



# Changing Workforce Development Systems to Better Serve Young Adults and Advance Equity

The First Five Years of Generation Work

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The Authors



# EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

A 2014 report on global human capital trends found that many employers across the United States had difficulties maintaining a skilled and committed workforce.<sup>1</sup> Yet unemployment among young people ages 16 to 29 years was well above the overall unemployment rate. In 2016, 8.2 percent of this group were unemployed, while the national average was 4.9 percent. However, among Black young adults it was even higher: 13.8 percent. Indeed, unemployment among young Black men was more than triple the national average.<sup>2</sup> To help address racial inequity and increase employment among young people, workforce systems and other systems that serve young adults would need to change.

Given this context, in 2016, the Annie E. Casey Foundation (the Casey Foundation) launched Generation Work™ to connect more young adults—especially young people of color from families with low incomes—with meaningful employment by changing the way public and private systems prepare them and support their search for jobs. As part of the initiative, it asked partnerships made up of key workforce organizations in five cities to change how their workforce systems operated by better aligning education, training, and support services across organizations, and weaving into their systems best practices related to employers and youth. In 2017, the Casey Foundation began working with the partnerships to help them incorporate a racial equity lens into their work.

The Casey Foundation asked MDRC to conduct a study examining the experiences of the five partnerships implementing Generation Work and to ascertain lessons for the partnerships as well as policymakers, practitioners, and funders.

The study found that most of the partnerships pursued three broad types of strategies to change their respective workforce systems. They include the following:

1. strategies to change policies or regulations that constrained or facilitated workforce systems coordination, including influencing the funding priorities of key public funders of workforce services (such as the mayor or the local workforce investment board) to increase resources for the system, and changing funding allocation systems to encourage collaboration across organizations;
2. strategies to change how workforce-related organizations interacted with each other to better serve young adults, such as co-locating service providers and fostering trust and

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1. Deloitte Consulting LLP and Bersin by Deloitte, *Global Human Capital Trends 2014: Engaging the 21st-Century Workforce* (New York: Deloitte University Press, 2014).

2. Ranita Jain and Amy Blair, “Now Jobs” in *Young Adult Workforce Programming* (Washington, DC: The Aspen Institute, 2018). The calculation is based on the Bureau of Labor Statistics’ 2016 current population survey data, available at [www.bls.gov/cps/cpsaat03.pdf](http://www.bls.gov/cps/cpsaat03.pdf).

collaboration among workforce organizations by holding regular cross-organizational staff meetings; and

3. strategies to change the practices of workforce organizations, including incorporating a racial equity lens into their work, using organizations' data to identify problems and solutions, providing staff with professional development and training to develop the new skills or knowledge needed to act differently, and obtaining technical assistance to help staff move from “awareness to action.”

The experiences of these Generation Work partnerships demonstrated that, in order to change a workforce system, leaders must first clearly articulate a broad vision that they and their staff across multiple organizations share and will work together to achieve. For this to happen, senior leaders had to trust each other and agree on how they wanted their respective staff to interact differently. They needed to build trust among staff across organizations. One of the main strategies to build this trust that the partnerships deployed was holding regular cross-organizational meetings of various types.

The partnerships' experiences also showed that external funders (in this case, the Casey Foundation) can play an important facilitating role.

All Generation Work partnerships encouraged organizations in the workforce system to adopt practices aimed at improving outcomes for young adults and making them more equitable in terms of race, ethnicity, and gender. The partnership undertook a number of activities to accomplish this task. They include the following:

- using data (both quantitative and qualitative) to identify and describe a local problem or issue and to better understand the challenges that young adults face,
- training staff on racial equity and developing a common language for staff across organizations to discuss and advance it,
- creating spaces (such as learning communities, events, and meetings) for staff to explore equity issues in depth and brainstorm solutions,
- procuring equity technical assistance to help organizations move from “awareness to action,” and
- developing tools to support staff in adopting a new practice.

In conclusion, leaders and funders who are interested in changing a workforce system so that it better serves young adults and advances racial equity can learn from the experiences of the Generation Work partnerships as they will likely want to make many of the same improvements—changing constraining policies, improving how workforce organizations interact, and incorporating practices throughout the system that promote racial equity. However, the Generation Work experience also showed that changing a system requires building trust

among partner organizations and developing a shared vision for how the workforce system can best serve young adults. External funders can be instrumental in the development of strong partnerships and strategies for change when they provide the financial support that allows leaders and staff to meet, learn from each other, and plan for coordinated action.



# Introduction

A 2014 report on global human capital trends found that many employers across the United States had difficulties maintaining a skilled and committed workforce.<sup>1</sup> Yet unemployment among young people ages 16 to 29 years was well above the overall unemployment rate. In 2016, 8.2 percent of this group were unemployed, while the national average was 4.9 percent. However, among Black young adults it was even higher: 13.8 percent. Indeed, unemployment among young Black men was more than triple the national average.<sup>2</sup> To help address racial inequity and increase employment among young people, workforce development systems and other systems that serve young adults would need to change. Given this context, in 2016, the Annie E. Casey Foundation (the Casey Foundation) launched Generation Work™ to connect more young adults—especially young people of color from families with low incomes—with meaningful employment by changing the way public and private systems prepare them and support their search for jobs. This report examines the first five years of the initiative as implemented by five partnerships.

## The Generation Work Initiative

Unlike most youth employment initiatives that focus on young people ages 14 to 24 years and support them as they prepare for and make the transition into the workforce,<sup>3</sup> many of which are funded through the Workforce Innovation and Opportunity Act (WIOA), the Generation Work initiative targeted young people in their first decade of adulthood, namely those ages 18 to 29 years. The initiative explicitly took a systems-level approach to change. In particular, rather than create a new, separate program to address issues related to unemployment among young people of color, the initiative asked the anchor grantee organization in each locality to partner with organizations and institutions involved in workforce-related systems (such as training programs, funders, government agencies, employers, and trade unions) to improve how existing organizations and agencies interacted with and served young adults.<sup>4</sup> To better serve young people, the Generation Work partnerships were expected to align the education, training, and support services across organizations, and to weave into the workforce development system best practices for employer and youth engagement (demand-driven strategies and positive youth development, respectively). See Box 1 for a description of these practices.

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1. Deloitte Consulting LLP and Bersin by Deloitte (2014).
  2. Jain and Blair (2018). The calculation is based on the Bureau of Labor Statistics' 2016 current population survey data, available at [www.bls.gov/cps/cpsaat03.pdf](http://www.bls.gov/cps/cpsaat03.pdf).
  3. Congressional Research Service (2022); U.S. Department of Labor (n.d.).
  4. The original grantees for the Generation Work partnerships were Towards Employment in Cleveland, United Way of Central and Northeastern Connecticut in Hartford, Goodwill Industries of Central Indiana in Indianapolis, the United Way of Southeastern Pennsylvania and of Southern New Jersey in Philadelphia, and Skill Up Washington in Seattle.

## BOX 1. SERVICE PROVIDERS' PROGRAM STRATEGIES

**DEMAND-DRIVEN STRATEGIES** involve building strong relationships with employers and other business leaders in order to better understand the local employment landscape in high-growth industries and develop a shared sense of trust. Through these relationships, partnerships were able to encourage employers to adopt workplace practices that are more likely to attract and retain young adults, particularly those of color, and develop their skills.

**POSITIVE YOUTH DEVELOPMENT** is a whole-person approach that focuses on cultivating young people's talents and competencies through, for example, mentoring and work-based learning, while taking into account the various challenges they may face. Most importantly, the approach emphasizes strong and affirming relationships with caring adults in their schools, families, workplaces, and communities that can help young people navigate their work and personal lives.

NOTE: This box summarizes page 5 in Annie E. Casey Foundation (2018).

The Casey Foundation anticipated that if these practices were integrated throughout a workforce-related system, then the system would produce better employment outcomes for all young adults and advance racial equity. As the partnerships implemented Generation Work, the Casey Foundation concluded that to advance equity the initiative needed to more explicitly prioritize racial equity and inclusion. Thus, starting in 2017, the Casey Foundation more intentionally collaborated with the partnerships to apply an equity lens to Generation Work activities.

