

WHITE PAPER

Unlocking Teen Potential: How Public Libraries Productively Engage Opportunity Youth

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Acknowledgments

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The Urban Libraries Council is an innovation and action tank of North America's leading public library systems. We drive cutting-edge research and strategic partnerships to elevate the power of libraries as essential, transformative institutions. We identify significant challenges facing today's communities and develop new tools and techniques to help libraries achieve stronger outcomes in education, workforce and economic development, digital equity and race and social equity.

Introduction

Youth disconnection is a concern in communities across the United States and Canada, regardless of whether they are urban, rural, or suburban. **In the U.S., there are over 5 million young people between the ages of 16 and 24 who are disengaged from both school and employment.** Concerns about this population range from creating disruptions in public spaces to failing to contribute to local economies or breaking cycles of generational poverty. In public libraries, staff can feel ill-equipped to deal with and even overwhelmed by disengaged teens who are perceived to be creating disruptions. However, as with any challenge, there is opportunity. **Libraries are well-positioned to unlock the potential of teens and young adults** and support them with reconnection due to their expert programming staff and safe public spaces. This white paper provides an overview of programmatic efforts that libraries can deploy to engage teens and young adults productively and support them on a path toward greater upward economic mobility.



The Urgent Need to Engage Opportunity Youth

Opportunity youth is a term that describes **young people between the ages of 16 to 24 who are disconnected from both school and work.** Disconnection can happen for a number of reasons, and **common risk factors** include trauma, engagement with the child welfare or justice systems, and having unemployed or drug-addicted parents. This age range also overlaps with **adolescence**, a period of significant emotional, social, and cognitive growth in which individuals are more likely to experiment with new activities and engage in risk-taking.

The economic implications of opportunity youth are significant. According to **Measure of America**, approximately \$55 billion in federal tax revenue is lost by the population of U.S. opportunity youth failing to contribute to the tax base. In public spaces, youth can be perceived as disruptive, sometimes even resulting in the implementation of curfews to curb their presence, which have shown **mixed results**. In public libraries, staff have reported feeling overwhelmed by “unruly teens” and ill-equipped to manage their presence in the library. At the extreme end, concerns exist about **youth violence**, which has been shown to correlate with low school commitment and shares many of the same risk factors as becoming an opportunity youth.

Opportunity youth commonly face a number of socioeconomic barriers such as housing or family instability, emotional or physical trauma, and the shadow of previous behaviors including having criminal records. Adolescence is also a critical period of brain development, and **experiences of trauma**—such as instability, violence, or systemic inequities—can heighten stress responses and negatively impact brain development in the long term.

Opportunity youth carry these challenges with them and can struggle to change their trajectory without support. Fortunately, various **interventions** have been shown to improve outcomes for opportunity youth, including providing safe and consistent environments, job-skilling and other training opportunities, and establishing support systems of reliable adults and mentor figures.

Public libraries, historically perceived in many communities as **trusted institutions**, have the ability to deploy targeted interventions that can help set opportunity youth on more positive paths. Expert staff and librarians—equipped with proper training—can provide a range of supportive programming such as job and skills training, social networking, and educational opportunities. Staff can redirect teens in libraries toward these programs, while also providing free access to non-stigmatizing, safe, youth-centered spaces.

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“Library staff must become comfortable with teenagers and young adults. Teens in general, and especially opportunity youth, face far too many barriers. The library must not be one of them! The public library has a mission to provide equitable access to information, knowledge, and resources that support lifelong learning, civic engagement, personal enrichment, and community well-being.

When librarians genuinely build and foster relationships with Opportunity Youth and invite them to be partners in shaping programs and services that reflect their authentic needs, interests, and goals, the library’s role can be transformative. The library is no longer just a service provider; it becomes a collaborator helping young adults become a positive force to be reckoned with in this world.”

-Michelle Hamiel, Chief of Programs, Urban Libraries Council

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ULC's Creating Youth Opportunities Initiative

With the support of the Walmart Foundation, ULC has worked since 2022 with a **cohort of 11 public library systems** that have deployed opportunity youth-focused programming. From 2022 to 2023, the cohort learned best practices, researched their communities, and designed tailored program plans for their libraries. From 2023 to 2025, the cohort implemented a wide range of programs for opportunity youth and captured impact data through a multi-faceted evaluation process.

The goal of the [Creating Youth Opportunities](#) initiative was to support opportunity youth through targeted, [locally designed programs](#) centered in public libraries to deflect them from involvement with the criminal justice system. Lessons from the pilot cohort serve throughout this white paper as a framework for other libraries and non-profits to explore how they may implement programs that are supportive to opportunity youth in their communities.

