

LEARN AND EARN TO ACHIEVE POTENTIAL (LEAP)

ABOUT THE INITIATIVE

Learn and Earn to Achieve Potential (LEAP)™, a multisite initiative of the Annie E. Casey Foundation, aims to help youth and young adults ages 14–25 who have been involved in public systems or 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 with the aim to adapt two promising pathway models to meet these young people's specific needs and challenges, provide supportive services to address past trauma and mental health issues they may have experienced: Jobs for America's Graduates (JAG) and JFF's Back on Track.

The JAG 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.

Now into the second phase of LEAP, which began in 2019, the Casey Foundation and its partners are focused on bringing these adaptations to more communities and expanding young people's access to opportunities and resources that help them stay enrolled in school and training programs — such as creative youth outreach, leadership and engagement, stable housing, child care, transportation and supportive relationships.

Local LEAP partnerships hope to encourage broader adoption of effective practices and policies among public systems to help more youth meet their postsecondary and employment goals, and 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 and support from the Annie E. Casey Foundation and a broad network of more than 60 local and national organizations. This diverse support system includes

funders, employers, government organizations and workforce development entities, as well as child welfare and justice agencies, postsecondary institutions and K–12 schools and districts.

Casey provides the local partnerships with informational tools and resources, coaching and technical assistance to strengthen their work with public systems, expand support services for thousands of young people, including young parents, and boost the financial capabilities of youth. The Foundation also brings members of the LEAP network, including young leaders, together regularly to learn from one another and further strengthen system and policy work in the field.

- **THE CENTER FOR ALTERNATIVE SENTENCING AND EMPLOYMENT SERVICES (CASES)** is using the JAG model to help young people in Harlem and Brooklyn further develop their employment skills 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 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.

As of 2019, LEAP sites had enrolled 3,132 young people. More than 80% of these participants are youth of color; 77% have been involved in the child welfare or justice system; 23% have experienced homelessness; and 32% have been involved in multiple systems.
- **THE COALITION FOR RESPONSIBLE COMMUNITY DEVELOPMENT (CRCD)** uses both the JAG and Back on Track models to offer a seamless continuum of education and workforce development services for youth involved in the child welfare, justice and homeless services systems in Los Angeles County who are not enrolled in school. Working with key system partners — including the Los Angeles Economic and Workforce Development Department, Homeless Services Authority, Unified School District, Housing Authority and Department of Children and Family Services — CRCD will help young people more seamlessly navigate these sectors and, ultimately, improve their education and career outcomes.
- **COVENANT HOUSE ALASKA** is collaborating with the Anchorage School District (ASD) to pilot and adapt an in-school alternative education JAG model in two on-site Covenant House Alaska ASD classrooms. JAG specialists will work with district employees, students and families to identify barriers and provide individualized wraparound services to help students stay in school through graduation and successfully transition into the workforce or postsecondary education. Youth choice, career exploration, tribal collaboration and celebration of Alaskan culture will be key aspects of the LEAP opportunity pathway experience.
- **THE DOOR** is using the Back on Track model to expand college access and training programs at its Lower Manhattan and Bronx locations to more effectively serve New York City youth who are involved in the child welfare or justice system and those who have experienced homelessness. The

Door offers a general path to postsecondary education, as well as career-specific programs for youth interested in information technology, emergency medicine, culinary arts or construction and masonry. Through a relationship with the New York City Administration for Children's Services, The Door is also working to unite and strengthen the entire system of services for these young people throughout the city.

- **JOBs FOR ARIZONA'S GRADUATES** has partnered with local alternative schools and community centers to expand the reach of its JAG program for young people in Phoenix and Tucson 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 these young people 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 advocating for themselves.
- **THE NEBRASKA CHILDREN AND FAMILIES FOUNDATION** has adapted the Back on Track model to 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 Education and Training Voucher program. The organization is partnering with six of Nebraska's two- and four-year postsecondary institutions (with plans to expand to more), government agencies and community partners to connect these youth and young adults to the academic and nonacademic resources needed for them and their children to thrive. Participants receive on- and off-campus wraparound services, including strength-based coaching, leadership opportunities, financial coaching, mental health support and educational support. They also receive first-year financial support to improve their economic trajectory and prepare them as they move forward in their career.
- **NMCAN** has adapted the Back on Track model to reengage young people ages 17–25 who have experienced homelessness or been involved in the foster care or juvenile justice system, helping them address external barriers that affect their stability and providing them with flexible pathways for educational and employment success. Working with Central New Mexico Community College, the University of New Mexico, government agencies and community organizations, NMCAN offers financial-literacy and leadership activities, academic preparation, education and employment coaches and a bridge program for college or technical school.
- **PROJECT FOR PRIDE IN LIVING (PPL)** has designed a LEAP model that uses JAG as one of many tools to substantially improve education, employment and life outcomes for young people in Hennepin



County, Minnesota, who are involved in public systems, have experienced homelessness or are young parents. By leveraging a strong network of partners from a variety of sectors, including city and county agencies, school districts and postsecondary institutions, community organizations and youth governing boards, PPL provides a one-stop shop of coordinated services to ensure young people receive appropriate academic and social support to overcome barriers to success. Over the next three years, PPL seeks to expand the LEAP model to support more youth and young adults, especially young parents, and further align systems and services to match the learning needs of these students with the workforce demands of local industries.

- **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 involved in systems to be self-sufficient and prosperous, enroll in college and avoid encounters with the justice system. Using the Back on Track model, SBCS is leading an ambitious multiyear plan to expand postsecondary support services through a countywide network that includes colleges, juvenile justice facilities and organizations that serve youth exiting foster care.
- **THE CUTLER INSTITUTE AT THE UNIVERSITY OF SOUTHERN MAINE** uses the Back on Track model to help youth and young adults who are transitioning from foster care, have been involved with the juvenile justice system or have experienced homelessness transition into postsecondary education and career pathways. The university works closely with a core group of public- and private-sector partners — including the state's Office of Child and Family Services, Goodwill of Northern New England, YouthBuild and Community Care — to serve LEAP youth after they leave high school and start college or career-focused training. The partners have expanded the reach of LEAP throughout the state to offer services to a wide range of young people.

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.

Established in 2020, the National LEAP Youth Fellowship provides an opportunity for 10 young adults to advise each of the local partnerships on strategies to better engage youth to shape and participate in programming and help them become leaders in their communities.

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, including ways they have recruited and retained youth, developed partnerships across 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 across the initiative 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.

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. An addendum to the 2019 study, which will analyze the second phase of LEAP, is underway.

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

ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

- **JFF. Postsecondary Systems Change: Lessons From the Learn and Earn to Achieve Potential (LEAP) Initiative.**
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. Connecting to Opportunity: Lessons on Adapting Interventions for Young People Experiencing Homelessness or Systems Involvement.**
Lessons on Adapting Interventions for Young People Experiencing Homelessness or Systems Involvement.
www.mdrc.org/publication/connecting-opportunity
- **School & Main Institute. Lessons From LEAP: Making Education and Career Pathways Work for Justice-Involved Youth.**
Lessons From LEAP: Making Education and Career Pathways Work for Justice-Involved Youth.
www.schoolandmain.org/tools