This report presents findings from an evaluation of the Generation Work initiative. It assesses what the first five implementing partnerships accomplished over five years in terms of enhancing the experience of young adults in their respective workforce development systems and advancing racial equity. While improving the economic well-being of young adults is complex work, especially in the context of the recent global pandemic and resulting economic slowdown, these partnerships have nonetheless made inroads. Their experiences offer policymakers and practitioners—as well as funders—useful ideas, lessons, and possible guidance on how to change systems to better serve young adults, especially those of color.

The report first describes the composition and initial plans of each partnership and the evaluation. It then explains in detail the strategies that the partnerships used to improve outcomes for young people and advance racial equity and the implications for policy. Finally, it concludes with some lessons learned.

## The Local Generation Work Partnerships and Their Initial Plans

During 2016, the five local partnerships engaged in a planning process with guidance from the Casey Foundation. The partnerships were located in Cleveland, Hartford, Indianapolis, Philadelphia, and Seattle. They consisted of a mix of city and nonprofit workforce agencies,



other nonprofit service organizations, workforce development boards, employers, foundations, and other entities involved with youth and workforce development. The planning process focused on identifying concrete strategies aimed at aligning the various systems that touch the lives of young adults. Table 1 summarizes the Generation Work implementation strategies that the five partnerships laid out in their draft implementation frameworks, which the Casey Foundation asked them to submit to receive implementation funding.

**TABLE 1. OVERVIEW OF THE PARTNERSHIPS AND THEIR INITIAL PLANS**

INITIAL PARTNERS	OVERALL GOAL	STRATEGIES
<b>Cleveland</b>		
Toward Employment Ohio Means Jobs Cuyahoga County Jobs and Family Service Youth Opportunities Unlimited	Create a pathway to jobs that provide family-sustaining wages and career advancement for young adults participating in the WIOA and Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF) system in Cuyahoga County	Transform the existing Young Adult Resource Center into a hub of young adult-focused training, employment, and career advancement services; engage industry partners to create diverse training opportunities for young adults
<b>Hartford</b>		
Capital Workforce Partners City of Hartford Department of Families, Children, Youth, and Recreation Hartford Foundation for Public Giving Hartford Opportunity Youth Collaborative Move UP! Our Piece of the Pie United Way of Central and Northeastern Connecticut Workforce Solutions Collaborative of Metro Hartford	Change existing dynamics among actors in the workforce development system, such as workforce development organizations, youth development and other community-based organizations, and employers, so that more young adults achieve success and do so more quickly	Align the various skill-building services and referral systems; increase the capacity of staff working with young adults to incorporate positive youth development practices into demand-driven, sector-based workforce development activities

(continued)

**TABLE 1 (CONTINUED)**

INITIAL PARTNERS	OVERALL GOAL	STRATEGIES
<b>Indianapolis</b>		
<p>Goodwill Industries of Central Indiana</p> <p>EmployIndy</p> <p>Region 12 Workforce Development Board</p>	<p>Better assist young adults (especially those with families) in obtaining the education and skills required by local employers in high-demand industries</p>	<p>Modify relevant policies and public assistance programs to ensure young adults receive the support they need to complete their education or training; build the capacity of adult education staff to provide high-quality individualized coaching to students; collaborate with employers engaging with adult education providers to develop work-based learning opportunities for students</p>
<b>Philadelphia</b>		
<p>Job Opportunity Investment Network</p> <p>Philadelphia Youth Network</p> <p>District 1199C Training and Upgrading Fund</p> <p>YouthBuild</p>	<p>More effectively connect young adults to quality employment opportunities by promoting strong practices and expanding public investment in the youth workforce development system to create a demand-driven employment system</p>	<p>Build the capacity of various providers through learning communities (recurring meetings in which practitioners, employers, and funders can share knowledge about how to best help low-income young adults find in-demand career opportunities); strengthen formal and informal partnerships across sectors; develop a common language for discussing this work</p>
<b>Seattle</b>		
<p>SkillUp Washington</p> <p>Port Jobs</p> <p>South Seattle College Georgetown Campus</p> <p>King County Employment and Education Resources</p> <p>Aerospace Joint Apprenticeship Committee Northwest Education Access (NEA) (formerly known as Seattle Education Access)</p>	<p>Create pathways for young adults ages 18 to 29 years with low incomes and limited skills to living-wage jobs and careers in growing, in-demand fields, including transportation, logistics, advanced manufacturing, construction or trades, and information technology</p>	<p>Co-locate education and training services at Port Jobs, the employment center at the Seattle-Tacoma International Airport; increase the coordination of education programs, career pathway programs, and other services by posting NEA navigators (staff who work directly with young adults) at Port Jobs; increase awareness of and access to career pathway programs at Airport University</p>

While all of the partnerships shared the overall goal of improving their systems to better serve young adults and help them achieve better employment outcomes, each partnership had a slightly different focus or approach tailored to the local context. In Cleveland, the partnership's key strategies were to co-locate new providers at the existing Young Adult Resource Center, incorporate emerging practices such as skills-based hiring, and improve employer engagement practices. In Hartford, the partnership's main goals were to build the capacity of workforce development providers to serve young people, improve coordination among them to create more seamless pathways for young adults to find quality employment, and change the attitudes of local employers and encourage them to hire young people. Its strategies to meet the objectives were to create "communities of practice," in which providers seeking to improve how they serve young adults could share knowledge and best practices, and to harness data to uncover issues and monitor progress. In Indianapolis, Goodwill Industries of Central Indiana sought to expand the individualized coaching model it uses in its alternative adult charter high schools, the Excel Centers—which award graduates high school diplomas and industry-recognized certificates—to the WIOA-funded adult education system. Similar to the partnership in Hartford, the one in Philadelphia wanted to increase the capacity and coordination of its workforce development providers to more cost effectively train young adults. Finally, like the partnership in Cleveland, the partnership in Seattle sought to streamline re-engagement education programs and career pathway programs. Its primary strategy was to co-locate services at the employment center at the Seattle-Tacoma International Airport.

## The Evaluation

The Casey Foundation asked MDRC to conduct an evaluation examining the experiences of the five partnerships implementing Generation Work and to ascertain lessons for the partnerships as well as policymakers, practitioners, and funders. The study aimed to build knowledge on how local workforce development providers with goals similar to those of Generation Work can change their systems to improve young adults' connections to employment opportunities and make them more equitable.

### Evaluation Questions

The key questions that the evaluation set out to answer included:

1. What strategies did the partnerships use to change their systems?
2. What strategies did the partnerships use to apply a racial equity lens to providers' work with young adults and employers?
3. What roles did the partnerships' leaders and funders play to change their systems and incorporate and prioritize racial equity in the workforce development system?

Workforce development systems consist of local organizations (such as training providers, often high schools and community colleges, and various youth organizations) and state agencies that work in tandem to prepare people for employment, help workers advance in their careers, and ensure that there is a skilled labor force to support local industries and the local economy over time.<sup>5</sup> Federal, state, and local dollars are all typically leveraged to pay for these services; thus, the regulations associated with these funds affect how organizations operate. These systems are a set of “interacting, interdependent parts that are connected through a web of relationships, forming a whole that is greater than the sum of its parts. Systems are overlapping, nested, and networked; they have subsystems and operate within broader systems.”<sup>6</sup> Given the complexity of these systems, changing them is a massive endeavor that is not linear and takes considerable time.<sup>7</sup> Especially in the early stages, it can seem as though nothing is changing.

Previous literature has shown that there is no single path or blueprint for successful systems change. Partners use their unique assets to take a variety of actions at different times to respond to a locality’s unique opportunities and challenges and move change forward.<sup>8</sup> The research team thus did not expect the five partnerships to use a single set of strategies. Instead, MDRC’s approach to answering the three evaluation questions was to interview the multiple members of each partnership over time to learn about the activities that the partnerships intentionally pursued to change their systems, as well as the factors that helped or hindered change. In addition, the research team examined the factors that earlier research on systems change had found to be critical, such as leadership, having a common vision, communications, and the use of data, and how these factors influenced the change process.<sup>9</sup> Finally, the Casey Foundation asked MDRC to learn more about the experiences of the young adults who participating in the services of the Generation Work partner organizations that robustly combined positive youth development and workforce demand-driven practices.

## Methods

From the initiative’s launch in 2016 through 2021, the research team reviewed the partnerships’ workplans, performance metrics, and reports, as well as reports by other organizations that were prepared for the Casey Foundation.<sup>10</sup> Starting in 2017, after the partnerships’ planning period concluded, the research team conducted about 150 in-depth interviews (virtually or

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5. Eyster, Durham, Van Noy, and Damron (2016).