The Creating Youth Opportunities pilot libraries were:



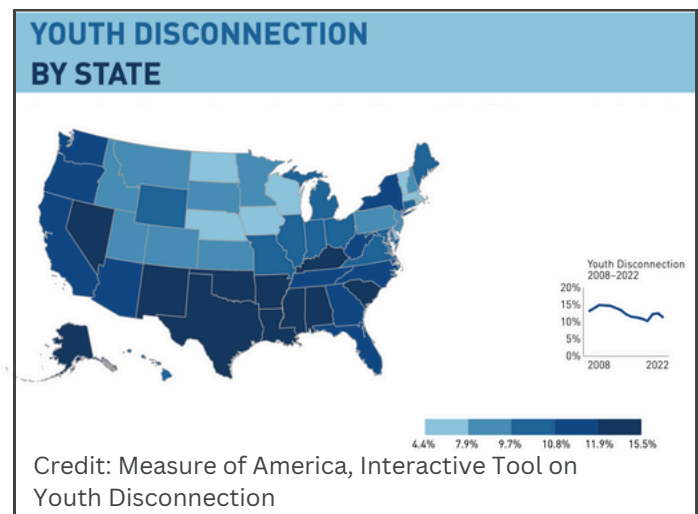
A Framework for Serving Opportunity Youth in the Library

Through the three years of the Creating Youth Opportunities program, cohort members heard from a number of national and local experts on best practices for supporting opportunity youth. They also worked to understand the needs of their own communities and how programming may best address them. A number of themes emerged from these conversations and can serve as a framework for effectively serving opportunity youth in the library.

1. Tailor programs to local needs and populations

Programs that authentically and effectively serve opportunity youth are not designed in a vacuum. Library staff who are designing programs should make an effort to understand what circumstances and challenges opportunity youth face in their community so that programs can be tailored to address those needs. For example, in some rural communities opportunity youth may face greater transportation barriers to attending library programs than others.

One place to start is examining local data. Measure of America's [interactive tool](#) on youth disconnection allows users to examine the number of disconnected youth in your library's county, metro area, or even neighborhood of various branch locations. The Annie E. Casey Foundation's [Kids Count Data Center](#) website can also generate reports on youth not attending school or working. This data can help build a foundational understanding of how many opportunity youth need to be served in your area, and which branch locations may be the best fit for programs and services.



Library staff can create their own data by hosting community conversations or deploying surveys to learn what patrons and other community members would like to see in programs for teens and young adults. In some cases, this could be as simple as having informal conversations with youth who already visit the library. Conversations with branch staff may illuminate which library locations are already visited by teens or young adults who could be served by more targeted programming. Staff should also consider ways to go out in the community and meet teens where they are at common gathering spots, as those most in need may not already be regular library visitors.

2. Pursue trauma-informed care trainings for library staff

[Trauma-informed care](#) is a framework for working with individuals of any age who have experienced trauma in a way that embeds care and understanding into all interactions. While popular in the health care and other sectors, trauma-informed care has been on the rise in the library field in recent years and many libraries already offer staff training in this area. This is in part due to the vulnerable populations that many libraries already serve and increased needs during the COVID-19 pandemic. This approach is particularly relevant to any staff who work directly with opportunity youth because of the familial, economic, and social challenges and traumas that many of them have endured.

Staff training in trauma-informed care mutually benefits both opportunity youth and library staff. Youth are received in a kinder, more empathetic and responsive environment, and library staff feel better equipped and more confident in navigating day-to-day interactions with trauma-impacted individuals. Library leaders can pursue bringing in third-party training providers or developing in-house trainings, as some cohort members pursued.

Many library staff also found benefit in learning [restorative practices](#), an approach to repairing and addressing harm done within a community.

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“While I had worked with both urban and opportunity youth previously, Trauma-Informed Care training helped me develop a more nuanced understanding of trauma, [Adverse Childhood Experiences](#) (ACEs), types of stress, social-emotional learning, triggers, self-regulation, fixed vs. growth mindsets, and practicing self-care.”

*—Genevievre Wood, Senior Librarian & Young Adult Coordinator,
Richmond Public Library*

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Read more about Genevievre’s experience as a Young Adult Coordinator in her guest-authored blog post for ULC.

