

LEARN AND EARN TO ACHIEVE POTENTIAL (LEAP)

ABOUT THE INITIATIVE

Learn and Earn to Achieve Potential (LEAP)[™], a national initiative of the Annie E. Casey Foundation, aims to help youth and young adults ages 14–25 who have been involved in the child welfare or juvenile justice systems, parenting youth or youth who have experienced homelessness succeed in school and at work by building and expanding education and employment pathways.

The Casey Foundation and Corporation for National and Community Service first launched LEAP in 2015. During the first phase of the initiative, the Foundation provided critical funding and support to local partnerships in 60 cities and eight states. The aim was to adapt two promising pathway models, Jobs for America's Graduates (JAG) and JFF's Back on Track, to the specific needs and goals of these young people and provide supportive services to address past trauma and mental health issues.

In the second phase of LEAP, which began in 2019, the Casey Foundation and its partners have been focused on bringing LEAP learning about supportive education and career pathway strategies to more communities and expanding young people's access to opportunities and resources that help them stay enrolled in school and participate in postsecondary education and employment training programs. [Core elements of LEAP pathways](#) include:

- equity-centered and inclusive environments that foster a sense of belonging and hope;
- flexible learning experiences tailored to young people's goals and needs and responsive to the labor market;
- youth-centered design and leadership;
- support for meeting basic needs and navigating public systems;
- empowering youth-adult relationships; and
- formalized structures for cross-organization collaboration and shared accountability.

Local LEAP partnerships seek to encourage broader adoption of effective practices and policies among public systems to help more youth meet their postsecondary and employment goals and to ensure they have the relationships and support needed to reach their full potential.

LEAP seeks to build and share evidence on the effectiveness of adapting programs to the specific needs of youth who are involved in the foster care and justice systems or experiencing homelessness as they work to earn credentials and develop careers.

ABOUT THE LOCAL LEAP PARTNERSHIPS

Local LEAP partnerships receive annual funding from the Annie E. Casey Foundation and support from a broad network of more than 60 local and national organizations. This diverse support system includes public and private funders, employers, public and nonprofit partners such as child welfare and justice agencies, postsecondary institutions and K–12 schools and districts.

Casey provides the local partnerships with tools and resources, coaching and technical assistance to strengthen their work with public systems; expand support services for young people, including young parents; and boost the financial capabilities of youth. The Foundation also regularly brings together members of the LEAP network, including young leaders, to learn from one another and further strengthen system and policy work in the field. More than 4,000 youth and young adults have been connected to education and employment opportunities through LEAP pathways, and many youth in LEAP continue to achieve employment and education outcomes at rates that surpass national averages for system-involved youth.

- **THE CENTER FOR ALTERNATIVE SENTENCING AND EMPLOYMENT SERVICES (CASES)** provides flexible, individualized support to young people who are disconnected from school and work and involved in the justice and/or other public systems to develop their employment skills and advance professionally. The organization, the first in New York City to implement the JAG model, has engaged a large network of local partners — including several employers, the Mayor’s Office of Criminal Justice, the city’s Department of Probation and the New York State Department of Corrections and Community Supervision — to ensure youth obtain academic credentials and make a smooth transition to work. CASES also increases young people’s financial capabilities through digital financial planning tools, including mobile applications.

Collectively, LEAP sites have enrolled over 4,000 young people. More than 84% of these participants are youth of color; 39% have been involved in the child welfare or justice system; 37% have experienced homelessness; and 28% have been involved in multiple systems. Nearly half of all enrolled LEAP participants were still connected to systems at enrollment.

- **THE COALITION FOR RESPONSIBLE COMMUNITY DEVELOPMENT (CRCD)** offers a continuum of education and workforce development services to reengage Los Angeles County youth who are out of school and involved in the child welfare, justice or homeless services systems. Young people without a high school diploma can join the Jobs for Los Angeles Graduates (JLAG) program, which is operated by CRCD, and enroll in training programs that prepare them for careers in high-growth industries. Young people who already have a high school credential can pursue a postsecondary education at Los Angeles Trade Technical College through CRCD’s college success and persistence program, Project Tipping Point. CRCD also operates a JAG dropout prevention program in partnership with the Los Angeles Unified School District (LAUSD) for youth who are at risk of becoming involved in the justice and other public systems. Through LEAP, CRCD is working with many partners — including those in child welfare, justice, homeless services, workforce development, public housing and education — to

help young people more seamlessly navigate these systems and achieve their career and education goals. Comprehensive supportive services, authentic adult-youth relationships and leadership development are key aspects of CRCD's LEAP programming.