6. Hargreaves (2010).

7. Latham (2014).

8. Latham (2014).

9. For a summary of much of this literature, see Bernstein and Martin-Caughey (2017), Chapter 3 of Kezar (2018), and Lynn et al. (2018).

10. The Aspen Institute, Child Trends, and Kingslow Associates documented and provided technical assistance to the partnerships during the period. The research team reviewed their reports as they provided rich details on particular topics.

in person) with staff members of the organizations comprising the five Generation Work partnerships, including executive directors and agency leaders, mid-level managers, and frontline staff, to learn how they were implementing their systems change plans.<sup>11</sup> The last of these interviews took place in 2021.

The research team attempted to interview the same individuals over time to provide some level of continuity. However, this was not possible in many cases given staff changes over the course of the study. Interviewing members of the partnerships at various points in time allowed the research team to gather information about the initiatives as they unfolded. The study, however, does not attempt to capture every activity or process that the partnerships engaged in, nor could it. The team conducted a systematic analysis of interviews to identify themes and patterns in the data that shed light on systems change strategies that could be useful to others, rather than the accomplishments of these partnerships or the effect of the Generation Work grants. All the locations had been working to improve their workforce development systems for young adults before joining Generation Work. These prior efforts, as well as Generation Work, helped shape the partnerships' approaches and the results.

To learn about the experiences of young adults in training programs, the research team conducted focus groups with participants in programs run by partner organizations in Hartford, Indianapolis, and Philadelphia. The team conducted two focus groups in each city, one with individuals still enrolled in training and educational programs and the other with graduates from the same programs.<sup>12</sup> Ahead of the focus groups, the team asked participants to complete a short survey, which included questions about their demographic characteristics, services that they received, and other experiences at the program. The team also collected program participation data, which included demographic information and program outcome information for all participants ever enrolled in the programs. Finally, the research team interviewed program staff who interacted most with the young adults at three points in time (2019, 2020, and 2021). While the current report is primarily based on the interviews with staff members of the organizations comprising the partnerships, it includes relevant findings based on the interviews and focus groups with the young adults in Boxes 2, 3, and 4.<sup>13</sup>

Finally, in 2022, the research team interviewed staff from the Casey Foundation to understand the initiative's historical context and how it evolved over time. Table 2 summarizes the rounds of qualitative data collection. One of the challenges of conducting this research

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11. To support the partnerships, the Casey Foundation hired Child Trends to provide technical assistance on positive youth development practices, the Aspen Institute to provide technical assistance on demand-driven practices, and Kingslow Associates to provide technical assistance and documentation on racial equity practices. To prepare for site visits, the research team spoke with these partners to get a better understanding of the types of developments that the team should explore.
  12. Three training programs were included in this study: Our Piece of the Pie in Hartford, District 1199C Training and Upgrading Fund in Philadelphia, and The Excel Center in Indianapolis.
  13. Several partnerships conducted their own research. For instance, the Cleveland partnership hired an independent ethnographer to complete a study on young adults' views on work and workforce development programs.

**TABLE 2. INTERVIEW ROUNDS AND TYPES OF INDIVIDUALS INTERVIEWED**

Year	Partnerships Included	Individuals Interviewed
2017	Cleveland, Hartford, Indianapolis, Philadelphia, Seattle	Lead staff members from partner organizations
2018 <sup>a</sup>	Cleveland, Indianapolis, Philadelphia	Lead staff members from partner organizations
2019	Cleveland, Hartford, Indianapolis, Philadelphia, Seattle	Lead staff members from partner organizations; staff members serving young people enrolled in Our Piece of the Pie (Hartford), District 1199C Training and Upgrading Fund (Philadelphia), and The Excel Center (Indianapolis); graduates of these three programs
2020	Cleveland, Hartford, Indianapolis, Philadelphia, Seattle	The partnerships' acting project directors
2021	Cleveland, Hartford, Indianapolis, Philadelphia, Seattle	Lead staff members from partner organizations; staff members serving youth in Our Piece of the Pie (Hartford), District 1199C Training and Upgrading Fund (Philadelphia), and The Excel Center (Indianapolis)
2022		Staff members from the Casey Foundation

NOTE: <sup>a</sup>In consultation with project officers at the Casey Foundation, the research team did not conduct a site visit to Hartford or Seattle in 2018.

over a long period of time was that the interviewees often changed jobs and left their positions at the Generation Work organizations. Because of turnover, later interviews with staff members offered more limited insight on the initiative's implementation over time, as the interviewees were often new to their roles. To the extent possible, the research team tried to talk with key staff before they left their positions.

## Organization of the Remainder of the Report

The next three sections respectively describe strategies pursued by the Generation Work partnerships over the five-year period to change the following three aspects of their respective workforce development systems:

1. policies or regulations that constrained or facilitated workforce development systems coordination;

2. how workforce-related organizations interacted with each other; and
3. workforce practices within organizations.

Each of these sections highlight the role that leaders and funders played in shaping systems change and advancing racial equity. Additionally, the third section describes the set of strategies that the partnerships used to integrate and prioritize racial equity practices within organizations. Examples from the partnerships and quotes from interviewees are included to provide context and illustrate the key findings. The report concludes with a summary of the lessons learned and reflections on the implications for policy and practice.

## Changing the Workforce Development System at the Policy Level

Laws, regulations, policies, and funding rules are some of the most powerful factors influencing the behavior of actors in a workforce development system because they establish constraints, offer opportunities, and provide incentives to partners within a system.<sup>14</sup> The policies and regulatory structures of the many workforce funding streams—such as the WIOA, Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF), and state and local governments—often inhibit the efficient coordination of services.<sup>15</sup>

Changing these policy drivers is difficult, and some actors in the workforce development system may have little control over if or when such changes can occur. While actors can propose changes, the passage of new laws or the introduction of new policies or regulations often takes time and political will. It may be helpful to work with individuals within institutions to facilitate change. Yet, these individuals are also bound by existing rules and regulations and may not have sufficient authority to implement change. When change at the policy level does occur, however, it can have far-reaching effects, given that new laws and policies create new incentives or disincentives for a large number of actors within a system. For example, the enactment of the WIOA by the federal government in 2014 established a new set of investment priorities and thus generated a new set of incentives that shaped the work of partners within the workforce development system.<sup>16</sup>

When Generation Work was launched in 2016, changes at the policy or institutional level were happening in the cities and states where the partnerships were forming. In fact, the Casey Foundation took this factor into account when selecting the grantees. Additionally, the Casey Foundation considered whether partnerships included institutional actors, such

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14. Latham (2014). In this report, the terms “stakeholder” and “partner” are used interchangeably.

15. Brown, Kirby, and Conroy (2019).

16. For an overview of the main changes to the workforce development system, see U.S. Department of Labor (2016).

as workforce investment board leaders or government agency leaders, as core members of the partnership. In four of the selected cities, the funding priorities of the workforce development system were being revised. In Philadelphia, the newly elected mayor promised to make workforce development a priority of his administration and initiated a planning process intended to overhaul the public workforce development system. Similarly, the newly elected mayor in Hartford set in motion a process to revamp the city's workforce priorities. In Seattle and surrounding King County, the Workforce Development Council, the entity that administers WIOA funds, was being restructured, offering the opportunity for institutional change. In Cleveland, the launching of Generation Work coincided with the passage of an Ohio state law allowing a single program to use both TANF- and WIOA-funded services. The partnerships in these four cities, where policy-level changes to the workforce development system were in progress, were especially well positioned to make some inroads toward institutional change.

The next sections describe the opportunities and challenges that revising funding priorities present and what it took for the change in Ohio state law to influence Cleveland's workforce development system.

