



Tailored for Success

How Two Programs in Los Angeles Customize Employment Services for Young People

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*Louisa Treskon
Jayce Everetts
Osvaldo Avila
Jonny Poilpré*

As young people navigate the transition to adulthood, obtaining employment is a major milestone. But connecting to any job, much less a meaningful career, can be particularly challenging for opportunity youth – young people ages 16 to 24 who are not engaged in work, school, or training – who have experienced educational or broader life disruptions. Community-based workforce development programs aim to support opportunity youth and other young people by offering career-readiness preparation and structured work experience as well as support for transitioning to independent employment or further training.¹ While these programs vary in terms of their structure and content, they often integrate classroom-based skills training with work-based learning opportunities to prepare participants for employment. Programs may also engage local employers in program design and delivery to better align training with employers’ needs. Research has shown that these programs can be effective in improving secondary education and employment outcomes.²

However, what is effective for one population of young people may not be effective for another. Although opportunity youth face a range of systemic and personal barriers to program participation, education, and employ-

ment, some barriers are more prominent within particular populations. Providers must therefore design their services to meet the needs of the young people who come through their doors and account for local conditions.³

To understand how community-based programs can best use employment training, work-based learning, and supportive services to help young people find jobs and begin careers, MDRC conducted case studies of two Los Angeles-based programs: Brotherhood Crusade's Movin' on Up initiative and the Los Angeles LGBT Center's Youth Services Workforce Development Program. Both are well-established entities with extensive experience serving young people in Los Angeles. This research is part of a broader partnership between MDRC and the Hilton Foundation's Opportunity Youth Initiative.

Based on analysis of interviews with program leadership, frontline staff, program participants, and employer partners, this brief shows how these organizations have tailored their services to best support their distinct populations of young people. This brief will identify considerations to help practitioners, policymakers, advocacy organizations, and funders develop and support employment programs for specific populations.

The Case Studies Approach

The Los Angeles Brotherhood Crusade and the Los Angeles LGBT Center are both grantees of the Hilton Foundation's Opportunity Youth Initiative. (For more information about the initiative, see Box 1.) While both organizations regularly provide progress reports on key program metrics to the Hilton Foundation, the case studies approach enabled MDRC to understand how each program is structured and the reasoning behind those structures, and to experience each organization's culture firsthand.

MDRC partnered with Brotherhood Crusade and the LGBT Center's program leaders to identify frontline staff members, program participants, and employer partners to interview during in-person, two-day site visits. In total, MDRC conducted 32 semistructured interviews in fall 2024, collecting data from multiple perspectives.⁴

Following the site visits, the MDRC team summarized and synthesized content from across interviews. Complementing information available in the organizations' progress reports, interview findings informed MDRC's understanding of the unique characteristics of the populations served by Brotherhood Crusade and the LGBT Center, as well as their approaches to training, work-based learning, employer engagement, and supportive services.

Box 1. The Conrad N. Hilton Foundation's Opportunity Youth Initiative

Established in 1944, the Conrad N. Hilton Foundation aims to empower communities across the globe through seven distinct initiatives, including its Opportunity Youth Initiative (OYI). The Hilton Foundation's OYI supports opportunity youth — young people ages 16 to 24 who are not engaged in work, school, or training — in reconnecting to education and meaningful career pathways. The Foundation funds a robust and diverse network of OYI grantees in New Orleans and Los Angeles, United States; Mexico City, Mexico; and Mombasa, Kenya.

Four main strategies guide the work of the OYI:

- 1. Career pathways and support:** Increase opportunity youth's access to in-demand career pathways, with comprehensive, wraparound services. Ensure that careers provide opportunities for advancement and that the hardest-to-reach young people are engaged.
- 2. Employer engagement and practices:** Deepen employers' engagement in program design. Train employers on working with opportunity youth. Help employers see the benefits of hiring opportunity youth to shift hiring practices.
- 3. Building the field:** Increase advocacy and funder collaboration across the field to better advocate for opportunity youth. Incorporate the perspectives of opportunity youth in policy decisions. Strengthen cross-sector data infrastructure.
- 4. Research and evaluation:** Research innovative programming for opportunity youth and disseminate findings. Evaluate the effectiveness of the Hilton Foundation's investments and shift as needed.

