

TOWARD A VISION OF QUALITY SUMMER EMPLOYMENT FOR ALL YOUTH

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For decades, Summer Youth Employment Programs (SYEPs) have provided income, career exposure, and real-life work experience for thousands of young people across the United States. Yet year after year, youth and community leaders report that there are [not enough summer jobs](#) to go around. Some cities pressure underfunded SYEPs to serve all youth who apply, while others hold lotteries to dole out limited slots. Ultimately, hundreds of thousands of youth find themselves unemployed every summer.

Young people entering the workforce today have borne witness to social and economic upheaval. The pandemic accelerated trends toward automation, virtual operations, and a growing gig economy. It also exacerbated a host of longstanding problems, including inequitable access to the educational and economic opportunities youth need.

Large numbers of youth lost jobs or experienced reduction in hours. Even more felt the economic fallout as family members lost work. Many watched older generations struggle to maintain their households while working jobs with low pay, inflexible schedules, and minimal sick leave. Today, they see government and business leaders casting blame for purported labor shortages while workers fight increasingly visible campaigns for safer workplaces, higher wages, paid leave, and fair treatment by employers. These events are shaping how a generation of young people navigates daily life and what they expect of their futures.

Recent interviews with SYEP funders, providers, advocates, and participants in 6 U.S. cities explored what it would take to guarantee a high-quality summer job to all youth. Among the insights that emerged, one theme became clear: **Young people want more than a summer job; they want career-focused work experience that is worth their time and responsive to their day-to-day realities.**



“A job is something you’re not really happy with – it’s just something that helps you pay the bills. But a career is something you love, and you don’t look at it as a job.”

- Naomi Porter, youth organizer and former SYEP participant

Mandate from a Young Generation

In early 2020, New York City zeroed out its budget for SYEPs, which had served 75,000 youth the previous year. The city later restored 30,000 positions – a partial win, according to Kai-Lin Kwek-Rupp, a high school student who spent her sophomore spring campaigning to save SYEP. Now a senior, Kwek-Rupp describes New York as a “city of opportunity” but dreams of a future where youth co-design SYEPs that coordinate universal access to high-quality paid summer work experiences. When asked if that is realistic, she doesn’t hold back. “It’s a matter of **will** and **imagination** and **investment**.”

The sampling of SYEP funders, providers, and participants interviewed for this report agreed that those three elements would make her vision possible. But how do we create public will? What do we imagine a guarantee would mean? What investments would be required to sustain an equitable program that meets youth’s unique interests and needs?

This document outlines strategies suggested during stakeholder interviews. Far from a framework or checklist, these considerations should serve as conversation starters to help communities think beyond SYEP as we know it and propose SYEP as it could be.



Considerations for Building Public Will

- Collaborate with youth to create a common definition of “full employment” in the context of summer jobs.
- Build a case for support by investing in systems that collect data on interests and needs of youth, families, and employers.
- Develop broad coalitions to advocate for permanent SYEP investments that survive changes in political leadership.
- Frame SYEP as an investment in youth futures, not a solution to crime. Although participation in SYEPs has been [shown](#) to [reduce](#) crime, rhetoric about youth violence often furthers the same racist tropes that have contributed to police profiling of Black and brown youth, criminalization of youthful behaviors, and mass incarceration.
- Expand partnerships among SYEPs, government agencies, schools, and community-based organizations to leverage complementary resources and share information.
- Enlist supportive business leaders to gain buy-in from employers.
- Educate funders about the value and true costs of both virtual and in-person work experience.

“The effectiveness of the program is gonna crash as soon as it’s all about like, how many guns can we get off the streets, how low can we get crime rates, rather than like, how many students can we get into like **meaningful job placements**, how many students are **leaving the summer feeling inspired for the school year**, how many students like, have more of an **idea of what they want to do in the future.**”

- Kai-Lin Kwek-Rupp, Youth Organizer, Teens Take Charge

Ideas for Expanding Imagination

- Institutionalize systems that give youth the power and support to lead program design and improvement.
- Minimize application, documentation, and eligibility requirements.
- Identify and dismantle practices that steer youth of color into careers with limited opportunities for advancement and away from postsecondary education and careers traditionally dominated by white men.
- Create targeted job opportunities with deliberate focus on equity, exposing youth to careers and connecting them to social networks in fields where they are underrepresented.
- Develop a standard for high-road host employers that demonstrate commitment to equity, youth development, and high-quality jobs.
- Collaborate with unions to develop pre-apprenticeships and other strategies to increase access to opportunities protected by collective bargaining agreements.
- Work with industry leaders and regulators to identify and remove restrictions that unnecessarily limit hiring based on factors such as age, educational attainment, immigration status, English fluency, drug testing, or experience in the criminal legal system.
- Commit to individualized supports for youth and prioritize resources for those who face the most significant barriers to quality employment.
- Secure flexible work sites that accommodate youth’s other obligations, such as education, family responsibilities, or court-mandated activities.



Ideas for Expanding Imagination (Continued)

- Ensure youth have peer support and adult mentorship.
- Match youth with work experiences related to their personal and career interests.
- Facilitate skill-building year-over-year, so youth gain responsibility, stackable credentials, exposure to postsecondary options, understanding of how to progress on a career pathway, and flexibility to change direction as their interests evolve.
- Align summer work experience with year-round opportunities for youth who want them.

“My job is to challenge [youth] so that they have the **opportunity to dictate what happens in their lives...** My job is to make sure that they have **choices.**”

- **Monica Badgett, City and County of Denver**

Examples of Necessary Resources & Investments

- Predictable, dedicated, multi-year, minimally-restricted funding that is sufficient to cover the true cost of implementing effective SYEPs at scale.
- Year-round staffing, with a dedicated SYEP department in larger cities.
- Work hours and hourly wages that make the program worth the time and effort youth put into participation.
- Program staff ratios low enough to ensure youth receive individualized support.
- Curriculum, training, certification, and ongoing coaching for employer partners.
- Citywide broadband operated as a basic utility.
- Data sharing agreements that explicitly protect youth privacy while allowing schools and SYEPs to share information they need for effective outreach and youth engagement.
- Centralized, streamlined enrollment and payroll management systems.
- Disaggregated, neighborhood-level data on youth demographics and interests as well as available jobs and other resources.
- Specialized transportation, assistance for employers, and advocacy support for youth with disabilities.

Change happens when communities coalesce around shared priorities. With will, imagination, and investment to match the full scale of the need, communities can make high-quality summer employment possible for all youth.