[Read Now](#)



GUEST ARTICLE

**Embracing the Role of
Young Adult Coordinator**



By Genevievre Gray,
Richmond Public Library

[READ NOW](#)

Additional resources:

- [Working Toward Wellness: Exploring Trauma-Informed Librarianship](#) by Leah Dudak
- [Trauma-Informed Libraries](#) by Wilmington University Library
- [Creating a Restorative Library Culture](#) by WebJunction

<https://www.urbanlibraries.org/blog/embracing-the-role-of-young-adult-coordinator>

3. Incorporate co-design and youth voices into the program planning process

Libraries should leverage co-design, a collaborative process that involves both those with professional experience and those with lived experience, in the development of programs that serve them. Libraries can deploy surveys, focus groups, or one-on-one conversations with youth in their library to assess what would draw them to and keep them in library programs. Consider giving opportunity youth leadership positions to lead program sessions or activities, which will allow [youth voice](#), or the unique ideas, perspectives, and contributions of young people, to shine throughout the program.

Teen advisory boards sometimes participate in co-design in libraries and can be an effective resource when designing programs for youth. However, traditional library advisory groups often include young people who are already highly connected to library resources, which may not reflect the perspectives of opportunity youth. To meaningfully incorporate the voices of opportunity youth, library staff may need to expand their outreach beyond existing participants and build intentional relationships in the broader community.

Additional resources:

- [Designing for Equity](#) by Linda W. Braun



4. Familiarize library staff with the process of teen brain development

Adolescence is a critical period of brain development, with areas related to decision-making, impulse control, and emotional regulation still maturing well into a person's mid-twenties. This is true for all teens, and the greater trauma often experienced by opportunity youth can cause stress responses and even [alter brain activity](#) related to learning, memory, and self-control. When library staff have a better understanding of the process of teen brain development, they approach programming efforts with more empathy and greater effectiveness.

Additional resources:

- [Teen Brain Development: How Libraries Can Better Serve Teens Through Understanding](#) by ULC Academy

5. Provide opportunities for opportunity youth to expand their networks and build their social capital

Research highlights the importance of [social capital](#), defined as the strength of our relationships and communities, to our life outcomes. Opportunity youth, many of whom come from challenging family circumstances and low-income neighborhoods, often lack responsible adult figures in their lives to serve as mentor figures and expose them to different life paths. This has implications for their long-term outcomes, from educational to economic and even health.



Library programs can help create opportunities for opportunity youth to access responsible adult figures, and even exposure to different careers and lifestyles. [Mentorship programs](#) are proven to encourage mentees to participate in more positive behaviors, as well as transition successfully into education and career pathways. Mentoring can also be a positive experience for the library staff and community members who support the program as mentors, having been [shown](#) to increase a sense of purpose and community.

Career- and education-focused events can expand the world of possibilities for opportunity youth. Creating Youth Opportunities cohort members explored program ideas including career fairs, college tours, and guest speakers who could share about their career and other life experiences.

6. Embed programs with a pathway to employment

Programs that serve opportunity youth should incorporate aspects that can support young people toward a future of success in the workforce. This can take many forms, from direct skilling and workforce programs to efforts that help young people develop soft skills that they can carry with them to the workforce or job market in the future.

Many opportunity youth face barriers such as interrupted education, lack of access to career networks, or limited exposure to professional environments. Libraries counter these challenges by offering inclusive spaces where youth can develop job-readiness skills, explore career options, and gain confidence through supportive relationships with staff and mentors.

These programs can leverage libraries' local partnerships to open doors for participants and alleviate programming burden on staff. Whether through collaborations with workforce boards, chambers of commerce, local employers, or training providers, libraries serve as connectors that help youth navigate the complex web of career pathways. Programs may include resume-building workshops, digital literacy training, or mock interviews, but they also go beyond technical skills by cultivating social capital: helping youth build relationships with adults in their community who can provide ongoing [guidance and support](#). In doing so, libraries help address one of the most significant barriers opportunity youth face: [a lack of professional networks](#). Just as important, libraries help youth develop soft skills—such as communication, teamwork, problem-solving, and time management—that employers [consistently rank](#) as essential for workplace success.

Finally, libraries such as Cedar Rapids Public Library are increasingly creating opportunities for youth employment within their own walls. From hiring young people as peer mentors and program assistants to providing internships and first-time work experiences, libraries offer participants not only a paycheck but also valuable exposure to workplace norms and responsibilities. These in-library roles are designed to be developmental, offering coaching, skill-building, and gradual increases in responsibility. For many youth, this experience serves as an essential first step in their career journey, demonstrating that employment is possible and giving them the tools to pursue jobs and education with greater confidence—not to mention, contributing to the long-term pipeline of the library field. Through this combination of supportive programming, community partnerships, and direct employment opportunities, libraries are cultivating pathways that can help transform opportunity youth into [thriving contributors to their local economies](#).