For more information, please visit the Hilton Foundation's OYI webpage:
<https://www.hiltonfoundation.org/work/our-initiatives/opportunity-youth/>.

Program Descriptions

At their cores, both the Los Angeles Brotherhood Crusade and the Los Angeles LGBT Center are multi-service organizations that provide young people with employment training programs, as well as comprehensive supportive services to reduce barriers to program participation. Both organizations braid together multiple government and private funding streams, each with its own eligibility requirements. They navigate these criteria on the backend to ensure sustained funding for all eligible young people who want to engage.

These two organizations are also prime examples of programs that have successfully tailored services to the unique populations they serve.

The Movin' on Up Initiative at Brotherhood Crusade

Founded in 1968, Brotherhood Crusade (“Brotherhood”) is a nonprofit organization that serves low-income communities in South Los Angeles County, with an emphasis on Inglewood, Compton, Lynwood, Altadena, and South Los Angeles. Brotherhood has a robust and active presence in the local community, and young people primarily connect with the organization after hearing about it from family, social networks, and community institutions. Staff members also run targeted recruitment campaigns, conducting outreach at places young people frequent.

Brotherhood Crusade’s Movin’ on Up initiative is a highly structured, research-informed workforce development training program that maintains defined attendance, participation, and performance expectations. It was designed for youth in the community who are ages 16 to 29, many of whom are young men of color, serving both opportunity youth and a broader population of young people, including those who are in high school, have graduated from college, or have employment experience. Many Movin’ on Up participants experience challenges related to mental health issues, trauma from neighborhood violence, and criminal legal system involvement. That said, Brotherhood recruits individuals who tend to be at a relatively stable point in their lives and ready to engage in a more intensive, structured program from the outset. Compared with other programs that focus first on stabilization, career exploration, and basic skills training, Movin’ on Up focuses on sustained engagement and targeted skill development. In this way, Brotherhood Crusade works to both address and *prevent* disconnection in its participants.

Movin’ on Up’s primary goal is to position participants in career paths with sustainable wages and opportunities for advancement or entrepreneurship. Additionally, the program fosters psychosocial development — including agency, identity, and emotional awareness — as well as civic responsibility. One of the defining features of this program is its emphasis on instilling a standard of professional behavior in its participants, developed alongside increased self-awareness and a stronger sense of internal responsibility. Moreover, Brotherhood Crusade teaches its participants that anyone could be a potential employer and to apply these standards of behavior with anyone they encounter. Young people learn to adhere to a professional dress code on and off site and to use strong handshakes and eye contact when introducing themselves to others. This focus on professional behavior is largely driven by Brotherhood Crusade’s desire to maximize the opportunity young people have for success and to protect participants from unfair stereotypes about the employability of young people of color.

The Youth Services Workforce Development Program at the Los Angeles LGBT Center

The Los Angeles LGBT Center (the “Center”) has provided a wide range of programs and services to LGBTQ+ youth and adults since its founding in 1969. A core part of its mission is providing housing assistance to LGBTQ+ young people (24 years old or younger), many of whom are at risk of, or currently experiencing, homelessness or housing instability.⁵ The Center hosts multiple kinds of housing programs — including emergency housing, transitional living programs, permanent supportive

housing, and rental assistance — and provides comprehensive, wraparound support for individuals in their programming.

Typically, individuals who enroll in the Center’s Youth Services Workforce Development Program (YSWDP) first come to the organization seeking housing services, engaging with the LGBT Center at a crisis point in their lives. They then join YSWDP programming after expressing a desire to engage in workforce programming or after a staff member refers them to these services. Most participants enter YSWDP with little or no employment experience; some have encountered anti-LGBTQ+ discrimination in the workplace. They may also be facing serious barriers to program engagement and employment beyond housing instability and limited work experience: Many YSWDP participants have experienced trauma — such as family conflict and rejection, peer harassment, and internalized shame — due to their LGBTQ+ identity, leading to depression, anxiety, and other mental health challenges. Issues with substance use are also common in this population, as young people may turn to drugs and alcohol as a maladaptive coping mechanism.

