



Connecting Outcomes to “What Works” in Education and Workforce Training

A review of six states’ work with the Annie E. Casey Foundation and Third Sector on the key elements for implementing outcomes-driven strategies and funding

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Overview

Attaining a post-secondary degree and/or credentials with labor market value is key to economic mobility and opportunity, as ongoing [research](#) from the Annie E. Casey Foundation continues to affirm. Data also show that low-income or first-generation students of color face systemic barriers accessing and completing postsecondary education and workforce training programs. As state governments implement plans to address the COVID-19 pandemic, economic downturn, and continued racial injustice, it is critical to ensure state recovery plans focus on the large numbers of youth of color who have become disconnected from school and/or work.

The Annie E. Casey Foundation has been investing to build evidence on “what works” to close education, skills, and wage gaps for young adult learners. The Casey Foundation’s [Center for Economic Opportunity](#) (CEO) and [Research Evaluation Evidence and Design](#) (REED) collaborated with Third Sector, a national advisor on outcomes-driven strategies for governments, to identify partnerships and resources to customize approaches for Youth and Young Adult populations. A cohort of six states (Arkansas, Kentucky, Mississippi, Nebraska, New Mexico, and Ohio¹) explored how to transform the way their public resources are designed, delivered, and managed to make the most of what have become generally known as [Career Pathway Programs](#). The two-year engagement with the Casey Foundation and Third Sector involved planning how to increase post-secondary education and workforce skills and credentials for Youth and Young Adults (YYA) ages 18-24 who are most at risk of disconnection from either school and/or work. By focusing on Youth and Young Adults with some of the greatest barriers to completing post-secondary education/training, or to being on a path to a job with family-sustaining wages, state teams explored how to finance and scale existing evidence-based community-college programs and identify new community partnerships that can connect youth to career pathway programs.

The six state teams assessed how to apply an outcomes-oriented approach to improve postsecondary education and career pathways for specific youth populations (e.g., youth who are neither in school nor working, and/or are low-income, foster care/justice system-involved, young parents, homeless, dual language learners).



¹ The Annie E. Casey Foundation’s grantees included: Arkansas Community Colleges (ACC), Kentucky Community & Technical College System (KCTCS) Foundation Inc., Mississippi Community College Board (MCCB), Nebraska Children and Families Foundation, New Mexico United Way Central New Mexico (UWCNM), and Towards Employment in Ohio

An outcomes-oriented approach enables governments to integrate data, policy, and funding strategies in collaboration with community partners to focus on measurable life changes that result from the completion of a program like Career Pathways. The planning process requires:



Strategic collaboration across workforce, education, and human services organizations to synchronize resources to specifically address long-term learning and remove employment barriers faced by a prioritized group of Youth and Young Adults



Alignment to form a continuum of support that merges funding streams, integrates metrics from various agencies, and collaborates on program implementation



Informed decision-making that links funding and program results, alongside insights from governments



Administrative data and continuous improvement feedback loops among government, community colleges, and other providers

Ultimately, each state expects that the work completed over the last two years to develop a strong foundation for outcomes-driven strategies can translate into future funding decisions linked to specific outcome achievement for Youth and Young Adults. Creating a stronger linkage between outcomes and funding decisions can bring greater lasting impact in addressing systemic inequities and breaking cycles of intergenerational poverty.

In states in which public funding sources are limited, federal and philanthropic funds play critical roles. The Casey Foundation and local philanthropies provided critical funding in the six states for program coordination, cross-agency collaborations, and equity-focused data analysis of youth populations. The Casey Foundation's grant provided local leaders with unique funding flexibility and technical assistance to plan years into the future to explore how to align and streamline local and federal resources to better support specific youth sub-populations. The planning grant also capitalized on federal-level momentum coinciding with the launch of the [Social Impact Partnerships to Pay for Results Act \(SIPPR\)](#). Administered by the U.S. Treasury, SIPPR is an appropriated \$100 million fund to implement feasibility studies and demonstration projects to explore how to improve the effectiveness of social services by paying for results. The six states will continue to explore how existing federal funds (e.g., WIOA and TANF), SIPPR, and other disbursements from the [Cares Act](#) and [COVID Economic Relief](#) Executive Orders can further support states' transition to sustainable, long-term funding that address the needs of Youth and Young Adults with the highest barriers to employment.