7. Leverage partnerships to increase impact

Effectively serving opportunity youth in a community requires a wide-ranging, multi-sector approach; this work will not happen in the library alone. Identify what organizations the library already partners with (including schools, local workforce and criminal justice agencies, local non-profits etc.), what they offer opportunity youth, and how you can incorporate them into your work serving this population. Tools such as an [asset map](#) and a [partnership matrix](#) can help library staff understand what partners and other resources are present in an ecosystem and what is missing. Then they may more strategically explore other organizations present in the community that the library may not already be connected with.

Partners can also help libraries access populations that are not already coming into the library. It's critical for library staff to be willing to go beyond the service desk and even outside the library to access opportunity youth. Staff should explore where teens are, including locations like parks, rec centers, and schools. Partner organizations that are already serving certain communities may also be willing to share library resources and opportunities with their service population.

Creating Youth Opportunities Program Snapshots: Library Examples

This section overviews the programs implemented by ULC's 11 Creating Youth Opportunities cohort members. These case studies may serve as examples for other libraries looking to develop programs that are supportive of opportunity youth.

CEDAR RAPIDS PUBLIC LIBRARY - Cedar Rapids, Iowa

During the summer of 2024, the Cedar Rapids Public Library piloted a program providing community resources, such as access to free STEM programming and training, mental health resources, and employment support, as well as a pop-up library with the ability to provide a library program, create library accounts and check out materials on-site at an apartment complex. The hope was that families would not only engage with the library but also be able to access no-cost resources all in their own backyard, in order to support family units in raising tweens and young adults. This program served an average of 25 individuals every week for ten weeks, which was very successful in reaching patrons, but the majority of participants were younger than their targeted tween/teen audience.

To address this in a second phase of the program, the library partnered with IowaBIG, a self-directed and nontraditional educational track that is a part of the Cedar Rapids Community School District, in order to create customer discovery surveys. These surveys were deployed with justice-impacted youth and the general population of local high schools to determine activities and resources to present at local rec centers throughout the summer. The library also employed one intern, self-identified as an opportunity youth, to assist with planning youth programs for the summer. One program was a series of outreach visits to the county youth detention center. The other was planning a one-off outreach program to serve the community based on the data that was collected and analyzed by IowaBIG students, in order to specifically create social capital for the intern while connecting local young people to resources for work and education.



CHICAGO PUBLIC LIBRARY - Chicago, Illinois

The Chicago Public Library offers trauma-informed book groups, publicly known as Real Ones Read programs, providing a safe space for teens between the ages of 14-19 to meet at a CPL location for a book group experience and snacks. Each session focuses on practicing literacy skills and building connections while discussing topics that promote social emotional learning. The book list includes young adult literature, manga, and graphic novels. All youth are welcome regardless of their personal background or experiences, however their primary audience includes justice-impacted teens or teens who are in out-of-home care programs.



Program staff are most proud of a professional development meeting in October 2024, where they trained over 40 staff members in trauma-informed programming and equipped them with skills needed to host Real Ones Read programs, in addition to learning about opportunity youth and best practices for engaging with their intended audience. In 2025, CPL planned to re-engage partners in the project and host consistent book groups at various library branches. They were most excited to begin planning for next year with the help of teen interns, to implement new ideas into the program.

COLUMBUS METROPOLITAN LIBRARY - Columbus, Ohio

Columbus Metropolitan Library's CYO projects support their teens in a multipronged approach. Starting from a trauma informed perspective, the library hosted internal and external trainings and discussion groups around trauma informed care, social emotional learning, growth mindset, and restorative practices. Grounding staff in these practices allowed for a deeper level of support for opportunity youth in both programming and daily interactions.

Additionally, the library partnered with several local organizations to hear from teens, schools, universities, and employers what the primary needs are in the community. This research and local partnerships resulted in the development of several new program offerings. An annual internship fair for ages 16-24 brings in 1,000 students from across Franklin County to meet with 60 organizations and employers that all have opportunities for those age groups. Bi-monthly, career experts present virtually to in-person watch parties at 15 library branches and several community partner organizations. Lastly, the library provides career support for 1,000 teen volunteers and community interns over the summer. This curriculum includes resume creation, college and job applications, and career research.