## Influencing Funding Priorities

As part of the planning documents the partnerships submitted to the Casey Foundation to receive funding to implement Generation Work, each partnership articulated the changes in the system it hoped to make to improve the employment outcomes of unemployed or underemployed young adults. Thus, in Philadelphia, Hartford, and Seattle, where workforce priorities were being revised, the door was open for the partnerships in these cities to push for the incorporation of the Generation Work priorities into the broader reform. Referring to the early work of the partnership in Philadelphia, a practitioner noted:

Everything is a little bit of luck in life and a little bit of risk-taking . . . We actually developed a concept paper, a pretty detailed piece of work that we put before the mayor-elect around what Generation Work would look like in the context of a bigger workforce agenda for the city.<sup>17</sup>

In Philadelphia, the new workforce development plan included an unprecedented focus on racial equity and inclusion, a proposal to recraft messaging to engage employers, and recommendations to use data across organizations. Referring to the plan, an interviewee said:

All of our vision is in there—100 percent. I mean, it's major. I've never seen this happen in Philadelphia before. I mean, you don't have a context [for] this. It's always the administration that decides what they want to do: "Here it is, you do it." This is a first . . . I do not believe that that would be in there if it were not for the partners influencing it.

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17. This and all subsequent quotes were collected during interviews with staff members of the organizations comprising the five Generation Work partnerships.



Leaders of the partnership in Philadelphia were able to take advantage of such an opportunity, in part, because they had developed a cross-organization common vision and a blueprint for how they would change the workforce development system to be more equitable and effective for young adults. When the new mayor took office, he incorporated their ideas into the workforce plan, which would serve as the roadmap for his administration.

Because the partnership's leaders had built strong working relationships with one other over the years, they shared a broad vision of the ideal workforce development system. The Casey Foundation had asked the Generation Work partnerships to write out their plans as part of the grant process. As a result, the partners had been recently discussing in more detail how to change the workforce development system to improve coordination among them and offer quality programming to young adults. Thus, a lesson for workforce leaders is that having a common cross-organization vision and plan increases the likelihood that a partnership can influence the policy result when the opportunity arises. A lesson for funders interested in supporting policy change is that helping partnerships develop a cross-organizational vision and plan can lead to that change by putting the partnerships in a stronger position to influence relevant actors if and when the opportunity arises.

However, while these early successes helped change the funding priorities and set the stage for more resources earmarked for young adults to flow into the workforce development system, the new priorities were not always implemented due to factors outside the control of the partners. For example, according to interviewees in Philadelphia, the citywide workforce plan was not fully implemented as of late 2021 because the mayor did not allocate adequate funding to move the plan into action. The next section describes a similar situation, in which an important state-level policy change was enacted, but the desired change did not take hold on the ground.

## **Using Both TANF and WIOA Funds in Cleveland**

In Cleveland, a new state law offered the Generation Work partnership an opportunity to have two of its partners—county-run Jobs and Family Service (JFS), primarily responsible for TANF funds, and locally-run Ohio Means Jobs (OMJ), responsible for WIOA funds—collaborate more closely to enhance service provision to youth by combining their funding streams. However, their experience demonstrated that a legislative mandate alone was not sufficient to effect the intended change on the ground.

When the Comprehensive Case Management Employment Program (CCMEP) legislation passed in Ohio (just before Generation Work was launched), which combined WIOA and TANF funds, it left many administrative questions unaddressed, such as which entity would exercise oversight of the combined funds. For example, after the directive was issued, the two agencies planned to release a joint procurement request for proposals (RFP) as a way to co-manage contracts and thus braid funding. However, issuing an RFP jointly required decisions about which entity was responsible for making the decisions and leading the work and which one would ultimately be accountable for the results. Negotiating these administra-

tive details took time, and thus during the first year each entity issued a separate RFP and contracted with providers independently. As will be discussed below, the two organizations did start collaborating in new ways with the help from the organizations' leaders.

The Cleveland context also offers an example of a change at the policy level that did lead to changes in practice. Prior to Generation Work, the TANF agency, JFS, allocated some of its funds (those used to support TANF recipients in subsidized employment) through a county-wide lottery. However, not all of the lottery winners were ready for employment. To more efficiently use these subsidized employment funds, the leadership of JFS changed its policy for allocating the funds. The funds would now be allocated to individuals who had been assessed for job readiness. Several OMJ providers were already assessing participants' job readiness, and the subsidized employment program could leverage the relationships these providers had built with job seekers. In other words, the new allocation system provided a concrete incentive to encourage OMJ and JFS providers to work together across programs and funding streams. In turn, JFS encouraged OMJ providers to share their job leads to help JFS better serve the needs of its participants (TANF recipients), while enabling the OMJ providers to manage the relationships with employers.<sup>18</sup> Previously, service providers had little incentive to work together, since funding was not contingent on their collaboration.

In summary, workforce leaders and funders should anticipate that changes at the policy level will not always lead to the changes on the ground that the new or revised policy was expected to produce. The experiences of Generation Work partnerships in Philadelphia and Cleveland illustrate that having a common vision across partner organizations can help the partnership influence a mayor's plan or how funding is allocated. Implementing a broader plan to change a system, however, sometimes requires the presence of additional factors. Leaders of nonprofit organizations may not control some of these factors, such as additional resources to support implementation, though that may not be the case for funders. Moreover, if a change at the policy level only encourages organizations to collaborate differently, organizations may not actually change. Without sufficient incentives to try something new, the leaders of these organizations may not want to take on the associated risk of change. Thus, a policy change that also provides strong incentives to adopt a new behavior, as was the case with the change to subsidized employment funding in Cleveland, appears more likely to induce the desired behavioral change. With this in mind, workforce leaders, policymakers, and funders who are planning policy changes should put in place incentives that would encourage organizations to change their behavior.

The next section describes in more detail the lessons learned about the actions partnerships can take, and the conditions they need, to influence actors in a system to change their behaviors and relationships with each other.

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18. It should be noted that OMJ and JFS providers sometimes overlapped. However, the funding streams did not always allow a single provider to optimize various funds.

# Strengthening Ties Among Organizations in a Workforce Development System

While the laws, policies, and funding structures that influence a system provide the framework for interaction, the way actors interact and connect within a system and across related systems characterizes a system.<sup>19</sup> Therefore, changing a system usually requires altering these interactions. One of the goals of Generation Work was to align the systems that help young adults enter onto stable career paths. Significantly, Generation Work aimed to build robust partnerships capable of implementing new, coordinated policies. In workforce development systems, however, funding is often scarce, so organizations in the system often view each other as competitors. In addition, the specific funding sources that support different organizations in various systems often create incentives that reinforce organizational competition over limited resources, such as employers.

As mentioned earlier, policy changes may offer organizations a framework for interacting in new ways. Actors in the system, however, have to incorporate these new ways of interacting into everyday practices. This section discusses actions taken by the Generation Work partnerships to foster collaboration. Several partnerships used one or both of two strategies: (1) co-locate the services of multiple workforce actors, and (2) establish regular communication among leaders and staff across the partner organizations.

The examples that follow illustrate the importance of strong leaders who help to articulate a broad vision of systems change that guides new collaboration and who create incentives for staff to try a new way of interacting. However, they also show that a shared vision alone will not induce a desired behavioral change. First, a certain level of trust must be established among leaders of the organizations for them to be willing to take the risk of operating differently, not knowing if the new way of interacting will work or will expose their organization's vulnerabilities. Second, staff must come to believe that collaborating is part of doing their jobs well and then must work together in new and meaningful ways.

## Co-Locating Service Providers

Two Generation Work partnerships, those in Seattle and Cleveland, used the strategy of co-locating services of different organizations in a single place to create something like a one-stop center for young adults. At a minimum, co-locating services makes those services more accessible to young people. In Seattle, Port Jobs, the employment center at the Seattle-Tacoma International Airport, served as the hub for the partnership's activities. Airport University was already located at the airport providing airport employees courses to help them advance their careers. In addition, the Generation Work partnership brought two programs, ANEW (Apprenticeship and Nontraditional Employment for Women) and the Aerospace Joint

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19. Eyster, Durham, Van Noy, and Damron (2016).

Apprenticeship Committee (AJAC), to Port Jobs to give the young people it served access to vocational training. Both programs offer apprenticeship and pre-apprenticeship opportunities, as well as classes for college credit that can be applied toward an academic degree at South Seattle College or other colleges in partnership with Airport University.

With Generation Work funds, the partnership brought on “navigators” from the partner organization Northwest Education Access (NEA). These staff members worked directly with the young adults from low-income backgrounds participating in services at Port Jobs and helped coordinate the services provided by the partners and other organizations. The navigators would meet with the young people to create an academic achievement and career plan tailored to their talents and goals. Knowledgeable about opportunities for youth throughout the region, they also linked the young adults to additional resources, support, and guidance. (See Box 2 for frontline staff members’ perspective on the services and supports they provided.)