The following sections share insights from the strategic planning processes from April 2019 to March 2021. As described in greater detail below, each state improved its outcomes-driven decision-making capacity through one or more tactical approaches:

Population-focused Visioning

Outcomes Data Integration

Diverse Stakeholders Convening

Funding Alignment

Population-focused Visioning

State teams with representatives from education, workforce, and human services agencies, state/local data centers, and community colleges began the planning process via administrative data scans to better understand the Youth and Young Adult population in their states. They sought to answer: What are the specific characteristics and needs of Youth and Young Adult learners in our state? What services are they accessing? How are they performing on education and economic wellbeing outcomes? Do we have disaggregated data by race, ethnicity, age, gender, and/or geography to create a baseline and track progress over time? If not, how can we obtain it?

States teams' initial findings, along with national research, provided some basic insight into various youth sub-populations that experience systematically higher barriers to accessing training services and completing postsecondary programs. A KIDS COUNT report entitled "[Race for Results](#)" highlighted that youth, especially those who are Black, Latino, and Native, and living in states in the South and Southwest, consistently have lower rates of post-secondary attainment, among other economic opportunity outcomes.

What made the planning process unique is that, rather than the common practice of developing a population strategy based on eligible funding streams, states articulated their local needs with their government partner's data and priorities. Some states, for example, design workforce training programs for all youth ages 14-24, no matter the varying needs within a broad population, because of the availability of WIOA Title I programs. The planning process flipped the script. It encouraged a population-driven approach by first specifying priority youth subpopulations based on life situations that are barriers to academic achievement and employment, such as: poverty, current or previous involvement in the justice or child welfare system, lack of a high school equivalency, and/or responsibility for children as young parents. When attempting to address equity gaps, whether in access to services and enrollment, or in outcomes like employment retention, population specificity is important to ensure funding intentions are paired with suitable, tangible program solutions. With data on specific targeted populations in hand, states can proceed with program approaches either to adapt referral pathways and program design of pre-identified existing programs to suit the needs of the youth, or review more broadly the available programs and funding opportunities to set up new strategies for serving the youth.



Spotlight: Kentucky

In Kentucky, the KCTCS Foundation, Inc. served as the project's fiscal agent. The Kentucky Community & Technical College System (KCTCS) and the Kentucky Center for Statistics (KYSTATS) partnered to create a [Youth and Young Adult data dashboard](#)² leveraging the Kentucky Longitudinal Data System to produce a demographic breakdown of the 14-to-24-year-old population in Kentucky by multiple subpopulation characteristics, as well as race, gender, region, and age subgroups.

² The dashboard displays Youth and Young Adult populations age 14-24 by the ten local workforce board regions in the Commonwealth and can be filtered by subpopulations: youth who are homeless, have limited English proficiency, are low socioeconomic status, are migrant, are in special education, are unaccompanied youth, and are enrolled in SNAP/TANF. Further disaggregation can be done by race, gender, and age subgroup (14-17, 18-21, 22-24). The dashboard tracks outcomes including: College/Career Ready by KDE's definition, CTE Certification, High School Graduation, GED Attainment, Postsecondary Enrollment, Postsecondary Credential, Employment 1 and 2 years out, SNAP Participation, KTAP Participation.

“ This is a new innovative way to utilize a longitudinal data system to provide information similar to the census about Youth and Young Adult populations and their education and workforce outcomes to inform programmatic and policy improvements.” KY state leader

The dashboard will be a key resource for state agencies like the Kentucky Workforce Investment Board on how to consider (re)allocating funding and support services based on 1-to 3-year education and employment outcomes disaggregated by various life factors. The dashboard is also publicly available with the hopes of all social service providers being able to utilize the information to design more human-centric approaches in partnership with government agencies working with the same population groups.

Outcomes Data Integration

State teams were able to examine holistically all services provided to the broader Youth and Young Adult population and all data connected to those youth in order to develop a tailored approach for how to work with a specific population group. A local philanthropic observer, for example, described the cross-sector, collaborative data space as “the linchpin to bringing all data to the table. Each representative from the Departments of Labor and Education, TANF, SNAP, philanthropy, community colleges, and service providers could say: “This is the data I have on the young people we’re serving. I see where I fit into this plan to reach specific outcomes.” State teams could subsequently “read and react” in accord with policy priorities and partnerships and continue to build and strengthen interagency relationships. For many agencies, leading with data was a new approach.