Given the severity of the barriers facing the population it serves, the LGBT Center designed YSWDP to be as accessible as possible, foregoing strict requirements that can be prohibitive for participants. In contrast to high-intensity workforce programming that emphasizes targeted skill development, YSWDP is primarily focused on giving its participants safe spaces to learn foundational job-readiness skills, make mistakes, and achieve stability. Placing participants in unsubsidized employment is, in many ways, a secondary, longer-term goal of YSWDP’s work-based learning; staff member interviewees at the LGBT Center highlighted increased confidence and self-esteem as primary measures of participant success.

Background on Employment Programs for Young People

Workforce development programs provide young people an opportunity to gain professional skills, explore careers, and gain a foothold in the labor market. These programs typically sequence activities to help young people develop fundamental job-readiness skills and demonstrate increasing levels of responsibility: a typical trajectory involves classroom training in job-readiness skills, followed by internship placement, and then independent employment (possibly with support from the program).⁶ Programs may also include skill development for a particular career pathway. Alongside these activities, programs may offer supportive services — such as case management, financial assistance, or behavioral health counseling — to help young people remain engaged in their training or job.

Staff members at programs are often balancing the tension between two conflicting approaches: placing young people in “now” jobs that provide them with an immediate source of income and work experience but may not allow time for further training, versus helping participants obtain “good” jobs that can give them a pathway to a solid financial future, but may have training requirements that temporarily reduce their ability to earn.

FUNDING SOURCES. Community-based organizations often leverage multiple funding sources to provide work experience programs. Many programs in Los Angeles leverage government and private funding to operate. The federal Workforce Innovation and Opportunity Act provides some funding for work experience programs. Additionally, local funds finance two work experience programs for young people: Los Angeles City’s Youth@Work program and Los Angeles County’s HIRE LA program, which support activities such as paid internships and work experience, and supportive services like transportation and work supplies. A third local program, LA:RISE, provides workforce development programming for those 18 and older who are or have been unstably housed.

RESEARCH ON EFFECTIVENESS. Rigorous evidence about the effectiveness of work experience and work-based learning programs for young people is limited. Much of the existing research involves federal programs for out-of-school youth — including YouthBuild, Civilian Conservation Corps, Job Corps, and National Guard Youth Challenge — since these programs operate at the scale needed for rigorous studies of their impact. Studies have found some positive effects on earnings and education outcomes, but these were often modest or short-lived. A prior MDRC review identified several features of effective programs: paid work experiences; links between education, training, and the job market; an approach that is developmentally appropriate for youth; comprehensive support to boost participant engagement during the program; and transition support to connect participants with jobs or training after the program.⁷ These features were found in the programs provided by Brotherhood Crusade and the LGBT Center.

EMPLOYER ENGAGEMENT. The workforce development field has become increasingly focused on the role of employers in codesigning programs and providing work-based learning opportunities. That said, there is very limited information available about how to effectively engage employers and encourage them to promote advancement for employees. Employer behavior is shaped by factors beyond the control of individual programs, including labor policies, worker protections, and broader economic forces. Short of policy mandates, workforce programs rely on voluntary engagement from employers, which limits the ability of such collaborations to achieve sustainability or expand. On paper, program-employer partnerships are mutually beneficial: employers gain a pipeline of potential new hires who have the skills needed by the company, reducing their recruitment and training costs, and employees have access to jobs that are of higher quality than they might otherwise access. The reality of employer engagement efforts, however, has not met this ideal, particularly for young people, whom employers may view as particularly unreliable. This has meant, in practice, that there are few program-employer partnerships operating on a large scale that target young people, and employers may view these efforts more as related to altruism or diversity efforts than sustainable talent pipelines. In addition, research has not yet demonstrated that employer engagement is in fact connected to better outcomes for young people.⁸

COMPREHENSIVE SUPPORT. Programs vary in their ability to provide comprehensive support to help participants meet financial and personal needs.⁹ This type of assistance can be critical to helping young people remain engaged in programming and progress toward stable employment. Lack of basic necessities such as work clothes, childcare, or transportation can mean the difference between losing a job or keeping it. Complex issues such as mental or physical health challenges,

unstable housing situations, or legal problems can also affect their ability to sustain participation in a program or maintain employment. An MDRC survey of programs found that most programs provide a suite of services on an as-needed basis, but having resources available does not mean that sufficient resources are available to meet the need in a community, or that young people are able to access the services to which they are referred.¹⁰ Barriers to access could include waiting lists for services, eligibility verification practices that young people have a hard time navigating, or services tailored for adults that young people are therefore reluctant to engage with.

