

Eliminating Barriers to WIOA Services for Systems-Involved Youth



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California's Need for a Federal Waiver

THE PROMISE OF WIOA

The Workforce Innovation and Opportunity Act (WIOA) is the primary federal law supporting workforce development and career readiness for our country's economically vulnerable youth. Each year the federal government distributes several hundred million dollars in WIOA funds to California, including about \$120 million through the Youth Program. These resources can be used by local workforce development boards (WDBs) to fund services including vocational coaching and navigation, workforce training, skill development, and apprenticeship and internship programs to connect economically vulnerable youth and young adults to employment opportunities and career pathways. Funds from the WIOA Youth Program provide critical opportunities for youth to build the necessary skills and experience to achieve long-term career success.

BARRIERS TO ACCESS FOR SYSTEMS-INVOLVED YOUTH

WIOA expresses an important intention to focus on the most disconnected youth and young adults. Unfortunately, the construction of the law and resulting interpretations create distinctions not reflected in the lived experiences of young people; these distinctions force youth and young adults we know are most likely to leave high school before earning a diploma, or otherwise become disconnected, to leave the one place we want them to be, school, before they are eligible for these services. That is, WIOA as currently implemented in California supports reactive approaches rather than prioritizing proactive solutions for youth at the highest risk of imminent education and workforce disconnection—including those

involved with the foster care and justice systems and those experiencing homelessness, despite the tight correlation between system-involvement and early school departure, adult justice system engagement, and homelessness.

In 2018, of the 161,288 youth who accessed programming funded through the WIOA Youth Activities Program across the country, services were provided to just:

- 6,024 current and former foster youth, out of several hundred thousand who are eligible
- 16,346 youth who have been involved with the criminal justice system, despite the fact that on any given day tens of thousands of youth are incarcerated or in out of home placement, and several million youth are arrested every year
- 10,163 homelessness or runaway youth, of the several million youth and young adults recognized by federal programs as experiencing homelessness each year

These particularly vulnerable populations are disproportionately represented by youth who are at risk of further marginalization, including youth from extremely low-income households and communities of color and youth identifying as LGBTQ, and they are called out in statute and given priority under the law as a means to achieving equity. Yet despite their recognized disadvantages, they collectively they represent just **1 in 5** of the youth currently being served with WIOA Youth Program funds.