By co-locating the Generation Work initiative at Port Jobs, the partnership appears to have connected young people to more of the services available across the various systems. One interviewee noted that having the NEA navigators work onsite at the airport allowed students to better access them and get the assistance with registration and financial aid that they needed and may not have otherwise received. The NEA navigators “really provided one-on-one assistance for registering, getting funding, and staying in class [and] has made a big difference.” The navigators also helped learners enroll and succeed in a bridge class that prepares them for airport technology courses and potentially a career in aviation maintenance technology. One staff member also noted that, because the navigators tended to be younger and were less likely to be white than the training staff and management, “They bring a different perspective and can speak to young peoples’ experiences.”

## BOX 2. CONNECTING YOUNG ADULTS TO SERVICES AND SUPPORT

Young adults interviewed in the study found all the Generation Work services they received helpful. However, they felt that caring staff and the supportive services, especially the financial incentives, were key to their success.

In interviews with the research team, program staff credited their ability to provide young clients with an array of services to the program’s partnerships with outside agencies and organizations. Whenever possible, programs brought in external partners to provide classes or workshops on financial

coaching and literacy, tax preparation, mental health, and career preparation, among other topics. However, staff noted that a lack of resources remained a major issue, which resulted in barriers to program completion. As one staff member said:

There are not enough resources in my opinion. We have kids who suffer from homelessness and that’s one thing that we have not been able to attack. We’ve been able to attack everything else and successfully conquer it. But homelessness is one of our biggest barriers that we feel helpless.

The young adults, however, were not the only ones to benefit from initiative's co-location at Port Jobs. Staff members in varied positions reported gaining a deeper understanding of the resources available through the other partners as a result. For example, case managers noted learning more about college and financial resources from the navigators. A NEA navigator remarked that her "awareness of services in general" increased because of her organization's work onsite at the airport, saying:

Staff who are embedded there are more aware of services and jobs at the airport. And folks who work at Port Jobs know that they can refer people to us, too. The chemistry between the Port Jobs office and NEA was already good but got even stronger [since they embedded a staff member at the airport].

The Generation Work partnership in Cleveland had similar results when it assigned TANF enrollment staff to the Young Adult Resource Center (YRC) to make it easier for young people to access various support they needed to pursue training. Previously, young adults had to go to a separate location to apply for public benefits. This additional step acted as a barrier and as a result many young people did not receive the TANF benefits they qualified for and subsequently dropped out of training services. One interviewee noted, "When young folks come to the YRC, they can go right upstairs and get JFS services . . . I just think it's significant . . . the initiative to bring [in] a whole unit is going to be really helpful for that integration."

Not only did co-locating TANF enrollment services at the YRC let young people more easily access TANF benefits, but, thanks to the implementation of the CCMEP legislation, the TANF program and the YRC did indeed better integrate their services. For example, career training provided at the YRC was for the first time counted as fulfilling the TANF work requirement. This change was one that the YRC leadership touted with pride, because, in their experience, TANF policies are not generally flexible, and so represented a notable improvement in how the two entities related to each other.

Co-location, however, is not always easy, as discussed below. Both the leaders and staff of the collaborating organizations' leaders must be on board and in agreement with the desired level of integration or coordination. The Cleveland partnership's experience illustrates this point but also highlights the importance of having a common vision across organizations, strong leadership, and mutual trust to effect change.

In 2017, Towards Employment and Youth Opportunities Unlimited (YOU) received grant funds to co-administer the services at the YRC. The two partners subsequently implemented a joint vision for coordinating and aligning their services, blending those funded through TANF with those funded through WIOA, to better serve young adults. The first step was for the two organizations to figure out a workable division of labor and a process for decision making and accountability. To that end, the leaders of the two organizations participated in a series of retreats to develop a framework for delivering services at the YRC and guidelines for what each organization should do. During this process, the leaders also strengthened their relationship and cultivated a shared understanding of how their collaboration would better serve young adults.

However, despite the framework that the leaders worked out and their common vision, on the ground, there was less cooperation among the staff members at the outset than the leaders had hoped for. The staff at both YOU and Towards Employment continued to see themselves as working for their respective organizations, not the YRC. The leaders of the organizations however stepped in, which was instrumental to overcoming this challenge. They posited that if they could create a culture at the YRC in which staff would see themselves as part of the YRC, while still retaining their organizational affiliation, they could reduce the competition between the staff from the two organizations, increase cooperation, and more seamlessly deliver services to clients. To create this culture, leaders convened regular staff meetings at the YRC that included staff from both organizations. Over time, staff at both YOU and Towards Employment came to appreciate that the two organizations “brought different strengths in the provision of services to young people and strengthened the overall provision of services for them,” in the words of one interviewee. At those meetings, the staff further defined which services each organization would provide and established clear intake and referral procedures.

Co-locating the services of different organizations thus helped make the system more accessible to clients, while the staff of the collaborating organizations tended to learn more about the other organization’s services over time and could refer clients to those services more often and when needed. Ideally, co-location improves the coordination and alignment of services across organizations, as well as the efficiency of the system. However, while bringing staff, resources, and services together in one place helped to streamline the provision of workforce services for young adults, it was not a panacea. Staff still experienced the usual stresses and pressures of operating their organizations and meeting high-performance expectations, such as placing clients in jobs.

## **Fostering Collaboration Through Regular Cross-Organizational Meetings**

To create the right conditions for organizations to collaborate, there must be both a common vision and a certain level of mutual trust. The vision is the north star to which all the organizations within the relevant systems can look for guidance. But to implement the vision, the people in the organizations must be willing to behave differently to achieve new goals.

### **Regular Meetings of Leaders**

To develop a vision and trust, the partners had to come together and meet regularly. When staff from different organizations are co-located in a shared space, as was the case in the examples described above, holding regular all-staff meetings to work out the details of running a joint center is relatively natural. Convening regular meetings with staff from organizations that do not directly work with each other or in the same location is less intuitive. However, it proved to be an important strategy for fostering collaboration. External funders (in this case the Casey Foundation) can play a vital role facilitating and creating incentives to hold these meetings.

In the planning year before the launch of Generation Work, the Casey Foundation required the organizations comprising each partnership to agree on a common vision and draft a plan for how to advance this vision. During this period, leaders of these organizations met regularly to accomplish these tasks. These meetings often continued even after the implementation grants were awarded (though less frequently). In interviews with staff members, several individuals noted that the regular partner meetings improved the relationship among leaders. Most of the partnerships held regular, established meetings in which leaders and senior-level staff of the core partner organizations came together to review progress, exchange updates on work, and discuss funding opportunities. Additionally, as the Generation Work initiative evolved and began to more explicitly address issues related to racial equity, these regular meetings were instrumental in developing a shared language, knowledge base, and vision for advancing racial equity.

Several interviewees noted that these meetings were important for relationship building. One interviewee said jokingly:

Gen Work is kind of building the relationship with [leadership]. And I credit the funding. I don't know, maybe it's the lunches they paid for or the trips . . . you got past some of the conflict. And you got past some of the ego on all sides, to "okay, we can work together. Let's figure out opportunities to work together."

Another interviewee noted that informal but intentional efforts to build relationships were important for changing the tenor of the relationship between leaders of some organizations. She noted, "The extent of the sort of behind-the-scenes negotiating conversations and relationship building that happens . . . has become really, really important to getting things done . . ." Indeed, multiple staff members said that strong leadership, defined by one interviewee as "persistent engagement and commitment" from those charged with implementing change, was a crucial element to making the desired change happen.

Members of organizations in several locations noted that the Generation Work initiative and funding made it possible for the partners to focus on collaborating and integrating their services and on incorporating a racial equity lens into their work. One interviewee reported that having the time and resources to meet and develop a common vision was instrumental, saying "[We] would not have had a common strategic plan for serving young people. That is huge to have a common strategic plan across all those organizations." The interviewee went on to explain that local funders generally do not like to fund strategic planning; "[They] like to fund discrete programs that can get up and running relatively quickly." According to the interviewee, the joint planning across organizations could never have happened without Generation Work. One staff member explained that the Generation Work funding was vital to the collaboration and provided "time to figure things out." Another interviewee mentioned that it helped to have an external mandate (referring to the Generation Work contract) to compel leaders to make time for these meetings, saying "Organizations will always have internal priorities; they have to look out for their own. Generation Work feeling like an outside entity has felt super useful."