These programs and partnerships have continued to grow beyond the original CYO programs with additional funding, new community relationships, and on-going surveys to check in with youth on their wants and needs.



DC PUBLIC LIBRARY - Washington, D.C.

DC Public Library worked on two major projects as part of the CYO program. One involved offering workplace readiness training to vulnerable populations of teens, and the other connecting incarcerated youth with literacy and mentorship. DCPL partnered with the Foster and Adoptive Parent Advocacy Center to offer a CPR certification and babysitting 101 class for foster and adopted youth, and was looking to offer more classes later on this year. They also explored a partnership with the Juvenile Justice's Advocacy Group's Youth Leaders in Action to serve incarcerated youth, and created a list of graphic novels and books together to purchase with the funds and donate to the youth in the center. Library staff trained the Youth Leaders in Action on booktalking the books and facilitating book club discussions. The project also supported funding the central library's 3rd annual Teen's Day of Well-Being and Wellness, which focuses on connecting opportunity youth with city resources pertaining to health, wellness, self-care, and places to volunteer and apply for jobs.

ENOCH PRATT FREE LIBRARY - Baltimore, Maryland

The Earl Teen Center at Enoch Pratt Free Library serves teens throughout the city of Baltimore. On any given afternoon the space is bustling with approximately 30-40 teens from a variety of schools including (but not limited to) Baltimore Leadership School for Young Women, Baltimore School for the Arts, Mergenthaler Vocational-Technical High, and Paul Laurence Dunbar High School. Students who visit the space and participate in the activities provided face a number of disparities including food scarcity or drug addiction and have suffered both social and emotional trauma. Some of the programming Enoch Pratt provides includes an Anime Club, sneaker design, poetry writing, and therapeutic art.

GREENSBORO PUBLIC LIBRARY - Greensboro, North Carolina

Greensboro Public Library has brought together a group of young people who are exploring everything from literature to the culinary arts as part of a holistic approach to personal growth, development, and future employment. Through these experiences, participants are building confidence, learning practical skills, and discovering new pathways for success. By partnering with the Family Justice Center of Guilford County and local organizations like PTMspeaks, they are able to broaden their reach and connect youth with a wider network of support and opportunity.



MEMPHIS PUBLIC LIBRARIES - Memphis, Tennessee

Memphis Public Libraries hosted a Continuing Education and Lifelong Learning (CELL) Spring session geared toward opportunity youth and adults. The classes were intensive four-week sessions on various subjects to help address personal and professional development. Some of the classes offered included: Spanish, small business development, printing, public speaking, craft making, small claim court filing, book publishing, painting, film-making with a cell phone, and many more. They partnered with Latino Memphis along with several other organizations.



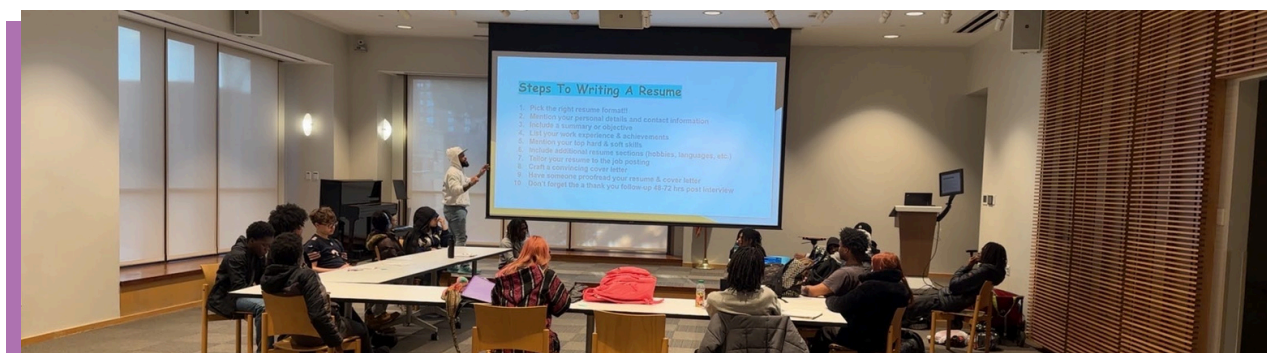
Through the CYO program, Memphis Public Libraries was able to have many more offerings geared to the interests and needs of local youth. In December 2024, staff had chats with young members of the community asking about what types of classes they would like to see offered not only for them, but for people not currently working or in school. Staff were then able to match some of those wants with instructors willing to teach.