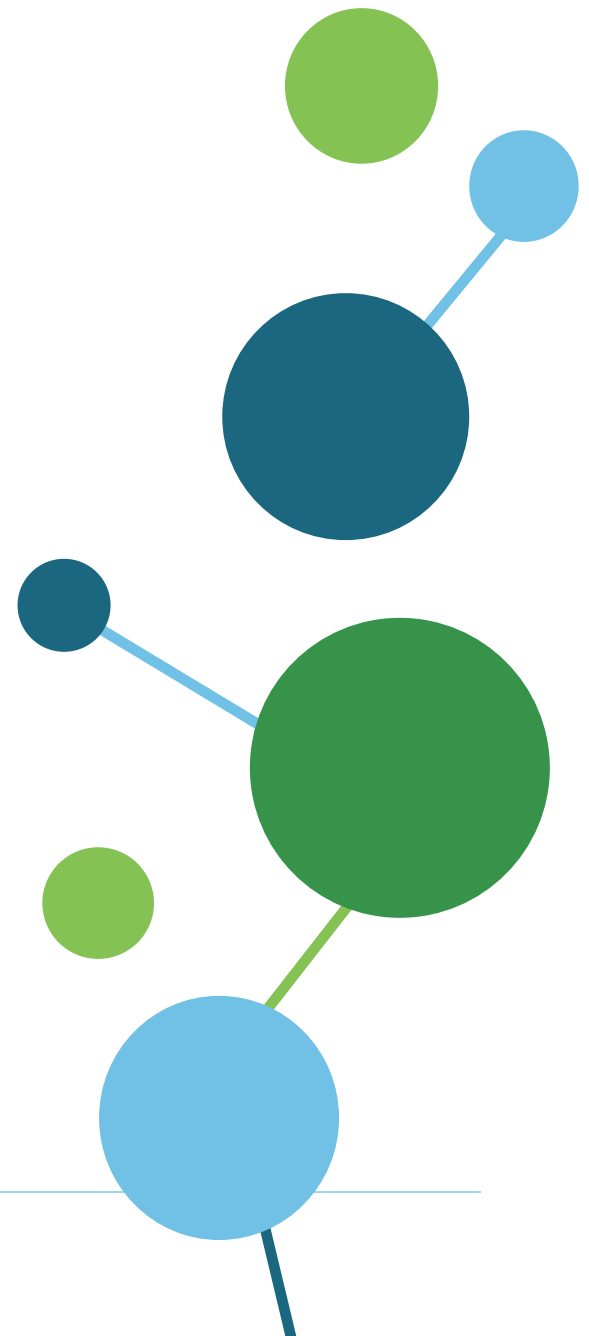
UNINTENDED CONSEQUENCES OF THE “OUT OF SCHOOL YOUTH” REQUIREMENT

A major barrier limiting systems-involved youth access to WIOA services is the requirement that at least 75% of Youth Program funding distributed by WDBs be directed to “out-of-school youth” (OSY) who have experienced education system disconnection. A recent Government Accountability Office (GAO) report¹ indicates that many workforce boards are in fact spending up to 100% of their funds on OSY, while there has been a 60% decrease in “in-school youth” (ISY) being served by WIOA since 2014. At the same time, many systems-involved youth are understandably being urged—if not required—to be enrolled in school in order to maintain their eligibility for other supportive services—as is the case for youth in the state’s extended foster care program as well as many youth on court-ordered parole. Ironically this connection to school—even if only part-time—makes it extremely difficult if not impossible for many systems-involved youth to receive WIOA-funded academic and career development services which might improve their outcomes.

While the OSY requirement is well-intentioned and aims to direct resources to the most vulnerable youth, it views school disconnection as a hard and definitive moment rather than the result of a long developing set of life experiences. This singular measure fails to consider the process of school disengagement and the factors that a large body of evidence tell us directly drive early departure, like school mobility, chronic truancy, and low academic performance. Rather than waiting for the added challenges of school dropout, we should be identifying these vulnerable youth and directing resources toward them in a more proactive manner, leveraging their connections to systems to address their needs farther upstream *before* they drop out of school and disengage from the labor market. If they are made more accessible, WIOA programs have tremendous potential to connect our most vulnerable youth toward a path of self-sufficiency.

PROPOSED SOLUTION: A STATEWIDE WIOA WAIVER

We recommend that the State of California submit a WIOA waiver request to the U.S. Department of Labor (DOL) that would provide local WDBs across the state the *optional* ability to exempt youth involved with the foster care, justice and homelessness systems from the OSY requirements. If approved, the waiver would address a systemic barrier within the law and expand opportunities for WDBs to work toward equity by supporting the state’s most vulnerable youth while they are connected to systems to prevent future disconnection, while preserving local flexibility and decision-making.



¹ <https://www.gao.gov/assets/700/692574.pdf>

The Vulnerability of Systems-Involved Youth to Future Disconnection and Poor Long-Term Outcomes

The very low rate of access for systems-involved youth to WIOA programming is unacceptable in consideration of widely available research demonstrating that these youth are at a very high risk of disconnection upon exiting the systems through which they are currently being served, and that they experience some of the worst long-term outcomes of any population in the country.

FOSTER YOUTH

A recent report from the Annie E. Casey Foundation illustrates the low rate at which these youth receive critical transition services, finding that just 20% of the transition age foster youth in California received any federally funded employment programs or vocational training.² The California Youth Transitions to Adulthood Study (CalYOUTH)—the nation’s largest and most comprehensive longitudinal study of transition age foster youth—highlights their resulting extreme economic vulnerability, finding that at age 21: nearly half are unemployed; those who are working generally do not earn a livable wage; their total income leaves them far below the poverty line; they have almost no financial assets to rely on; and they are often unable to meet their basic needs.³ The Midwest Study—a large longitudinal study tracking youth transitioning from foster care to adulthood—illustrated the extreme economic vulnerability of this population and recommends that systems address barriers to education and employment for these youth, including better coordination with programs funded through WIOA.⁴ Foster youth who do pursue postsecondary

pursue postsecondary education often struggle mightily during their first year in college, while those who are able to access support services and academic assistance benefit greatly, according to a new report from Educational Results Partnership and California College Pathways.⁵