These leadership meetings were not always easy. The partnerships often struggled to give each partner organization the sense it had an equal voice and seat at the table, ensure that the vision or the strategies were not perceived as reflecting any one organization's approach, and resolve disagreements. Project officers from the Casey Foundation would engage external mediators to help partnerships experiencing these types of challenges. Later interviews with key staff members indicated that involving an internal or external mediator, especially early on, helped the partners find common ground and reaffirm their shared vision for their work.

As the examples above illustrate, funders can help ensure key partners meet regularly and thereby change a system by:

- asking partnerships within a system to develop a common vision and plan of action, and
- allocating some or all grant money to support meetings rather than only to direct services.

While the interviews with staff members highlighted the importance of developing a shared vision and trust at the leadership level, building trust among staff across the collaborating organizations is also beneficial. If staff members did not work in the same location, one of the main strategies that the partnerships employed to foster trust and collaboration was to hold regular meetings of managers and sometimes frontline staff.

For example, early on in Seattle, staff from Generation Work partner organizations were included in the meetings of the Opportunity Youth Advisory Group—a multisector group formed in 2014 to improve outcomes for 16- to 24-year-olds who have not earned a high school or college credential and are unemployed—in an effort to make the group more representative of the multiple youth opportunity initiatives in the region.<sup>20</sup> In these meetings, staff from Generation Work partner organizations, along with staff from the other organizations, interacted with regional leaders and updated them on the status of their projects and solicited feedback on ongoing challenges and opportunities. Overall, staff members from the partnership widely agreed that these meetings allowed connections among staff from different organizations to form naturally and improved the way they and their organizations interacted. For example, some staff members expressed that they came to see funders not just as funders, but more as allies.

In addition, many of the key workforce-related organizations in the advisory group were also members the Generation Work partnership and participated in its cross-organization meetings. Thus, when staff members left one organization in the partnership, they often went to another organization connected in some way to the partnership or advisory group. While relationships were always changing, staff from Generation Work partner organizations reported that the new way of collaborating had become institutionalized to the extent that any changes in leadership would not disrupt it. Staff members credited this shift in part to the cross-organization meetings that the partnership facilitated.

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20. Road Map Project (n.d.).



## Cross-Organizational Learning Communities for Practitioners

Another early strategy to foster collaboration that leaders in several Generation Work partnerships deployed was to create cross-organization learning communities—forums designed to regularly bring practitioners from across organizational boundaries together to learn from each other’s work, share best practices, and pursue common goals. Several partnerships, including those in Philadelphia and Seattle, already had standing workforce or youth-focused learning communities. In other partnerships, such as the one in Hartford, funders provided resources to establish a learning community.

Participants in these learning communities reported learning about other organizations they only knew vaguely. By connecting practitioners, these communities helped build trust and strengthened cross-organizational relationships. Interviewees noted that the communities fostered multi-layered relationships among staff across partner organizations, which helped stabilize the partnership and the cross-organizational collaboration over time. As one staff member stated, “There are strong congenial relationships across organizations,” adding that the mutual trust among the partner organizations was less likely to fade when key individuals left. Regular participation in meetings also strengthened the young adult service system, as partners explored ways to better coordinate and align their services. For example, in Seattle, as a result of these meetings, AJAC and Port Jobs organized joint recruitment activities, strengthening their capacity to market to, recruit, and serve more young adults. Thus, as a strategy, leaders and funders who seek to change a system may want to create learning communities that include members from all the main organizations in the system, not only to deliver professional development, but as a mechanism to connect and build trust among practitioners and better align the services of their organizations.

## Changing Practices Within Organizations

Another piece of the puzzle in changing systems is to modify the practices within organizations. This section explores the diverse strategies that the Generation Work partnerships pursued to change practices within the partner organizations. In particular, this section focuses on strategies designed to incorporate a racial equity and inclusion (REI) perspective into organizational practices.<sup>21</sup> The partnerships’ experiences provide lessons for leaders and funders who wish to change organizational practices.

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21. Generation Work partner organizations also endeavored to integrate into their systems demand-driven workforce practices, which have had demonstrable success in adult workforce development systems, as well as positive youth development practices, which have been proven to help young people stay engaged in a program and achieve their goals. Organizations used many of the professional development strategies described in this section to incorporate these other practices into their systems.

## Using Data to Inform Practice Change

Practices, or ways of doing business, are an integral part of systems. Often, these ways of doing business are deeply ingrained. A first step to changing practices is to identify potential issues with the current practices. When the Generation Work initiative was launched, leaders at the Casey Foundation hoped that it would motivate practitioners to identify racial inequities in the workforce development system using their data on race and gender. If disparities were found, organizations could make the necessary adjustments to improve practices and reduce or eliminate inequities. However, the partner organizations were not examining their data for this purpose. As a Casey Foundation staff member said:

It became clear that the place to start was to disaggregate their data. They didn't know if their programs were producing the same results by race . . . when you see inequities, they would think, how do you change the system to interrupt that? . . . But people's eyes weren't open to the data.

Thus, in February 2017, the Casey Foundation organized a cross-partnership training in Philadelphia on racial equity led by the Race Matters Institute. The training sought to improve participants' understanding of structural racism and racial equity and help them translate these concepts into their practices with a view to advancing racial equity. Participants were encouraged when they returned home to disaggregate their systems' data by race, ethnicity, and other characteristics to learn how structural and institutional racism affected their clients' outcomes.

All the partnerships thought the training was useful. However, the partnership in Indianapolis found its potential to change organizational practices particularly striking. When the participating organizations—including Goodwill, EmployIndy, and the Indiana Department of Workforce Development—disaggregated their data, they found clear disparities in outcomes across racial and ethnic groups. This new information was particularly transformational for the leaders of several partner organizations, who subsequently redoubled their commitment to REI. Leaders from two of these organizations decided to undertake several initiatives to address the identified disparities, including funding staff training on REI and investigating further why these disparities were occurring. As a result, one organization uncovered issues related to a local employer's hiring practices that adversely affected young adults of color. In response, the organization explored tax abatements and other incentives to entice employers to hire young adults of color and encouraged employers to work with neighborhood partners to mitigate some of the barriers to employment that young adults of color faced, such as those related to housing, transportation, and child care.

Other partnerships also continued to gather information about why disparities occurred, often talking directly with their young clients of color. (See Box 3.) For example, in Philadelphia, the partner organization Job Opportunity Investment Network conducted focus groups with alumni of two programs run by YouthBuild and District 1199C Training and Upgrading Fund. The focus groups revealed that young adults valued most a supportive workplace environment where they felt respected; having a higher-paying job was secondary. They also indicated that the

professional skills development services the young adults received in the programs did not prepare them for how to navigate racism in the workplace. In response, partner organizations piloted a training program for employers on practices that support young adults of color. The goal was to initiate a conversation with employers that could eventually lead to systemic change in their workplace practices.

These experiences highlight the valuable role funders can play in encouraging organizations to examine how equitably they serve young adults. The Casey Foundation consistently drew attention to the importance of racial equity, helped the partnerships develop a common language around racial inequity, and provided the time and space for the partners to discuss racial equity. It also asked the organizations to use their own data to document the issue, which was a particularly powerful step toward change.

### **BOX 3. LISTENING TO YOUNG PARTICIPANTS**

A practice used by some programs was to welcome formal and informal feedback and input from young participants related to program services and their needs. Offering young people an avenue to voice their needs and opinions is a core positive youth development principle. For example, several programs conducted focus groups with young clients in which they would review a workshop. In these programs, it was not uncommon for staff members to ask participants about how they can do a better job in serving them. As a result, young adults in these programs felt they had a voice and that staff cared about them and their perspectives.

## **Building the Capacity of Providers to Advance Racial Equity**

When leaders of organizations want to establish new internal practices, they often need to offer staff professional development and training opportunities to give them the skills or knowledge required to implement these practices. (See Box 4.) The two most common strategies partnership leaders deployed to build the capacity of staff members to apply a racial equity lens in all their activities were creating learning communities and organizing trainings on racial equity.

### **Learning Communities as a Professional Development Strategy**

While learning communities built trust and knowledge across workforce organizations, as discussed above, they were also an investment in mid-level staff and intended to empower them to bring about change within their organizations and prepare them to be the next generation of leaders in the sector. Mid-level managers are well positioned to influence internal policies and practices. It was thus expected that their participation in the learning communities would amount to a more or less direct transfer of knowledge and skills from these meetings to the staff members' home organizations. In fact, the partnership in Hartford set as one of its criteria for admission into its learning community a commitment from the partner organization's leadership to consider the participating staff members' reports on what they learned in the community and their suggestions for internal changes.