Continuing Education classes, once offered locally by the University of Memphis, would cost between \$125-\$400 per session, but are no longer offered. Southwest Community College offers continuing education classes on a limited basis also at a cost. Memphis Public Libraries' offerings were completely at no cost through the CYO program.

OAK PARK PUBLIC LIBRARY - Oak Park, Illinois

With the support of the CYO Walmart Foundation grant, the Beyond the Books mentor program at Oak Park Public Library—facilitated by A Greater Good Foundation—empowers youth by fostering personal development, social-emotional learning, and restorative practices. To date, the program has played a vital role in enhancing emotional intelligence, resilience, and leadership skills.

This year, they aim to broaden their impact by prioritizing holistic wellness and providing students with more opportunities to align their personal and academic goals with actionable steps. Additionally, the program will offer unique experiences and meaningful service opportunities to ensure students are equipped to thrive both within their communities and beyond.



PIONEER LIBRARY SYSTEM - Norman, Oklahoma

Pioneer Library System in Central Oklahoma serves three counties with varied demographics and needs; some urban to rural areas. Pioneer created a "Critical Mission Team" of staff across the library system that excelled in youth engagement to ensure they were providing equitable access and learning from each other as they carried out the goals of the CYO initiative. Pioneer staff identified and built relationships with community groups and agencies in their service areas to help them understand and reach local opportunity youth. Partners included the Oklahoma Commission on Children and Youth, specifically engaging with their Children of Incarcerated Parents Advisory Committee and Homeless Children and Youth Steering Committee, local alternative schools, and other social services and nonprofits.



Their project efforts focused on supporting opportunity youth by offering paid internship opportunities. Staff mentors were tasked with working with related partners to help identify youth that could benefit from the program, develop trainings and onboarding such as financial literacy, social/soft skills, and building upward mobility skills while connecting youth with their community and resources to help them meet their goals and overcome challenges. So far, they had one successful intern with incarcerated parents that was identified through a local Big Brothers Big Sisters Group. He worked with a staff mentor over the Fall/Winter 2024 semester. One of the library's main outcomes with him was how much his confidence, social skills, and professionalism grew throughout his internship. One of their next steps was to complete an internship application push through partners in early 2025 for a Winter/Spring semester internship which would focus on workplace skills support and creating opportunities for connection and exposure based on their individual needs and community.

PRINCE GEORGE'S COUNTY MEMORIAL LIBRARY SYSTEM - Prince George's County, Maryland

The Prince George's County Memorial Library System kicked off their CYO activities with a collaborative event in partnership with the Latin American Youth Center (LAYC) and Liberty's Promise (LP) to host a day-long Adulting 101 program at the Hyattsville Branch Library. Invited youth participants aged 16-24 were drawn from LAYC and LP's clients, which include low-income youth, teen parents, immigrant youth, unhoused youth, youth in foster care, and justice-involved youth, and those facing mental health, substance abuse, or complex family issues. Activities and speakers focused on financial literacy, creative expression, career exploration, and community resources.



Building on feedback that participants wanted more creative expression and self-care options, the library then collaborated with the first Latino Olympic artist Jesse Raudales to host a bilingual month-long, eight-session Therapy Through Art program for emerging adults (EAs). They averaged an attendance of 24 per session and had 50 individual EAs attend at least one session. Sessions involved art instruction and exercises about emotional expression and how to channel stress through the artistic process. In August, the library had an opening reception during the Therapy Through Art program. Approximately 150 people attended the event and each of the EAs received a personalized certificate of completion as well as a citation from state Delegate Ashanti Martinez. The feedback was overwhelmingly positive with many of the EAs saying they appreciated a space to build community with peers and make connections with other people who were at the same point in their lives and dealing with similar struggles. Cohorts continue to do this work including a mural project for the Fairmount Height Branch and working with the library to design and deliver a four-session arts program for a local low-income senior apartment complex.

RICHMOND PUBLIC LIBRARY - Richmond, Virginia

Richmond Public Library has built meaningful community partnerships to better reach opportunity youth in the Richmond, Virginia area. New programs include life skills workshops, covering topics such as meal planning on a budget, navigating free transportation using the Richmond bus system to help youth access jobs, grocery stores, etc., understanding social-emotional consciousness by teaching conflict management, developing individualized self-care plans with a focus on the eight dimensions of wellness, all with a goal of creating balance for overall well-being and improved self-concept.