Knowing specific youth needs also allowed state teams to identify which other outcomes are important to track to ensure a fuller picture of improved livelihood. While data for educational attainment and workforce measures are commonly compared, they are not always integrated and may exclude other measures that greatly impact success in those two areas. For example, tracking impact on recidivism rates for youth who have former involvement in the justice system is an important indicator for whether educational or workforce attainment supported that young person toward a stable career path.

Data integration requires substantial coordination. Every state, regardless of how sophisticated or mature their data management systems, found data collection, sharing, and analysis a challenge. The [Arkansas Research Center](#), Mississippi’s [NSPARC](#), and Kentucky [KYSTATS](#) all have robust infrastructure for longitudinal state data collection, but even for these states, organizing data by population had not been standard practice for the disparate education, workforce, or human services agencies involved in the planning process. Instead, information is owned by different government agencies, and enabling data analysis required negotiating complex sharing and confidentiality agreements. Getting partners on board for the long-term vision of the research queries, setting clear parameters for data sharing, and creating or modifying MOUs can take 6-9 months of conversations and coordination. Once data is in hand, integrating information (including cleaning and matching data points) may take a tremendous amount of manual labor.

When the Mississippi YYA planning team identified its target sub-populations of interest, it soon learned that data about some of these populations were not currently available in the State Longitudinal Data Center operated by the National Strategic Planning and Analysis Research Center (NSPARC). One such population is juvenile justice involved youth. Instead, data about this youth population is “owned” by each of the county youth courts, though some limited data elements are also reported and collected at the state level. After some discussion with the state agencies that work with juvenile justice involved youth, the Mississippi Community College Board (MCCB) staff reached out to Judge John Hudson, Jurist in Residence, Mississippi Supreme Court, who works with the state’s Youth Court system to embrace best practices.

“ I see the MIBEST program as a natural program of hope for our young people. It encourages them to set reachable meaningful goals, provides them pathways to accomplish those goals, and assists them to identify and embrace their will-power to achieve those goals. Our young people embrace hope as they increase their belief that the future will be better than today and they have the power to make it so. I strive to do all I can to help the system accumulate necessary data on educational and workforce outcomes to promote the goal of postsecondary and career success through MIBEST and other programs for current and former justice involved youth.”

Judge John Hudson

Judge Hudson sees this as a unique opportunity to employ state court data contained in the state's court reporting systems to directly improve systems responses to juvenile justice involved youth and inspire meaningful resources to provide better outcomes. Funding from the Annie E. Casey Foundation, particularly the Juvenile Detention Alternatives Initiative ([JDAI](#)) – a network of juvenile justice practitioners and other system stakeholders working to build a better and more equitable youth justice system – will allow NSPARC to conduct an analysis of the high school completion, postsecondary attainment, and labor market outcomes for this population. The information resulting from this analysis can be used by the Youth Court staff to identify new and expanded services needed to assist these youth and young adults and promote their postsecondary and career success during and after Youth Court supervision. It can also help to drive more juvenile justice involved youth towards MIBEST – an evidence-based, integrated career pathways initiative that simultaneously helps under-prepared students improve their academic skills and obtain a High School Equivalency (if needed), while being enrolled in community college occupational training programs.

Most states elected to use substantial portions of the grant resources to support staff’s data planning, access, and integration capacity either internal to organizations or with partner data institutions³. A great benefit of the Casey Foundation’s philanthropic grant, as highlighted in Kentucky and Mississippi, was the flexibility to fund initial data scans that were not attached to a fully-fledged program evaluation or research study. Foundation funding, in essence, allowed these states to explore what additional questions might need to be asked and answered beyond those formulated already.

³ Arkansas worked with the Arkansas Research Center (ARC). Kentucky worked with the Kentucky Center for Statistics (KYSTATS). Mississippi worked with the National Strategic Planning & Analysis Research Center (NSPARC). New Mexico worked with the University of New Mexico (UNM). Nebraska worked with the Nebraska Children and Families Foundation’s internal data unit. Ohio worked with the Center on Urban Poverty and Community Development at Case Western Reserve University.

Particularly with recent funding reductions for data institutions, philanthropic funds are especially valuable to apply to these open-ended data explorations.

Despite the challenges, state teams acknowledged that using a data-driven approach produced benefits for conducting a baseline analysis on postsecondary education and workforce outcomes, and for setting up the infrastructure for partners to jointly track performance on program interventions.