## BOX 4. SUPPORTING STAFF WHO DELIVER SERVICES TO YOUNG ADULTS

Young adults reported experiencing a positive and supportive environment in the Generation Work programs, which they valued highly. Program staff used positive youth development practices—such as forming strong relationships with young clients and giving them a voice in the program—to engage them throughout the program and to create a challenging, but supportive environment for them.

To provide the full range of services, some staff had to possess a broad range of skills and expertise and a willingness to be available to participants outside normal

work hours. Many of the staff members interviewed in the focus groups reported being overwhelmed. Some organizations in the partnerships dispatched frontline managers to the learning communities to discuss issues related to overburdened staff.

Given the intensive level of support that the Generation Work program provides, it is essential to its success that staff receive high-quality training and have small caseloads. Investing in staff and their development may be useful and necessary.

The learning communities in both Hartford and Philadelphia made racial equity and inclusion central to their discussions. One practitioner noted:

We have talked about, as we bring in new people and new organizations, to kind of get from them a commitment around racial equity . . . My suggestion was to at least have practitioners who want to join say that they are committed to understanding and learning and growing with the practitioner learning community around issues related to racial equity.

The Hartford partnership's learning community, the Workforce Leadership Academy (WLA), was notably successful because it was based on a cohort model in which participating staff members attended the meetings consistently over an entire year. This model allowed participants to develop a shared understanding of racial equity concepts.

The Philadelphia partnership's learning community was less structured. Each quarter, between 40 and 50 mid-level practitioners would meet to share information and best practices for implementing Generation Work and advancing its goals. A different group of staff members would attend each quarter, so conversations on racial equity that began in one session did not necessarily continue in the next session. According to some staff members, participants had different levels of familiarity and comfort with racial equity concepts, and they never reached a common understanding.

The learning communities led to concrete changes in the practices of the organizations whose staff members participated, although it is difficult to determine the extent of these changes. For example, the partnership in Hartford asserted in a 2018 report that 64 percent of organizations that dispatched a staff member to the WLA conducted REI-related staff development activities, and 21 percent of staff members who participated in the WLA had developed or expanded a REI initiative within their organization in the previous year. Interviews with staff members confirmed that those who participated in the WLA felt comparatively more familiar with racial inequity concepts and possessed the language to talk about them. Participants

mentioned having an awareness of bias, discrimination, and microaggressions—subtle everyday actions that convey prejudice, specifically racial prejudice.

However, the interviews also suggested that some participants struggled to transfer the knowledge they acquired in the WLA to their organizations for two reasons: (1) the conversations did not necessarily translate into concrete tools or strategies that participants could bring to their organizations and use to effect change, and (2) participants did not always have the backing of the leaders in their organizations to implement particular changes.

### **Racial Equity Trainings**

The partnerships also conducted trainings on REI to build staff members' capacity to integrate REI in their work. As noted earlier, starting in 2017, the Casey Foundation organized several REI trainings and professional development activities for the five Generation Work partnerships. Later, some of the partner organizations participated in additional REI trainings led by the partnerships or the organizations themselves.

These early trainings had a positive impact on the partnerships and the organizations, though mostly limited to starting a conversation about REI. Interviewees consistently stated that the participants in these trainings were more aware of racial and ethnic inequalities, and that the trainings helped them develop a common language to discuss these issues. A frontline staff member, for instance, said, “I took a lot away from the race, equity, and inclusion [training] . . . I think it opened my eyes to the reality and it gave me a new perspective because now I'm able to advocate for things for my youth that I didn't know I had to advocate for . . .” The trainings also provided evidence of inequitable outcomes in their local workforce development systems.

At the same time, similar to the learning community participants, participants in these trainings often said that they struggled to translate what they learned into specific actions that could change organizational practices and advance REI. One leader from the partnership in Cleveland, for instance, said that after attending several trainings on REI, other participants started to ask, “How does this apply to our own work? How do I move from A to B on this?” The leader continued, saying this “awareness to action kind of thing came to be our construct.” Another staff member remarked that it was “grandiose to think that [a few trainings] . . . would change the way [staff members] work every day.” In Hartford, one leader of the Generation Work partnership recognized that some staff members had “personal epiphanies” about REI during the trainings, but then subsequently felt “trapped” in their newfound state of awareness, unable to transform it into concrete changes to organizational practices.

In response, leaders of the Generation Work partnership in Hartford brought in a consultant to develop and conduct sessions on how to move from awareness to action for organizational leaders and another consultant to lead similar sessions for frontline staff. According to the leaders, these sessions were successful in helping staff members identify specific organizational practices that should be changed. To date, two partner organizations changed their hiring, onboarding, and procurement practices to make them more racially equitable and inclusive.

In summary, leaders and funders who wish to advance REI in workforce organizations may want to consider investing in REI training that offers staff the time and space to develop a shared understanding of the problem, a language to discuss it, and the capacity to identify inequity in their own organizations. However, moving from awareness to action may require additional REI technical assistance to strengthen organizational capacity. This assistance may involve hiring an external consultant to help organizations identify practices that should change and the steps to take to change them.

## **Strategies to Build Employers' Capacity to Advance Equity**

An equitable labor market for young people would be free of racism and other bias at all stages—during the hiring process, on the job, and as employees advance in their careers. As noted earlier, several of the partnerships gathered and examined data to identify disparities and investigate what was leading to them. As part of this effort, staff members often spoke directly with their young clients, who commonly reported workplace racism. The five Generation Work partnerships developed a number of other strategies and practices to engage with employers in new ways and facilitate young adults' success in the labor market.

Whereas leaders in the Generation Work partnerships could compel staff in the workforce organizations to work differently with vision and training, they had to find other ways to encourage employers to change. First, they had to identify and discuss racial disparities with employers. Second, they had to show employers that the disparities stemmed from conditions and practices in the workplace, including both the uneven quality of the jobs and racial bias. Third, they needed to help employers build the capacity and skills needed to address these issues. A pilot program run by Workforce Solutions—a collaborative of funders, employers, and service providers explicitly focused on racial equity and one of the partner organizations in Hartford—provides a comprehensive example of how partnerships can work with employers to improve their workplace conditions.

Workforce Solutions staff approached three manufacturing employers with an offer to collaborate with them to figure out how to minimize the frequent turnover of entry-level employees of color that these companies were experiencing. Framing the work as a way to reduce turnover created an incentive for these employers to participate in the pilot program, as turnover is costly for employers since they lose their investment in job training when workers depart soon after. As part of the pilot, Workforce Solutions collected data on the issue by conducting surveys with entry-level employees and managers to identify specific policies and practices that lead to staff turnover. For at least one employer, the data from the survey convinced the company's management team that race was a factor for some employees of color when deciding to leave the company.

The pilot program had positive results. Participating employers examined their workplace and hiring practices for bias and discrimination (e.g., reviewing job descriptions that might discourage applicants of color to apply). They also explored how to improve policies such as those related to team building, onboarding, training, and promotion. The pilot prompted

some employers to develop training for supervisors and managers with a focus on racial equity and cultural competence as a way to support managerial staff in their interactions with young adults of color. In addition, Workforce Solutions provided onsite career navigation services for incoming employees to help identify opportunities and guide them in their careers at the company. The pilot was well received by the employers that participated. Word of the pilot spread, and two more employers took part in it, paying for most of the cost of the program.

The success of the pilot program helped inspire the Generation Work partnership to plan a forum in late 2019 to showcase the experiences of employers that participated in it. Unfortunately, the forum did not go as planned. The COVID-19 pandemic forced the partnership to put the forum on hold until the summer of 2020. Instead, the partnership put together a webinar on equity featuring manufacturing employers that participated in the pilot. In the webinar, presenters discussed survey findings, and young adults shared their experiences in the workplace. The webinar achieved some of the objectives that the partnership had set out to accomplish through the in-person forum.