- **COVENANT HOUSE ALASKA** is the leading provider of services to youth in Alaska who have left their homes or are experiencing homelessness. Through LEAP, the organization is collaborating with a large variety of community partners in the design and delivery of culturally responsive career pathway and permanency strategies focused on building the knowledge, skills and opportunities necessary for successful independent living. Youth choice, housing stabilization, community connections, career exploration and employment-related competency development, tribal collaboration and celebration of Alaska Native culture are key aspects of the LEAP opportunity pathway experience.
- **THE DOOR** is using JFF's Back on Track model to expand college access and training programs at its Lower Manhattan and Bronx locations, enabling them to more effectively serve New York City youth who are involved in the child welfare or justice system, who have experienced homelessness or who are parents. The Door offers a general postsecondary education pathway, as well as career-specific programs for youth interested in information technology, historical preservation and construction, emergency medicine and culinary arts. The Door also is working alongside community partners to advocate for changes within the New York City Administration for Children's Services (ACS) and building referral relationships with ACS staff to connect more system-involved youth with educational and career pathway opportunities. Youth leadership development and comprehensive wraparound services, including parenting supports and artistic and creative outlets, are key aspects of the LEAP opportunity pathway experience.
- **JOBS FOR ARIZONA'S GRADUATES** is partnering with local alternative schools and community centers to expand the reach of its program for young people throughout Arizona who have been homeless or involved in the foster care system and who need additional support to complete high school and transition successfully into employment or postsecondary education and training. JAG provides participants with connections to educational and career opportunities and a suite of other support services, including trainings to build professional and leadership skills and coaching in self-advocacy. JAG also is working to strengthen its partnership with local agencies and community organizations — including city governments, public school districts, employers, local workforce programs and other youth-serving organizations — to connect young people with the right supports to remain in school and successfully pursue a career or postsecondary pathway.



- **THE NEBRASKA CHILDREN AND FAMILIES FOUNDATION** (also a [Jim Casey Youth Opportunities Initiative®](#) partner) uses a collective impact approach to facilitate cross-sector partnerships that support young people in the care of the state or a tribe — or those with a permanency plan of adoption or guardianship at age 16 — who are pursuing postsecondary education or career training through the state’s Chafee Education and Training Voucher program. Many of these young people are also parents. The organization is convening a statewide network of partners — including the University of Nebraska system, community colleges (such as Metro Community College, Southeast Community College, Iowa Western and Central Community College, with plans to expand to more), government agencies and community partners — and scaling efforts to connect young people across the state to the academic and nonacademic resources they need to pursue postsecondary education, including specific supports for pregnant and parenting students.
- **PROJECT FOR PRIDE IN LIVING (PPL)** aims to substantially increase positive education, employment and life outcomes for youth and young adults who are involved in Hennepin County public systems. PPL and its partners provide a one-stop shop of coordinated services to ensure young people both in school and disconnected from school receive appropriate academic and social support to complete their secondary degree and prepare for a career. Through LEAP, PPL is expanding the network of partners — particularly county governments, alternative high school programs, reengagement centers and public housing complexes — that are providing career readiness programming and supportive services and identifying policy changes that remove barriers for Minnesota opportunity youth, including young parents. Key aspects of LEAP partner programming include youth-centered, holistic support services, career planning and preparation for in-demand jobs and financial empowerment.
- **SOUTH BAY COMMUNITY SERVICES (SBCS)**, together with San Diego County agencies and community partners, is working to create career pathway opportunities that increase the ability of youth who are homeless or system involved to be self-sufficient and prosperous, enroll in college and avoid encounters with the justice system. SBCS is leading an ambitious multiyear plan to expand postsecondary support services through a countywide network that includes colleges, county government agencies, juvenile justice facilities and other organizations that serve youth exiting foster care or involved in the court system.

- THE UNIVERSITY OF SOUTHERN MAINE'S YOUTH AND COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT TEAM** and other public- and private-sector partners in the Maine Youth Transition Collaborative (MYTC), a long-standing 18-year partnership, are using a collective impact approach to create a statewide system of high school transition and postsecondary pathways support for young people with system involvement. MYTC partners include Maine DHHS Office of Child and Family Services, Jobs for Maine's Graduates, Goodwill Industries of Northern New England, the Youth Leadership Advisory Council and the John T. Gorman Foundation. As part of LEAP, Maine expanded its focus to include young people with justice involvement and youth who have experienced homelessness. This broader focus reflects the high degree of crossover among young people involved in multiple systems and the many similarities in staff skills and services required to help these young people successfully pursue employment, postsecondary pathways and other credentialing opportunities beyond high school. Moving forward, the collaborative will continue to work on ways to incubate cross-system approaches for supporting opportunity youth. MYTC partners also have been working on a joint approach to race equity, including ways partners can ensure that it is a central lens for both their individual and collective efforts. Maine is also a Jim Casey Initiative site and an Aspen Opportunity Youth Forum partner. As a Jim Casey Initiative site, MYTC's focus is on systems change at the local, state and national levels to meet the needs of young people transitioning from foster care to adulthood. And as an Aspen Opportunity Youth Forum partner, the collaborative is exploring apprenticeship development as part of JFF's U.S. Department of Labor-funded national effort to expand apprenticeships for opportunity youth.