Diverse Stakeholder Convening

One of the key benefits for each state team was the ability to attract diverse partners to join the planning process. With the backing of Annie E. Casey as a national foundation, teams formed workgroups consisting of community colleges, state government agencies, workforce entities, community organizations, local philanthropies, and others. While the six state teams were focused on developing individualized plans, being part of a cross-state cohort created extra incentives for local partners to join the conversation.

As both data owners and managers of federal and state funding, government agencies were key participants for creating an outcomes vision for Youth and Young Adults that was both feasible to implement and could tap into sustainable funding sources. Governments at all levels often, yet unintentionally, fund service efforts that prove duplicative, without determining if sustainable progress is being achieved. Understanding how TANF resources could support WIOA training or serve childcare or transportation needs was a critical question many states explored. While philanthropy and community-based organizations can achieve substantial positive impact directly, breaking down government silos and fostering broad agency involvement is critical to achieving a coordinated vision and systemic impact.

Each state's partnership approaches were different and had unique strengths. The planning process revealed how a network of organizations can each impact an education and workforce system from their respective roles. Going beyond managing one program or securing a grant in isolation, the outcomes-oriented focus enhanced communication and alignment across the system to ensure a full career pathway--from enrollment to progression to completion--could be connected.



Spotlight: New Mexico

In New Mexico, the United Way of Central New Mexico (UWCNM) served as the community convener and intermediary hosting the planning process. At the onset of the grant, UWCNM was considering how to expand its Graduate! ABQ program to meet the needs of the community. After nearly 40 interviews with community partners, UWCNM reassessed more than just its one Graduate! ABQ program, but also the organization's overall role in the community and how to reposition its work. As a result, UWCNM developed a new five year strategic plan for the broader umbrella of Mission: Graduate to boost collaboration and cross-pollination: across its three arms (K-12 Engagement and Attendance, College and Career Readiness and Adult Education and Transitions), between Mission:Graduate and Mission:Families, and across the diverse functional departments of the organization as a whole.

In Nebraska, the Nebraska Children and Families Foundation welcomed the unique opportunity to convene stakeholders under a national foundation's external grant (as opposed to their own funding) because it helped equalize the power dynamics among community partners. Nebraska Children became an equal partner in a generative conversation alongside local subject matter experts, government staff, and other community partners in workforce and wrap-around support services. All committed to an ongoing, two-year strategy development process in lieu of a handful of convenings. Long term planning encouraged tactful relationship building and expectation setting among all partners in order to align their respective expertise with the existing investments in the state from the Casey Foundation's [Learn and Earn to Achieve Potential \(LEAP\)™ initiative](#) and [Jim Casey Youth Opportunities Initiative](#), and the outcome priorities of the state's Department of Labor, Department of Education, Department of Health & Human Services, and the Governor's job creation efforts for young people. The process ultimately generated the capacity for Nebraska Children to refine its equity targets for engaging youth of color and explore how disaggregated data from the state will inform which outcomes to prioritize in 2021 and beyond.

“ Commitment across many agencies was so hard to get. But finally, two years later it feels like the collective vision of all partners can be sustained.”

Nebraska state leader

Funding Alignment

The ultimate goal of the planning grants was to achieve sustainable public funding for outcomes-oriented programming. Funding sources differed for each state's programs: In Ohio and Arkansas, the programs were funded by WIOA and TANF federal funding streams; in Mississippi, the program was beginning the transition from sunseting philanthropic funds to a state or federal funding stream; in Nebraska and New Mexico, programs were funded locally on an annual basis (Nebraska Children and Families Foundation and United Way, respectively); and in Kentucky, the program and funding source remains to be identified once all data and program landscape assessments are completed by the state workforce board. Each state, in short, needed to develop a unique funding approach.

State teams had to consider which Youth and Young Adults are served by existing state and federal funding streams and identify how new funding opportunities could support their population-focused work. Integrating population data enabled states to quantify need and disparities across key populations to influence new or reallocated funding. The planning grant also allowed state teams to step back and holistically examine state data independent of a program evaluation or research study, then adjust their strategies to reflect these data insights and/or community needs. Recognizing future public funding opportunities also influenced state teams' decisions around which government agencies to engage and how.

In Arkansas, the goal was to expand Arkansas Community Colleges' (ACC) Career Pathways Initiative (CPI) and customize it to the needs of noncustodial parents, who are primarily low-income men of color. CPI was initially designed to support low-income parents seeking to attain postsecondary degrees and is administered through the Division of Workforce Services using TANF funding to pay for wraparound supports such as tuition stipends, transportation funds, childcare, and career counseling services. With a clear vision and funding source, the state focused on how to modify referral/enrollment strategies into CPI and program services to specifically engage a TANF-eligible population with limited supports.