Research has shown that effective approaches to providing comprehensive support involve holistic needs assessments, followed by connections to supportive services that are easy for young people to access.¹¹ Strong relationships between program participants and adult program staff members underpin this approach. These relationships encourage participants to share their needs with staff members and establish the trust that encourages participants to engage with services. This can be particularly important when referring to mental, physical, or behavioral health services.

Case Study Findings: Tailoring Services to the Population

Brotherhood Crusade and the LGBT Center have tailored their approaches to employment training, program sequencing, work-based learning, employer engagement, and supportive services to best meet the specific needs of the populations they serve and accomplish short- and long-term goals. The following sections discuss how each organization designed programming to meet the unique needs of its participants.

Program Sequencing and Training

Both Brotherhood Crusade's Movin' on Up initiative and YSWDP at the LGBT Center provide structured employment training programs, but they take different approaches to meet their participants' specific needs. Brotherhood Crusade emphasizes a tiered, labor-market-aligned training with clear pathways to a career or entrepreneurship. The LGBT Center focuses on cultivating a supportive, LGBTQ+-affirming environment to help participants gain transferable skills and achieve life stability.

Brotherhood Crusade

“Like, it's not just, ‘Oh, I came in because I needed a job.’ It's, ‘How can we fundamentally understand who you are as a person and actualize what you wanna be?’... Brotherhood Crusade, their role isn't just finding you a career. It's trying to put you in environments that you feel like ‘I am deserving. I am worthy to be here. And my life is so much more than what I thought it could be.’” — Movin' on Up participant

Movin' on Up is a highly prescriptive employment training and psychosocial development program, where young people follow a series of steps designed to move them through behavioral changes and prepare them to obtain, retain, and advance in quality jobs or entrepreneurship. Upon starting

Movin' on Up, participants are placed into one of three different tiers based on their readiness for employment, which informs how they will move through the program:

- Tier one: No previous job experience.
- Tier two: Previous work experience, as well as a developed resume.
- Tier three: Ready to be employed full-time.

Tier placement is based on an initial online assessment. Program staff members — including participants' assigned case managers and job developers — discuss progress through tiers as participants move through the program. Regardless of their tier, all participants must complete a two-week life skills course that teaches both job-readiness skills and soft skills such as communication and conflict resolution. During the course, case managers also identify potential employment or education pathways for each young person by administering a strengths-and-goals assessment. Following the life skills course, participants begin to work with a job developer who uses the assessment data to create individualized training programs specific to each participant's interests and employer partners' needs. Participants also engage in role-playing and modeling of workplace behavior.

Labor market data, partnerships with local employers, and participant aptitude and interest shape how Brotherhood Crusade identifies which training opportunities participants should pursue. External partners — such as employers, Los Angeles County programs, and community-based organizations — have significant input into the industry-specific trainings. Brotherhood Crusade also develops and facilitates training specific to employers' needs. (For example, Brotherhood created a two-week workshop on the skills and certifications needed to become a customer service representative at United Airlines, bringing in industry experts and United Airlines representatives.) This flexibility in programming enables Brotherhood to be directly responsive to real hiring needs. It also increases the likelihood that young people are well prepared to enter full-time employment after the program, which is Movin' on Up's ultimate goal.

After individualized training programs are completed, staff members interview all participants and use a weighted scale to rank them in order of preparedness for an external placement. Participants who meet the cut-off score are placed into sequenced work-based experiences, such as job shadowing, internships, apprenticeships, and other types of transitional employment. For participants placed in positions, Brotherhood assigns each a staff member to meet with at least once per week during this phase. For participants who did not meet the cut-off score, the program continues to work with them and offer services until they are ready for the next phase. (For a more detailed description of Movin' on Up's program sequencing and services, see Figure 1.)

