the same opportunities to receive VR services, information and referrals to other support services as youth in traditional settings.<sup>17</sup>



- **Staff programs with individuals who have the language and other skills to engage target populations**



The **Tennessee Disability Pathfinder** program provides free information, resources, support and referrals to Tennesseans with disabilities. The program hires bilingual staff to improve services for Spanish-speaking consumers. It is a partnership between the state's Vocational Rehabilitation Services program and Vanderbilt University's Kennedy Center.<sup>18</sup>



## 2. Create new workforce programs for Y&YADs with specific intersecting identities

States may determine that they do not have programs that can be easily adapted to meet the needs of Y&YADs with specific intersecting identities, or that specific communities require more intensive services. In those instances, states can create new workforce programs and services to serve Y&YADs with specific intersecting identities, such as tribal youth or youth involved in the juvenile justice system. Effective programs provide instruction and services that are tailored to meet the specific needs of a community, as identified in the program design phase. States can:

- Provide specialized workplace instruction to culturally and linguistically diverse Y&YADs



**Oregon's Connecting Communities Program** is designed to facilitate greater access and service provision

for culturally diverse job seekers with disabilities by providing specialized instruction such as English for the workplace, cultural differences in the workplace and English as a Second Language (along with other workplace readiness and on-the-job skills trainings). It is a partnership between Easterseals Oregon and Oregon Vocational Rehabilitation.<sup>19</sup>

- Provide intensive case management services to Y&YADs exiting juvenile justice supervision (JJS)



The **New Mexico** Children, Youth & Families Department offers [JJS Transition Services](#), which provides intensive case management services to youth with high levels of mental and/or behavioral health needs following their discharge from juvenile justice facilities. Transition coordinators work with clients to develop transition plans, which cover areas like housing, behavioral and mental health, education, employment and vocational training and life skills.<sup>20</sup>

- Provide peer mentoring and self-advocacy services to youth who lack strong social support systems



**Missouri** Vocational Rehabilitation offers [peer mentoring](#) specifically for students with disabilities who are in the foster care or juvenile justice systems. Students are connected with a peer mentor for at least a year and work with Pre-Employment Transition Services (Pre-ETS) specialists on career readiness skills related to self-advocacy.<sup>21, 22</sup>

### 3. Coordinate with community organizations to enhance services for Y&YADs with intersecting identities

Community organizations and non-profits already exist within each state that engage, serve and understand diverse communities. States can support these organizations to enhance their efficacy, and/or states can leverage organizations' services and expertise to minimize duplication of efforts and save time and financial resources. States can:

- Provide grants, funding and technical assistance to support organizations that serve Y&YADs with intersecting identities



#### **Minnesota's Opportunity Reboot**

initiative provides training and technical support to sustain and grow the work of local organizations creating career pathways for opportunity youth (i.e., youth disconnected from education and employment). One grantee is Sauk Rapids-Rice Public Schools, which serves 166 economically disadvantaged and/or disconnected youth through its Opportunity Reboot program, 50% of whom come from communities of color and 25% of whom have disabilities.<sup>23</sup>

- **Contract key services (such as translation) to community organizations well-versed in engaging diverse populations**



In **Maine**, the Division for the Blind and Visually Impaired utilizes certified interpreter services, such as Maine State Interpreters and Catholic Charities Maine, to bridge language and cultural barriers and communicate directly with clients in numerous languages.<sup>24</sup>

- **Co-deliver services with community organizations to leverage their expertise and reach**



The **Alaska** Division of Vocational Rehabilitation (DVR) partners with a Community Rehabilitation Provider (CRP) to provide transition camps at juvenile justice facilities and to students in foster care. The CRP contracts directly with the school district, Division of Juvenile Justice facility or state agency for coordination, travel and lodging costs, and DVR funds the direct delivery of Pre-ETS as the content for the camp.<sup>25</sup>

## 4. Hire more diverse and culturally competent workforce system staff

States can develop the cultural competency of their workforce system staff by targeting their recruitment and hiring efforts toward individuals who either reflect the diversity of the target populations they will serve, or who have existing training around cultural competency and related topics. States can:

- **Recruit candidates from Rehabilitation Counseling Programs that have diverse students and/or that focus on cultural competency**



In **Washington, D.C.**, the University of the District of Columbia's [Master of Arts in Rehabilitation Counseling program](#)

prepares graduate students to meet the needs of a "culturally diverse community" by requiring mastery of multicultural counseling competencies and providing courses in social and cultural foundations. The District works closely with the program to coordinate internship opportunities and hire VR specialists from the program.<sup>26</sup>

- **Partner with state human resource divisions to increase the recruitment of minority and bilingual candidates**



The **Kentucky** Office of Vocational Rehabilitation partners with human resources within the Personnel Cabinet and the agency's Human Resource Division to hire the most qualified individuals, with a focus on recruiting minority candidates, including those who are bilingual.<sup>27</sup>

- **Offer extra assignment pay for staff with language skills beyond English, as a way of attracting diverse staff**



The **Washington** Division of Vocational Rehabilitation provides 14 staff with 5% extra assignment pay

for language skills, including for Spanish, Korean, Cambodian and Tagalog/Bisayan, to continue targeting formerly underserved Hispanic/Latino and Asian communities.<sup>28</sup>

## 5. Develop the cultural competency of existing workforce system staff

In addition to hiring more diverse and culturally competent workforce staff, states can help enhance the cultural competency of existing staff through ongoing trainings and other professional development opportunities related to cultural humility and sensitivity, multicultural competency and serving specific populations of Y&YADs. States can:

- **Provide in-house trainings to workforce staff**



The **Florida** Division of Vocational Rehabilitation includes a module on cultural competence as part of its staff development and training program.<sup>29</sup>

- **Bring in external experts to train workforce staff**



The **Maine** Division of Vocational Rehabilitation brings in individuals from Wabanaki Vocational Rehabilitation (one of the state's tribal Vocational Rehabilitation programs) to provide training and technical assistance on issues related to cultural competency and best practices in Native employment supports.<sup>30</sup>

- **Support workforce staff in attending relevant conferences and pursuing other professional development opportunities**



The **Illinois** Division of Rehabilitation Services provides financial support to enable staff to attend the Illinois Association of Agencies and Community Organizations for Migrant Advocacy Conference and the Latino Mental Health Conference, among others.<sup>31</sup>



## Conclusion

Y&YADs are a diverse population. Y&YADs with overlapping social identities can face numerous barriers (e.g., additional workplace discrimination) as well as possess protective factors (e.g., strong support from their communities) that can affect their potential for successful employment. States can effectively serve Y&YADs with intersecting identities by implementing programs and services

that specifically address their unique needs and leverage their unique strengths. This includes adapting existing programs and creating new ones, coordinating with community organizations to enhance services and developing a more culturally responsive workforce staff through targeted hiring and training.

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This is one brief in a series on serving Y&YADs with intersecting identities.

# Endnotes

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