“ One thing you have to have upfront is funding. Partners came to the table because we had funding to use. Philanthropy might seed [this work], but you need to be able to tap into sustainable funding.”

Arkansas state leader

In Cuyahoga County, Ohio, stakeholders aligned this planning grant's efforts with funding from Generation Work, a partnership also funded by the Annie E. Casey Foundation which aims to support the development of a coordinated and accessible workforce system, with a particular focus on youth development. Aligning philanthropic grant efforts provided a helpful starting point for county stakeholders across population, data, and stakeholders. The team focused on the Comprehensive Case Management and Employment Program (CCMEP), a program that helps low-income young adults get the training and supports necessary to enter a career, which includes service providers in the Generation Work partnership. Data analysis work also built off previous conversations among Generations Work stakeholders around the importance of disaggregating data to improve racial equity. By braiding these two philanthropic grants, the county was able to maximize their potential for impact across both efforts to improve outcomes for youth.

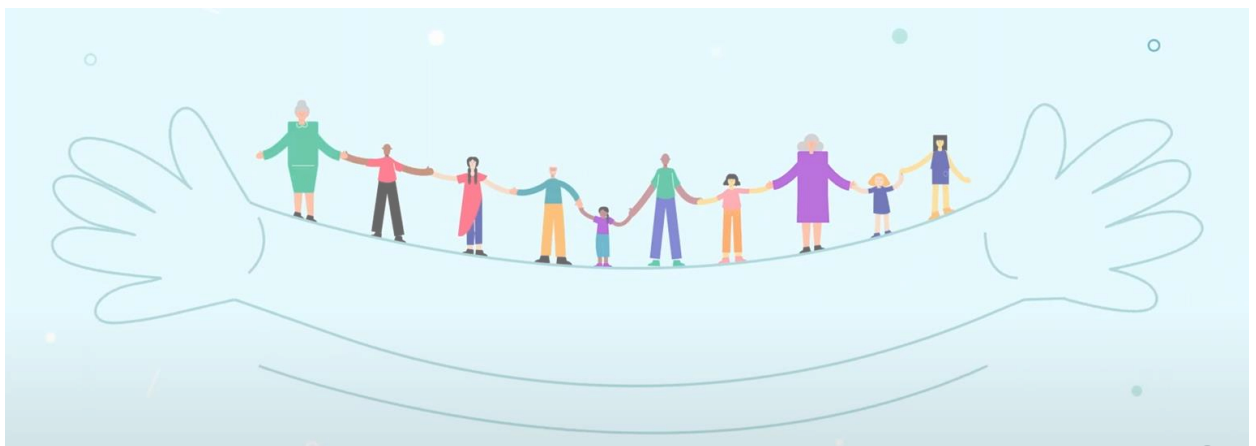
Looking Ahead

The ongoing COVID-19 crisis only makes outcomes-driven strategic planning more urgent and necessary. COVID-19 exacerbated economic, education, and health inequities across the country, particularly for Youth and Young Adults. For most of 2020 and into 2021, most schools and universities transferred to online, remote learning. [Research](#) shows that online education succeeds only if students have consistent Internet and computer access and are in safe and stable living situations with sufficient resources – all factors worsened by COVID-19.

The ongoing COVID-19 crisis only makes outcomes-driven strategic planning more urgent and necessary. COVID-19 exacerbated economic, education, and health inequities across the country, particularly for Youth and Young Adults. For most of 2020 and into 2021, most schools and universities transferred to online, remote learning. [Research](#) shows that online education succeeds only if students have consistent Internet and computer access and are in safe and stable living situations with sufficient resources – all factors worsened by COVID-19. Many of the Youth and Young Adults that state teams prioritized already faced challenges accessing postsecondary education and workforce opportunities. Remote learning and massive reductions in lower-wage and hourly jobs has undoubtedly magnified these challenges. The state teams also observed that more young people feel financial pressure to find employment, even at less than livable wages, over completing a high school equivalency or postsecondary degree that would promise them greater lifelong economic and personal benefits.