Figure 1

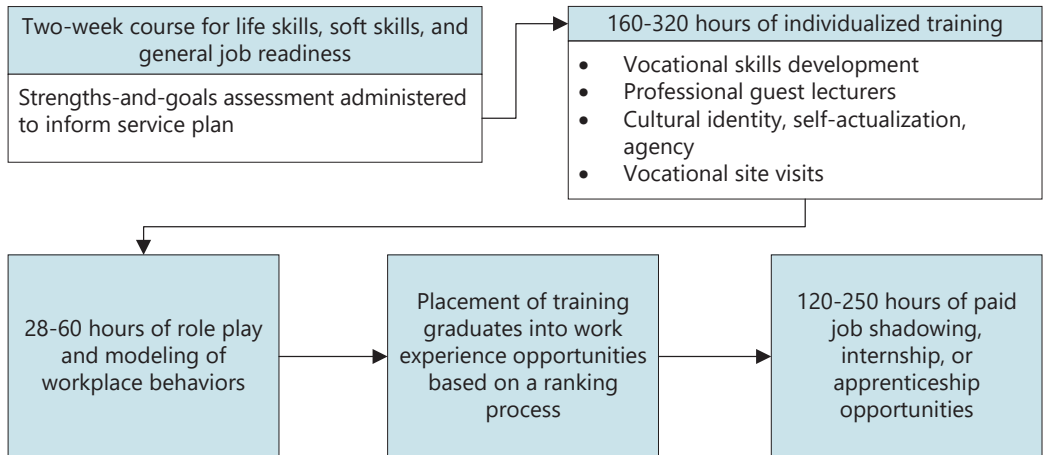
Elements of Brotherhood Crusade’s Movin’ on Up Initiative

Population and Recruitment

Population served: Typically boys and young men of color ages 16-29 in South Los Angeles, though braided funding streams allow a broader population to be served, including those outside of age range.

Recruitment strategy: Young people typically first hear of Brotherhood Crusade through family and friends, or through school fairs or other outreach campaigns.

Workforce Training Process



Post-Program Activities

- Ongoing communication with Brotherhood Crusade
- Continued access to professional development

Desired Goals

- Unsubsidized employment in a middle-wage career
- New mindsets of agency, identity, and civic responsibility
- Opportunities for advancement at work
- Further education and training

LGBT Center

“I think, particularly with our youth, they’re really figuring out who they are.... And now, they’re also working in an internship or in a vocational track, and they’re also figuring out what their name is, and what their pronouns are, and how they wanna dress.... I remember our culinary arts program [director] saying, ‘We’re changing the way we’re talking about this. We’re no longer talking about this in that we’re preparing people ... for a job in the culinary arts. *We’re preparing them for their future as an employed person.*’” – LGBT Center staff member

The YSWDP program provides participants with a structured and flexible approach to work-readiness training in a way that prioritizes sustaining their engagement and building their confidence. First, young people must attend four workshops on basic work skills and gather documents needed for employment. (Staff members refer to this activity as completing a “Youth Academy Passport.”) The primary purpose of this step is to ensure that potential participants can meet program expectations of completing tasks and showing up for sessions multiple days in a row. Once they complete the Passport activities, young people can then enter any of four in-house job training programs based on interest: culinary arts, social services, new media, and general work experience. (There are also a small number of external training opportunities.) Since participants typically lack income and family support, YSWDP pays young people \$17 per hour once they enter training. This income allows young people to address some of their basic needs, in addition to promoting engagement in programming.

Over time, the LGBT Center has adapted the four training tracks to promote participant engagement; for example, the social services track now requires fewer hours per week since students struggled to meet the previous requirements. The LGBT Center has also incorporated community-building activities, interactive lessons, and guest speakers to help keep participants engaged. While not all tracks may be of interest to participants, the Center’s perspective is that the tracks are better thought of as tools for developing transferable skills, such as conflict resolution and communication.

After completing an in-house training, participants can move on to a subsidized internship, either internally or with an external employer. Key to the LGBT Center’s model is its ability to offer multiple, paid internship opportunities at the Center. While about one-third of participants obtain internships with external employers, many of the Center’s young people require a level of social-emotional support that external employers typically cannot provide. Internal internships such as working for the Center’s in-house food service program or housing program enable young people to learn in a safe, LGBTQ+-affirming environment.