In addition, the library hosted digital literacy workshops for refugee youth to develop computer, email, and online navigation skills. They also offer Future Ready workshops such as workforce readiness training with resumé building, interview preparation, and career exploration, as well as GED/post-secondary education guidance as a means of expanding opportunities. For young mothers in need of community support, Richmond Public Library provides tailored sessions combining workforce and education preparation with maternal health and wellness resources during pregnancy, birth, and beyond.

This fall, the library also launched an internship for youth referred by the Department of Juvenile Justice and the City of Richmond's Youth Engagement Services, where participants evaluated the Main Library's media lab, conducted user-centered research, developed empathy maps and surveys for direct patron input, created proposals for improvements, and gained hands-on experience with media production, design-thinking, and collaborative creating—building practical skills for their futures while shaping their community's media space.

Internally, the library has led staff development initiatives by completing Trauma and Resiliency training and is developing staff training on best practices for supporting trauma-impacted youth.

Creating Youth Opportunities Program Impact & Evaluation

Taken together, these snapshots reveal the range of strategies libraries are using to support opportunity youth. To understand the impact of these efforts and draw lessons for the field, ULC partnered with Golstone Evaluation Consulting on a multi-year evaluation of the initiative.

The evaluation of the CYO program was designed to do more than measure outcomes. Its purpose was to illuminate how libraries can effectively engage opportunity youth, document the impact of these efforts on young people and communities, and generate lessons that could inform the field. With this in mind, Golstone Evaluation Consulting implemented a culturally responsive and participatory evaluation approach that placed learning at the center.

From the beginning, the evaluation was co-designed with ULC staff and library partners. Together, the partners developed a learning agenda that established priorities, clarified questions, and created shared ownership of the process. Traditional research methods were then combined with more creative approaches to ensure a holistic picture of the program's impact. Case studies and key informant interviews provided depth and context, while surveys captured the experiences of youth, staff, and partners across sites. At convenings, staff facilitated art-based activities such as photo elicitation, drawing, and imaginative interviewing, which opened new ways for participants to express their perspectives. These activities helped uncover stories and insights that might not surface through standard survey tools alone. Throughout, the team used learning logs and sensemaking sessions to continually reflect on findings, ground them in local realities, and co-interpret their meaning with library teams.

KEY FINDINGS

Across the 2024–2025 program cycle, libraries collectively recorded 4,981 total youth engagements through CYO activities, with participation reported monthly across all 11 sites (n=88 reports). The majority of participants identified as non-White (972 out of 1,263, or 77%), reflecting the program's intentional reach toward racially and ethnically diverse youth. Libraries also documented steady facilitation by staff, with an average of 18 staff members leading programs per month (total n=214 staff instances). These efforts were further supported by community and institutional partnerships—a total of 49 new partnerships were developed, and 33 partner engagement events were hosted throughout the year—demonstrating the networked approach necessary for sustained impact.

4,891 total youth engagements

77% of participants identified as non-White

18 staff members leading programs every month

49 new community partnerships developed

33 partner engagement events hosted

What emerged from this process was a clear set of lessons. First, opportunity youth respond most positively to programs that are co-designed with them and reflect their lived experiences. Programs that invited youth to share leadership roles or inform decision-making built stronger engagement and longer-term participation. Qualitative data reinforced this finding: staff described how youth leadership roles and peer-to-peer mentoring cultivated belonging, trust, and confidence. Many youth shared that being seen and valued within the library made them more likely to stay connected to the programs and staff who supported them.

Second, libraries that invested in trauma-informed training and practices saw staff grow in confidence and skill, creating spaces where youth felt respected and safe. Third, partnerships proved essential. Collaborations with workforce agencies, schools, and justice organizations expanded opportunities for youth and amplified the impact of libraries' efforts. The evaluation revealed that months with higher partnership activity often correlated with stronger attendance (average 7.8 partner organizations vs. 5.1 during months of low attendance). Libraries highlighted that deep, trusted partnerships—rather than quantity alone—were key to reaching youth consistently.



Participants and facilitators alike shared numerous success stories that underscored these quantitative trends. Libraries noted how CYO programs increased youth confidence, strengthened communication skills, and fostered a sense of community. Staff frequently observed that youth began returning independently to the library to access additional resources or volunteer. Partners reported that collaboration with libraries improved their own outreach to disconnected youth. At the same time, staff reported challenges such as inconsistent attendance, short staffing (reported in 33% of months), and limited resources for transportation and incentives. Despite these barriers, program teams consistently demonstrated adaptability and innovation—piloting 27 new programs across sites and documenting iterative learning through reflection logs and debrief sessions.

