



Learn and Earn to Achieve Potential (LEAP) is a multimillion-dollar initiative to increase employment and educational opportunities for young people facing some of the greatest challenges on the path to adulthood. Launched by the Corporation for National and Community Service's Social Innovation Fund and the Annie E. Casey Foundation in 2015, this effort involves 10 local partnerships working in more than 85 service locations across eight states, four national organizations — Jobs for America's Graduates (JAG), JFF, MDRC and School & Main Institute — and a growing network of more than 60 local and national funders.

About the Initiative

LEAP aims to help youth and young adults ages 15 – 25 who have been involved in the child welfare and justice systems, or who are homeless, succeed in school and at work by tailoring and scaling two established models to address their specific needs and challenges. Research shows, for example, that youth transitioning from foster care are less likely to complete a postsecondary degree or to find and keep stable jobs.

The Jobs for America's Graduates model helps youth earn a high school degree or equivalent, develop professional skills and gain employment, or enroll in postsecondary education. JFF's Back on Track model provides a range of academic enrichment and other support programs to help young people prepare for and enroll in postsecondary education and, ultimately, build paths to careers by earning a degree or credential. Through LEAP, we are piloting adaptations of these models that focus on the distinct challenges facing young people who are involved in systems or who are homeless, including support to address the trauma they may have experienced in their lives.

The initiative aims to build further evidence on the effectiveness of these two models in creating stronger pathways to postsecondary education and employment for young people — and encourage broader adoption among public systems so that even more youth and young adults throughout the nation can reach their full potential.

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Learn and Earn to Achieve Potential At-A-Glance

Who: The Casey Foundation, Jobs for America's Graduates, JFF, MDRC, School & Main Institute and 10 local partnerships

What: An initiative launched in partnership with the Social Innovation Fund to connect young people with postsecondary education and employment

Focus: Young people ages 15 – 25 who have experienced public systems or homelessness

Why: To improve educational and economic opportunities and systems for youth and young adults

Local LEAP Partnerships

The 10 LEAP partnerships each receive up to \$190,000 of local match funding annually to employ adaptations of the Jobs for America's Graduates model and/or the Back on Track model for youth with a network of local organizations in their respective areas. The partnerships represent a diverse portfolio in terms of geography, model selected and youth served — more than 80 percent of LEAP enrollees are youth of color, 56 percent have been involved in foster care, 38 percent have been involved in the justice system, 46 percent have experienced homelessness and 35 percent have been involved in multiple systems.

The Center for Alternative Sentencing and Employment Services (CASES) is using the JAG model to help young people in Harlem and Brooklyn who are homeless and/or involved in the justice or child welfare systems further develop their work experience and advance professionally. The organization is the first in New York City to implement JAG and has engaged a large network of local partners — including the Mayor's Office of Criminal Justice, the city's Department of Probation, the New York State Department of Corrections and Community Supervision and several employers — to ensure youth obtain academic credentials and make a smooth transition to work.

Coalition for Responsible Community Development (CRCD) is using the JAG and Back on Track models to help youth who are either in, or transitioning from, the foster care and justice systems earn their high school diploma or GED and enter the job market or successfully move into postsecondary education. The organization and its partners, which include the Boyle Heights Technology Center, Los Angeles Trade Technical College and the Youth Opportunity Movement in Watts, work with young people who have dropped out in South and East Los Angeles, where only half of youth in foster care have completed high school.

Covenant House Alaska and **Nine Star Education & Employment Services** are using the JAG model in Anchorage and Wasilla to provide mentoring, coaching, community-based learning opportunities and a suite of other wraparound services to help local youth who are homeless or involved in the child welfare and justice systems complete high school and secure quality jobs. Covenant House is the lead agency in Alaska for the U.S. Housing and Urban Development Department's Youth Homelessness Demonstration Program in Anchorage and is spearheading the city's efforts to end youth homelessness by 2020.

The Door is using the Back on Track model to expand its existing college access and training programs at its Lower Manhattan and Bronx locations to more effectively serve New York City youth involved in the child welfare or justice systems, or who are homeless. The Door offers a general path to postsecondary education, as well as career-specific pathway programs for youth interested in information technology or emergency medicine.

Jobs for Arizona's Graduates has teamed up with local community organizations, homeless shelters and schools to expand the reach of its JAG program for young people throughout Phoenix and Tucson who are not in school or enrolled in alternative programs. JAG provides these young people with connections to educational and career opportunities and a suite of other support services, including professional and leadership skill-building trainings and self-advocacy coaching.