The LGBT Center’s braided funding streams allow the organization to switch funding sources when a young person exhausts the allotted hours from one source. As long as participants are within the eligible age range (under 24), they can enroll in multiple internships or even circle back to complete a different job track. (For a more detailed description of the YSWDP’s sequencing and services, see Figure 2.)

Figure 2

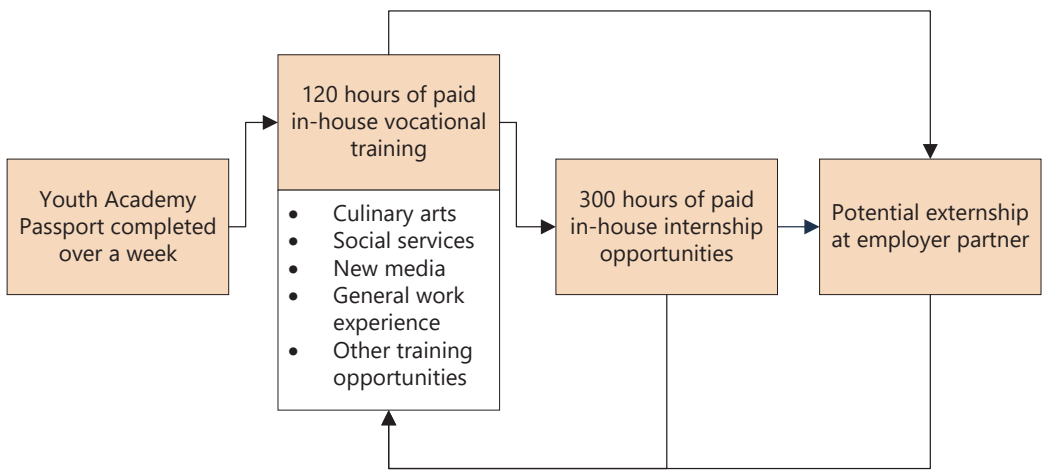
Elements of the LGBT Center’s Youth Services Workforce Development Program

Population and Recruitment

Population served: LGBTQ+ young people ages 16-24 who are at risk of, or currently experiencing, homelessness or housing instability.

Recruitment strategy: Typically, young people first engage with the Center seeking housing or other supportive services, enrolling in workforce training after expressing interest or being referred.

Workforce Training Process



Post-Program Activities

Connection to the Center’s alumni program platform

Continued opportunities for professional and personal growth

Desired Goals

Unsubsidized employment to cover basic needs

Increased confidence and self esteem

Housing stability

Stability to enter further training

Work-Based Learning and Employer Engagement

While Brotherhood Crusade and the LGBT Center both integrate external work-based learning opportunities into their programs to some extent, the two organizations' approaches to engaging employers diverge. Brotherhood Crusade leverages dedicated resources to recruit potential employer partners, making the business case for the partnership. In contrast, the LGBT Center — with its primary focus on in-house opportunities and social enterprises to provide work experience — appeals to employers' altruism when engaging external partners.

Brotherhood Crusade

Brotherhood Crusade's model for providing work-based learning opportunities relies on a robust and multifaceted employer engagement strategy. This approach has contributed to strong relationships with local employers in the hospitality, customer service, health, entertainment, logistics, technology, and infrastructure sectors. As mentioned earlier in this brief, the young people enrolled in *Movin' on Up* undergo a training process on professional behaviors and skills that matches specific employer needs and only begin their internships once Brotherhood is confident that they will be successful. Brotherhood aims to show employers that they can hire qualified and capable young people from within the community, potentially building opportunities for more young people in the future. Brotherhood Crusade has built a reputation among employers as an organization that provides high-quality workers who meet real business needs. Brotherhood further entices employer partners by leveraging its funding streams to fully subsidize interns' wages and work materials. In effect, employers get high-quality workers for free. The organization seeks to provide its employer partners with positive experiences that will ultimately translate into full-time employment for interns and future internship opportunities with other participants.