As states struggled with mounting unemployment claims and increasingly strained resources, many were forced to deprioritize longer-term, equity-oriented strategies and instead appropriately focus on short-term crisis responses. Ensuring states would not have to completely forgo the critical long-term work to achieve equitable outcomes was a key benefit of the Casey Foundation’s grant funding. While public resources were redirected towards COVID-19 relief efforts, strategic philanthropic funding was leveraged to ensure sustained focus on long-term postsecondary and workforce outcomes for Youth and Young Adults and equity goals.

As our country moves away from reacting to the pandemic and starts rebuilding from it, strategic philanthropic funding will continue to be integral to ensuring states across the U.S. have the resources to engage in critical work that improves postsecondary and workforce outcomes for Youth and Young Adults. By providing financial support through [COVID-19 Economic Relief](#) and explicitly [advancing racial equity](#), federal leadership is supporting increased federal funding through the Departments of Education, Labor, and Health and Human Services and national grant programs like SIPPRA. Both federal and philanthropic grants can ensure federal leaders are in close contact with state leaders, all sharing data and insights on strategies that are achieving the greatest benefits and sustained positive impact for prioritized Youth and Young Adults.





Reflections from the Annie E. Casey Foundation

The planning process for this six-state, outcomes-driven strategy planning effort was grounded in the recognition that removing barriers for Youth and Young Adults requires coordination among partners who each make distinct, important contributions to a young person's success. Coordinated action for this planning process -- whether to change policies, design new programs, braid and blend funding, or integrate data -- required a specific set of actors within each state planning team including government agencies (primarily in Workforce and Education), community colleges, and data institutions. As the Casey Foundation, state teams, and Third Sector reflected on the planning process, we recognize that outcomes-based strategy takes significant effort and coordination. The focus on outcomes is promising, and although the process is challenging, undergoing population-based, data-informed, collaboration-dependent approaches is a better way of achieving improved impact. The preparatory analysis and partner collaborations point toward a path for making Youth and Young Adult populations a more visible, urgent priority for states.

Philanthropic dollars dedicated toward exploratory phases and planning periods can generate tremendous value, and the Casey Foundation believes several strategies from the planning process are worthy of replicating in the future. The focus on the specific needs and circumstances of a youth population--rather than the interests, scope, and limits of an individual agency or funding stream--is consistent with the Casey Foundation's new announcement for [Thrive by 25](#), a commitment to dedicate at least half of its investments over the next decade to improving the well-being and prospects of Youth and Young Adults ages 14–24.

The Casey Foundation also continues to invest in results-based efforts that rely on data to drive decisions toward concrete goals and accelerate measurable and equitable improvements in outcomes for children. The "[Results Count](#)" approach to meeting the needs of children and families works backwards from the brighter future we want for our young people to identifying and understanding the systemic barriers that stand in the way of their achieving it. Agencies cannot identify Youth and Young Adults unreached by their programs without comparing notes or lessons learned from staff or community partners. Moreover, to create incentives and reward progress toward achieving better results requires linking data to evaluate and acknowledge the contribution of one agency's program (i.e. subsidized childcare via TANF) to another institution's success (i.e. credential attainment at the community college offering supportive services for young parents). Data drives this kind of partnership.

The Casey Foundation has also appreciated the opportunity to learn more about Third Sector's outcomes-driven strategies that tie new incentives to existing funding sources to create a sustained source of support for Youth and Young Adults who have the most to gain from targeted assistance by agencies. *"Third Sector was an invaluable partner to the Casey Foundation and leaders from six states as we worked to increase economic opportunity for underrepresented youth and young adults of color and strengthen the systems that serve them across multiple sectors,"* says Irene Lee of the Casey Foundation. Such a focus on outcomes through the integration of data, policy, and funding insights into a vision to scale Career Pathways has encouraged the cohort to consistently think of sustainability through public resources. An eye toward impacting the system through existing data and funding sources ensures that partnerships do not become a one-time event. The iterative process of engaging government agencies, data partners, and philanthropy ensures an accountable use of scarce resources to support Youth and Young Adults emerging from the pandemic.



About Us

Third Sector is a non-profit advisory organization that transforms public systems to advance improved and equitable outcomes. We partner with governments, service providers, and their community partners on how to maximize the impact of public programs by integrating data, policy, and funding insights. Since 2011, we have worked with more than 40 communities to deploy over \$850mm of government resources to improve the life outcomes in workforce, education, mental health, justice and family services. When our work is complete, agencies entrusted to use public funds will have the systems, tools, capacity and data to do more and do better for their customers and clients.

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