One of the most striking findings was the power of hiring opportunity youth into library roles. Whether as interns, peer navigators, or program assistants, these young people not only gained income and work experience, but also helped shape programs in ways that resonated with their peers. Their presence shifted the culture of libraries, making them more accessible and relatable to other youth in the community.

Evaluation data also demonstrated that libraries served as catalysts for connection: nearly half (46%) of all partner interactions were rated as "fully engaged," indicating that library partnerships deepened throughout the program cycle. Staff emphasized that these connections extended beyond single events—they created feedback loops that strengthened program design and increased cross-sector visibility for opportunity youth issues in their cities. Many libraries described the CYO experience as transformative for both youth and staff, reinforcing the idea that libraries are not only providers of services but also conveners of equitable community ecosystems.

Finally, embedding evaluation itself into program cycles proved transformative. Using regular feedback loops shifted evaluation from a compliance exercise into a growth strategy. Staff came to see evaluation as a way to adapt and innovate, rather than as a burden. This change in perspective strengthened programs in real time and left libraries better prepared to sustain and scale successful practices.

Overall, the data point to an encouraging trajectory: increased youth participation, strengthened staff facilitation capacity, and more cohesive community partnerships. The combination of quantitative outcomes and qualitative insights affirms that when libraries center relationships, reflection, and responsiveness, they can successfully re-engage opportunity youth and build lasting pathways toward equity and empowerment.



Recommendations for the Library Field

1. Fund and scale trauma-informed opportunity youth programming in libraries

Opportunity youth are a population of need that libraries are uniquely positioned to serve. The framework outlined in this white paper has demonstrated success in 11 pilot public library systems. This may be a paradigm shift for some library systems, but programs for opportunity youth are worth investing in. Opportunities for cross-sharing between libraries, as the CYO program facilitated, should also continue to be provided.

2. Incentivize library-youth workforce collaborations

Libraries should prioritize long-term collaboration with workforce boards, schools, youth-serving nonprofits, and local employers that comprise the local workforce ecosystem. Many libraries are already doing workforce work for youth and other community members, but they are not always in coordination with the community entities that lead in this space. These relationships create stability, reduce duplication of efforts, and provide youth with clear, supported pathways into education and employment.

3. Embed opportunity youth hiring pathways into library operations

According to the [SHRM Foundation](#), most HR professionals who hire opportunity youth report positive experiences and performance that is on par or exceeds that of other employees. Despite this, hesitation to hire opportunity youth persists across industries. Hiring opportunity youth in the library itself, as Cedar Rapids Public Library did, is a powerful, scalable strategy that brings new talent to the library field and creates opportunity for young people.

4. Prioritize data collection and program evaluation

Communicating program outcomes to funders and other stakeholders is key to the sustainability of library programs for opportunity youth, and more broadly. Libraries should invest time in developing evaluation tools that show both qualitative and quantitative program impacts, such as participants reached from disadvantaged populations.

5. Choosing the right staff to do the work

Staff who lead programs for opportunity youth should combine professional expertise with empathy, cultural competency, and the ability to connect authentically with young people. This may not be the right role for every librarian. The selection of staff who are committed to relationship-building and responsive to youth needs is critical to achieving meaningful outcomes, and training and ongoing support can further equip staff to navigate the complexities of this work. The need for leadership support is also something that came up often in the evaluation findings, as staff who feel the support of their leadership may be more engaged, productive, and innovative.

6. Trust-building is essential and takes time

Building trust with opportunity youth requires patience, consistency, and genuine care. Many participants may have prior experiences of exclusion or instability that make trust more difficult to establish. Libraries must create environments that are welcoming, predictable, and respectful, recognizing that strong relationships are the foundation for engagement and long-term impact.



Conclusion

Libraries stand at the intersection of education, workforce development, and community well-being. ULC's Creating Youth Opportunities program has demonstrated that when libraries intentionally design or co-design programs of interest for opportunity youth, they can bridge critical gaps, strengthen local ecosystems, and help young people chart meaningful paths toward stability and employment.

As the field looks ahead, libraries have the chance to position themselves not only as places of learning, but as hubs of opportunity and belonging for opportunity youth. By adopting some of the strategies outlined in this paper, including trauma-informed care practices, forging strong partnerships, and investing in staff and youth voices, libraries can help transform cycles of disconnection into possibility. When libraries commit to this work, they can do more than serve young people; they help shape stronger, more equitable communities for all.



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