Brotherhood Crusade's job development team consists of a director of employment services, a coordinator of employment services, and job placement liaisons. The team has a data-driven approach to assessing which industries show potential for growth. It works closely with case managers to determine how to best prepare Brotherhood's participants for specific job opportunities at current or new employer partners. As a staff member explained: "[We focus on] working with our employers on what their needs are, what they see, struggles that they may be having with employment ... working with them and engaging them in a way where we can come back and bring it to our youth and participants."

Not all employers, however, are prepared to accept interns; smaller organizations may not be able to offer consistent job opportunities, and larger employers often have bureaucratic barriers to job placements. (For example, the corporate office of a large retail business may not see economic value in a partnership that would only affect one store.) Other potential partners may simply not match well with Brotherhood Crusade's mission; some, for instance, may express interest only because they are looking for free labor to perform menial work, and are uninterested in providing the more substantive work experience that Brotherhood Crusade is seeking for *Movin' on Up* participants.

With this in mind, Brotherhood Crusade uses a tiered system to categorize the level of engagement that each employer is willing and able to meet.

- Tier one employers offer limited engagement. Employers may conduct mock interviews, share their training manual, or explain their workplace norms. They are typically not in a position to host an intern full time.
- Tier two employers partner with Brotherhood Crusade in the same manner as tier one employers. They also host a limited number of interns.
- Tier three employers partner with Brotherhood Crusade in the same manner as tiers one and two employers. They also have consistent pipelines for internships and full-time employment.

All potential partners are invited to tour Brotherhood Crusade's space and discuss their employment needs, desires, and challenges, as well as the best way the two entities can work together.

Brotherhood develops written agreements with employers to set intentions and formalize the goals for the partnership. That said, staff interviewees pointed to an organizational culture of relationship building as the true backbone of employer partnerships. Brotherhood staff members are proactive communicators who regularly conduct outreach to both potential and active employers. They also make regular in-person visits to internship worksites to gauge intern and employer satisfaction.

LGBT Center

The Center typically works with organizations that are mission aligned and LGBTQ+-affirming when developing work-based learning opportunities with employer partners. Its current relationships with partner organizations — many of which are other social service providers — are long-standing and strong. Staff interviewees described the importance of networking to develop new internship opportunities. This approach to partnership reflects the Center's careful consideration of the types of environments in which its participants would thrive, and the organization's emphasis on finding stability over choosing a "forever career."

In developing new partnerships with organizations the LGBT Center has not worked with, Center staff members frame the relationship as one of altruism: by hosting internships, employer partners can "give back" to the local community. This may be a direct goal of a social service organization, or it may represent an opportunity for a for-profit organization to demonstrate social responsibility. In either case, the altruism frame is clear in how the Center communicates with employers about hosting interns. A Center staff member explained:

I do sell it as, "The LGBTQ youth – you can really make a difference in [the young person's] life. You can help change that." That is my selling point. I know that many people do sell it as free labor. I don't, because I think that I am also asking for something.

Somewhat unique to its model, the LGBT Center tries to prepare employers to work with a population of young people whose lives currently involve ongoing instability and may have inconsistent engagement as issues arise in their lives. The Center cautions that interns may arrive late or not at all, and it assures employers that it will provide the necessary socioemotional support that young people need during their internships. While the Center does not require employers to engage in formal check-ins during the internship — out of a desire to minimize burdens placed on them — it does encourage employers to reach out when an intern is struggling. To mitigate concerns about the financial risk associated with taking on what employers may perceive as less-than-ideal interns, the Center uses its funding streams to fully pay interns' wages.

Comprehensive Support

Following best practices for working with young people, Brotherhood Crusade and the LGBT Center offer comprehensive supportive services to participants, which are integral to mitigating potential barriers to program engagement and future employment. While Brotherhood primarily relies on connecting participants to external partners, the LGBT Center focuses on in-house services.