The second phase of LEAP, which began in 2019, is focused on expanding young people's access to opportunities and resources that help them stay enrolled in school and training programs.

YOUTH VOICE AND NATIONAL YOUTH LEADERSHIP

Established in 2020, the National LEAP Youth Fellowship provides an opportunity for young adults from each local partnership to participate in a yearlong Fellows program, designed to build leadership skills, advise national partners and support local partnerships on strategies for engaging young people and creating opportunities for them to shape and lead LEAP system-improvement efforts. This fellowship builds on [best practices](#) established through the Jim Casey Initiative.

LEARNING AND EVALUATION

The Casey Foundation's primary goal with LEAP is to build and share evidence on the effectiveness of adapting programs to the specific needs of youth who are homeless or involved in the foster care and justice systems as they work to earn credentials and develop careers. To that end, Casey is working with local and national partners to (1) measure progress toward achieving program outcomes; (2) collect and share data to promote continuous improvement and evaluation throughout the initiative; and (3) help practitioners ensure participants benefit from strong adult relationships and comprehensive support services.

In September 2019, nonprofit research firm MDRC released an [evaluation](#) of the LEAP partnerships' early implementation efforts and the experiences of youth enrolled during the first 18 months of the initiative, including ways local partner organizations recruited and retained youth, developed partnerships across public systems and integrated wraparound services to create pathways to opportunity. The study features qualitative data gathered through extensive interviews with program leaders and staff, key partners and youth participants, as well as an analysis of participant-level data collected by each local LEAP partner.

Among the key insights:

- Positive relationships with staff are critical to keeping youth engaged in services. Involving program participants in an organization's hiring process can help ensure frontline workers are a good fit, foster a sense of trust and improve retention.
- Partnerships with child welfare, juvenile justice and other agencies are essential for expanding access, aligning resources and recruiting and connecting eligible young people with the services, relationships and resources they need to succeed.
- One-on-one learning opportunities, flexible scheduling, options to pause participation and other customized support can help keep young people engaged in services when they face unexpected challenges.
- Instead of making assumptions, it is important to let young people inform the program and identify service changes they need. LEAP participants are an asset in guiding recruitment, engagement and retention strategies.

In 2021, MDRC released an addendum to the 2019 study, which looked at the experiences and outcomes for young people enrolled in the second two years of LEAP, many of whom were still engaged when the COVID-19 pandemic hit in March 2020. The addendum, which looked more closely at factors that facilitate engagement and persistence, included additional interviews with LEAP youth and a youth-led action research component supported by National LEAP Youth Fellows. Findings from the follow-up study included:

- LEAP participants often have important goals including housing, transportation, child care and income or goals that emerge as life circumstances shift or as they navigate toward bigger or longer-term goals. Programs, which often refer to these areas as "barriers" or "basic needs," may be able to better support young people by reframing them as goals (how young people think of them) and using similar approaches for supporting longer-term career and education pathways.

ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

- **JFF.** *Postsecondary Systems Change: Lessons from the Learn and Earn to Achieve Potential (LEAP) Initiative.*
www.jff.org/resources/postsecondary-systems-change-lessons-learn-and-earn-achieve-potential-leap-initiative
- **Jobs for America's Graduates.** *The JAG Advantage.*
www.jag.org/about/#JAGAdvantage
- **MDRC.** *Strengthening Research Through Participatory Methods.*
www.mdrc.org/publication/strengthening-research-through-participatory-methods
- **School & Main Institute.** *Lessons From LEAP: Making Education and Career Pathways Work for Justice-Involved Youth.*
www.schoolandmain.org/tools
- **Annie E. Casey Foundation.** *Developing Supportive Educational and Career Pathways for Young People.*
<https://aecfcraftstr01.blob.core.windows.net/aecfcraftblob02/m/blogdoc/aecf-LEAPcoreelements-2021.pdf>

- It can take a young person many years to complete LEAP-style pathway programming. The path is not always sequential or steady, and pathways should exercise flexibility and adapt to the changing life circumstances and priorities of youth. Youth are best served through consistent, ongoing relationship-focused support that helps them achieve immediate and long-term goals.
- Relationships are the “glue” that helps young people attach to program services and feel confident and supported while they work toward their goals.
- Programs may be most able to help young people achieve their goals when they tailor services to each individual.
- Mental health and housing can have a profound effect on a young person’s progress toward their goals. The youth field needs more resources and strategies to help young people in these areas.

The Casey Foundation and its partners are eager to build on these lessons to cultivate additional relationships with public systems and position LEAP as a replicable solution for connecting youth with educational and employment opportunities.

For more information about LEAP, visit www.aecf.org/leap.