Another strategy several partnerships used to encourage employers to change their workplace environment was to engage them in conversations about their workplace practices. To help job developers in workforce organizations identify what types of practices could be good to discuss with employers, the Aspen Institute created a survey for them to fill out that asked them how often they spoke to employers about various issues beyond job openings, such as wage increases, work conditions, and advancement opportunities for employees. By completing the survey, job developers were able to see how they could broaden the conversations they were having with employers to get them to think about how to improve the quality of the jobs they offer and make them more attractive to young people.

In an effort to change the employers' assumptions about young clients seeking employment and their job qualifications, several partnerships adopted a practice common among sectoral training programs—namely, asking employers what training or skills clients needed to be desirable employees and then providing clients with that training. The partnerships would solicit input from employers on training curricula they were developing for clients in order to build a talent pipeline attentive to employers' needs. For example, in Indianapolis, the partner organization Goodwill worked closely with multiple health care employers and a training provider to create a certified clinical medical assistant (CCMA) program. Based on feedback from the employers, those developing the curriculum doubled the number of externship hours the CCMA program initially required and increased its focus on medical math calculations. As a result, student outcomes improved, and the employers began holding the young clients' skills in higher regard. The partnerships also invited employers to participate in training-related activities such as career advising, field trips, and interviews, and collaborated with them to develop work-based learning opportunities such as apprenticeships, internships, and job shadowing. These activities helped staff and young clients better understand what employers were looking for in employees, while giving employers the opportunity to observe the skills that the clients had developed.

In summary, the strategies to engage employers that the Generation Work partnerships implemented illustrate that it is possible to have an open and productive conversation about racial equity with some employers. Some partner organizations expressed concern that having these conversations might damage their relationships with employers. However, this did not occur. That said, the providers had to broach the topic of racial equity with employers in such a way that it was meaningful to employers, for instance, by highlighting its effect on employee retention and advancement. Regardless, the discussions about racial equity did not alienate those employers with whom the partner organizations had strong relationships. For a broader set of employers, it remains to be determined how best to start the conversation about racial equity. As a staff member noted, “For us, [REI] was a new conversation that we are having with our employers . . . it [will] take a certain amount of time.”

Based on the experiences of the Generation Work partnerships, the following strategies could help workforce organizations build employers’ capacity to advance equity:

- using systems data to identify the local problem,
- strengthening the relationships between workforce organizations and employers, and
- providing training and technical assistance to workforce organizations and employers over time.

## Limitations of the Evaluation

In the first five years of the Generation Work initiative, many useful lessons were learned about strategies that can be used early on in a process to change a system. However, this phase of the initiative, slated to end in 2020, was significantly affected by unique and powerful events—the COVID-19 pandemic and its lockdowns and a national reckoning on racism sparked by George Floyd’s murder. The partnerships shifted most of their energy and resources to assisting young people and the communities where they lived, and figuring out how they could continue providing basic services during the lockdowns. The Casey Foundation supported this shift. The partnerships also tried to help young people as they grappled with George Floyd’s murder and the ensuing protests and the broad social movement calling for action against racism and injustice. While the capacity that some partnerships had built for racial equity may have helped them meet the moment in a strong position, this evaluation did not assess the partnerships’ response to these events.

Changing a system is by nature a long-term, non-linear endeavor. A number of challenges can arise along the way, brought about by the ever-shifting social, political, and economic winds. That said, the Generation Work partnerships encountered “Category 5 Winds” just three years after they got started. As a result, some of the progress they made was lost, and as of 2021 (the research team’s last interview with them) partnerships were still figuring out how to navigate the new normal. Nevertheless, the partnerships succeeded in laying foundations



that might help them to further change their workforce development systems and advance racial equity and improve the lives of their young clients.

## Conclusion

The Generation Work initiative was launched in 2016 to help workforce development systems improve how they serve young adults, especially young people of color between the ages 18 to 29 years who have not yet found meaningful career paths. As the initiative progressed, equity became an explicit objective. This study sought to document the various strategies partnerships used to change systems in general and specifically to incorporate a racial equity lens into the work of the partner organizations serving young adults. The study highlighted the role of the partnerships' leaders and funders.

The study found that most of the partnerships' strategies during this five-year period fell into the following three categories:

1. strategies to change policies or regulations that constrained or facilitated coordination within workforce development systems,
2. strategies to change how workforce-related organizations interacted with each other to better serve young adults, and
3. strategies to change workforce practices within organizations.

The most common way partnerships tried to change policy was to influence the funding priorities of key public funders of workforce services, such as a mayor's office or the local workforce investment board. One of the conditions that helped this approach succeed was partner organizations having a common vision and plan for achieving it. With a vision and plan, the partnerships were in a stronger position to seize opportunities to influence policy-makers and effect change when they arose. If key workforce development leaders have not already elaborated a common vision, funders interested in changing a system can financially support the relevant consortium of organizations in their efforts to create such a shared vision.

Another apparent lesson that can be drawn from the partnerships' experiences is that changes at the policy level do not necessarily lead to the intended changes on the ground. In other words, successfully convincing funders to prioritize a certain change does not guarantee that more funding will be allocated to make the change happen. Similarly, establishing regulations meant to improve coordination between agencies (such as those managing TANF and WIOA funding) does not mean that these agencies will immediately start to cooperate with each other. As the Generation Work partnerships have demonstrated, building trust across organizations and creating incentives for them to cooperate are critical to changing how organizations interact with each other.

One strategy that partnerships used to foster collaboration among workforce development organizations as well as make it easier for young adults to access services were co-locating service providers. The following factors appeared to have helped partner organizations improve how they interact with one another:

- a common vision that the leaders and staff across the partner organizations were committed to achieving together,
- senior leaders from the different organizations who trusted each other and clearly articulated that they wanted improve how their respective staff interacted, and
- activities meant to build trust among staff across organizations (such as regular cross-organizational leadership and staff meetings).

Building trust takes time. However, as one practitioner noted, “Work only takes place at the speed of trust.” Once trust was established, the partnerships were able to achieve concrete outcomes. These included shifts as simple as program managers and staff across organizations now calling each other and working to solve problems together rather than alone and more complex changes such as successfully braiding the services of TANF- and WIOA-funded organizations to better serve young people.

Again, funders can contribute to the development of cross-organization trust by allocating some or all of their grant money to support regular meetings of partner organizations rather than only to direct services.

All the Generation Work partnerships encouraged organizations in the workforce development system to adopt practices to improve outcomes for young adults and make them more equitable in terms of race, ethnicity, and gender. The study focused on documenting the strategies that the partnerships used to induce changes in practices. They included the following:

- using data (both quantitative and qualitative) to identify and describe a local problem or issue and to better understand the challenges that young adults face,
- training staff on racial equity and developing a common language for staff across organizations to discuss and advance it,
- creating spaces (such as learning communities, events, and meetings) for staff to explore racial equity issues in depth and brainstorm solutions,
- procuring technical assistance on racial equity to help partner organizations move from “awareness to action,” and
- developing tools to support staff in adopting a new practice.

It is difficult for leaders to take the first steps on their own to investigate and address racial inequity in a workforce development system. The Generation Work experience has shown that an external funder (in this case, the Casey Foundation) can jumpstart the process by requesting disaggregated outcome data and providing REI training to the system's leaders. Similarly, a funder can help organizations in a system adopt new practices by supporting professional development activities (such as trainings or learning communities) and the creation of tools.

Some of the Generation Work partnerships also endeavored to change employers' practices to make them more equitable. Generally, partnerships undertook similar activities to change employers' behaviors as they had to change the practices of workforce organizations. They included the following:

- activities to build trust between the employers and the workforce organizations,
- using the employers' own data to illustrate the racial disparities in their business-as-usual practices in ways that were meaningful to them (for instance, highlighting the impact of staff turnover or the need to backfill an aging workforce), and
- providing professional development to employers and the workforce development staff with whom they interact.

In conclusion, leaders and funders who are interested in changing a workforce development system so that it better serves young adults and advances racial equity can learn from the experiences of the Generation Work partnerships as they will likely want to make many of the same improvements. These include, for example, changing policies that inhibit the organizations in the system from effectively delivering services at the needed scale, improving how workforce organizations interact with one another, and incorporating practices throughout the system that promote racial equity. However, the Generation Work experience also shows that changing a system requires building trust among partner organizations and developing a shared vision for how the workforce development system can best serve young adults. External funders can nurture strong, results-driven partnerships and help them develop and implement strategies that advance racial equity when they provide the financial support that allows leaders and staff to meet, learn from each other, and plan for coordinated action.



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