YOUTH INVOLVED WITH THE JUSTICE SYSTEM

Youth and young adults involved with the juvenile justice system typically lag behind their peers academically. A large longitudinal study of a cohort of 18-to-24 year old young adults involved with the correctional system found that more than half lacked a high school diploma or GED when exiting the system.⁶ The study also found that the youth lagging academically experienced a recidivism rate almost twice as high as the other youth exiting the system, noting that the “vast majority of the recidivists were unemployed and less-educated.” The authors note the importance of connecting this population to academic and career pathways to address “deficiencies in education and lack of adequate job skills” and prevent recidivism—80% of which occurs within the first two years after youth exit the system. Meanwhile the Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention (OJJDP) highlights the importance of education to the long-term outcomes for this population, noting that youth who continue to progress in their education while incarcerated are more likely to continue with school after they are released, while those who continue participating in school after their release will have less chance of recidivism.⁷

² The Annie E. Casey Foundation. (2018). *Fostering Youth Transitions: Using Data to Drive Policy and Practice Decisions*. Baltimore, MD. <https://www.aecf.org/resources/fostering-youth-transitions>

³ Courtney, M.E., Okpych, N.J., & Park, K. (2018). *Findings from the California Youth Transitions to Adulthood Study (CalYOUTH): Conditions of Youth at Age 21*. Chicago: Chapin Hall at the University of Chicago. Retrieved from https://www.chapinhall.org/wp-content/uploads/CY_YT_RE0518_1.pdf

⁴ Hook, J.L. & Courtney, M.E. (2010). *Employment of Former Foster Youth as Young Adults: Evidence from the Midwest Study*. Chicago: Chapin Hall at the University of Chicago. Retrieved from: <http://www.chapinhall.org/research/coordinated-systems-key-to-employment-for-youth-formerly-in-state-care>

⁵ Education Results Partnership, & California College Pathways. (2019). *Pipeline to Success: Supporting California Foster Youth from High School to Community College*. Retrieved from <http://www.jbaforyouth.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/12/Pipeline-to-Success-report-web.pdf>

⁶ Lockwood, S.K. and Nally, J.M. (2017). *Exploring the Importance of the Workforce Innovation and Opportunity Act (2014) to Correctional Education Programs for Incarcerated Adults*. Center on Juvenile and Criminal Justice. Justice Policy Journal. Vol 14, Number 1. Retrieved from http://www.cjci.org/uploads/cjci/documents/workforce_innovation_and_opportunity_act_and_correctional_education.pdf

⁷ Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention. (2019). *Literature Review: Education for Youth Under Formal Supervision of the Juvenile Justice System*. <http://www.ojjdp.gov/mpg/litreviews/Education-for-Youth-in-the-Juvenile-Justice-System.pdf>

HOMELESS YOUTH

It has been well documented that housing instability often results in school instability. Research from the Institute for Children, Poverty & Homelessness (ICPH) indicates that youth experiencing homelessness miss more days of school than their peers and are more likely to transfer schools, placing them at a higher risk of falling behind and repeating a grade.⁸ ICPH found that just 50% of youth experiencing homelessness graduated on time, while they were almost 40% more likely to drop out than their peers. Research from Chapin Hall indicates that these youth were less than one-third as likely to be enrolled in a four-year postsecondary institution as their peers.⁹ Chapin Hall also finds that youth who drop out of school without attaining a high school diploma or GED are 4.5x more likely than their peers who completed school to experience homelessness in early adulthood.

⁸ Institute for Children, Poverty & Homelessness. (2014). *A Tale of Two Students: Homelessness in New York City Public Schools*. http://www.icphusa.org/wp-content/uploads/2016/09/ICPH_policyreport_ATaleofTwoStudents.pdf

⁹ Morton, M.H., Dworsky, A. & Samuels, G.M. (2017). *Missed Opportunities: Youth Homelessness in America*. National Estimates. Chicago: Chapin Hall at the University of Chicago. Retrieved from http://www.voicesofyouthcount.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/11/ChapinHall_VoYC_NationalReport_Final.pdf



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