Jobs for Michigan's Graduates–Youth Solutions is focusing on youth who are involved in the child welfare or justice systems, or who are homeless, in three cities — Benton Harbor, Detroit and Flint. Using the JAG model, the organization works with a wide array of partners to help systems-involved youth attain a GED or a high school diploma while also learning skills to become self-sufficient and secure employment or enroll in postsecondary training opportunities.

Nebraska Children and Families Foundation is working with six postsecondary institutions and other public- and private-sector partners in Lincoln and Omaha to help youth in foster care successfully move into postsecondary education, using the Back on Track model. In addition to helping LEAP participants secure scholarships and on-campus housing, the foundation helps them enroll in Opportunity Passport™, a matched savings program that combines financial literacy training and banking access to help youth transitioning from systems cover major expenses, such as buying a car or paying for housing and school.

Project for Pride in Living is applying the JAG model in a total of 12 alternative schools and reengagement centers throughout Hennepin County. The organization is facilitating partnerships between four local school districts, county staff and several nonprofits to help LEAP youth access a comprehensive suite of support services, pursue postsecondary education and, ultimately, secure careers that pay family-sustaining wages.

South Bay Community Services is weaving Back on Track's preparation and first-year support for postsecondary education into its education and employment programming for San Diego County youth who are homeless, exiting foster care or being released from juvenile justice facilities. The organization is working with a large network — including officials from the county's child welfare and juvenile justice agencies, local high school and community college partners and employers — to raise awareness about the issues LEAP youth face and ensure they can transition smoothly from high school into a fulfilling career.

The Muskie School of Public Service at the University of Southern Maine uses the JAG and Back on Track models to help youth transitioning from foster care complete high school and transition into postsecondary education and employment. It recently expanded its reach to support young people who are experiencing homelessness and those involved in the justice system. The university works closely with a core group of public- and private-sector partners — including the state's Office of Child and Family Services, Jobs for Maine's Graduates, Goodwill Northern New England, YouthBuild and Community Care — to serve LEAP youth while they are still in high

school, after they leave high school and as they start college, training or work. The partners have expanded the reach of LEAP throughout the state to offer services to young people ages 15 – 24 in Maine’s foster care system.

The partnerships receive ongoing coaching and technical assistance on designing and implementing their local program. In addition to conducting a national evaluation throughout the initiative, the Casey Foundation periodically brings them together to learn from one another and further strengthen system and policy work in the field.

Learning and Evaluation

A primary goal of LEAP is to build and share evidence on the effectiveness of the JAG and Back on Track models in helping youth who are homeless or involved in the foster care and justice systems earn credentials and develop careers. To that end, Casey is working with our local and national partners to track progress toward achieving program outcomes; collect and share data to support a national evaluation; promote continuous improvement throughout the initiative; and ensure participants receive the strongest services possible. Along the way, we are creating avenues for our national and local partners to share lessons and identify areas for practice and system improvement.

MDRC is leading the national evaluation of LEAP that is currently underway. The evaluation is a two-part implementation study that includes: 1) qualitative data gathered through interviews with program leaders and staff, key partners and youth participants; and 2) a cross-site analysis of participant-level data collected by each local LEAP partner. By using these qualitative and quantitative methods to assess the mechanics of each program, staffing strategies and contextual factors, we hope to lay the groundwork for important program improvements and future scaling efforts. These studies enable us to explore critical aspects of LEAP, including the ways program components operate under real-life circumstances, the factors that influence staff members’ ability to implement the model and engage participants and how staff and participants view the overall program. The evaluation will provide valuable lessons to promote adoption, scaling and adaptation of the two models among practitioners and systems, as well as key insights on how best to engage and serve youth who are systems-involved or homeless.

Early Results

Since launching their LEAP programming in April 2016, the 10 local partnerships successfully enrolled 1,981 young people in job-training and postsecondary programs at 87 locations across the country. Early data show that many of these youth have already started meeting some of their educational and career goals. During the first two years of the initiative, 137 earned a high school diploma or GED; 237 completed an internship or work-based learning experience; 475 started a part-time or full-time job; 431 enrolled in a postsecondary program; and 160 enrolled in another advanced training program.

Cross-sector collaboration remains a key component of LEAP. Together, the 10 sites have engaged more than 375 workforce, education, child welfare and justice partners to improve youth-serving systems and institutional practices — including expanding participants’ access to resources such as housing, child care, transportation and other supportive services; establishing LEAP enrollment as an alternative to probation and confinement; and creating fast-track hiring agreements with employers.

LEAP offers a unique opportunity to identify effective strategies for enabling youth and young adults involved in systems to make a successful transition into adulthood, equipped with the education and skills they need not only to get a job but also to build lifelong careers.

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

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