Brotherhood Crusade

Brotherhood Crusade's approach to delivering comprehensive support — both internally and through referrals to external partners — is appropriate given the level of need of the population it serves. While participants' needs vary, interviewees noted that the most common needs are mental health counseling and legal support to review, expunge, or seal records in the criminal legal system. For participants with mental health needs, Brotherhood Crusade partners with a co-located, culturally competent mental health organization to provide participants with a limited number of sessions with a licensed therapist. (Although there are external mental health providers available to participants, Brotherhood's leadership noted that program participants viewed services at those providers as impersonal and lacking connection. This informed Brotherhood's decision to develop internal mental health services.) Brotherhood's mental health professionals are positioned as regular staff members and initiate contact with participants as soon as they are first connected to the organization. Sessions with these providers tend to focus on resilience building and immediate crisis management — such as for a family death, injury, or gun violence. Brotherhood Crusade also provides food, clothing, transportation, housing, and other basic needs to participants, as appropriate.

Brotherhood staff members emphasized the importance of building trust with participants before providing or referring them to supportive services. This ensures that participants are more likely to accept the support or referral and follow through with services.

LGBT Center

The Los Angeles LGBT Center provides YSWDP participants with a wide range of LGBTQ+-affirming and trauma-informed comprehensive support services, most of which are offered on-site. Given that many YSWDP participants are facing some form of housing instability, the Center offers on-site

short- and longer-term housing programs, as well as a drop-in center that provides laundry, showers, food, and clothes.

Substance use disorder treatment is available at the Center's off-site clinic; on-site therapists provide counseling to address mental health issues; and case managers help connect young people to other health, employment, and community resources.

The Center's model for comprehensive support reflects the understanding that many LGBTQ+ young people face administrative and logistical barriers to engaging with social service and workforce development organizations. For example, social service organizations may require documentation that unhoused young people cannot easily provide, and other workforce entities may assume that participants already have stable housing and basic needs met. LGBTQ+ young people may also be mistrustful of and avoid organizations if they anticipate being misgendered or otherwise stigmatized. By offering these services through internal providers, the LGBT Center aims to protect YSWDP participants from uncomfortable or potentially discriminatory environments that may prevent them from accessing services. This approach helps sustain young people's involvement in programming in two ways. First, it creates an environment where young people feel respected and affirmed. Second, it increases the likelihood that young people take up supportive services.

A downside to this approach, however, is that the Center can struggle to meet young people's needs when its internal services are at capacity. Participant and staff interviewees alike expressed frustration at the limited availability of housing programs and mental health care at the Center. While the Center can and does refer participants to external organizations to address these gaps, Los Angeles' affordable housing and behavioral health worker shortages make it difficult to serve all who are interested.¹² An external organization's capacity can be similarly constrained by high demand and long waitlists. As a result, any referrals to outside providers for housing or other supportive services may not lead to immediate assistance, which can deter young people from fully engaging in programming.

Considerations for the Field

These case studies show different models for customizing workforce development programs to meet young people where they are in their journey to adulthood. Staff members at the Los Angeles Brotherhood Crusade's Movin' on Up initiative and the Los Angeles LGBT Center's Youth Services Workforce Development Program considered the unique needs of the specific population they serve to build customized programs that provide appropriate and effective support.

Both organizations have designed their programs to be accessible and engaging. A young person's engagement in services is often facilitated by a strong relationship with program staff members. The program culture at each organization is oriented toward being culturally competent and trauma informed, which aids relationship building. Additionally, these examples show how to make supportive services accessible through direct service provision or intentional partnerships.

Ensuring young people are ready for employment before placements (either in subsidized or unsubsidized jobs) with employers helps them perform well at work and maximizes the likelihood of positive experiences for these workers and their employers. Both programs provide participants with robust training before placing them in positions with external employers. The LGBT Center leverages internal employment opportunities to provide a bridge between training and external placements.

Providing work experience and job placement opportunities for young people requires dedicated, sustained resources. Brotherhood Crusade invests resources in establishing and maintaining employer relationships that lead to career-oriented jobs for Movin' on Up participants. The LGBT Center dedicates resources to providing work experience programs internally, often placing participants in internal "now" jobs that allow them to gain general work experience and readiness prior to external placement.

This brief provides examples of how two organizations in Los Angeles have tailored work experience programs to the populations that come through their doors. Though the two programs look different, they are underpinned by the same core strategies for setting up young people for success: designing services that prepare individuals for their next step, maximizing young people's chances of success with employers, providing relationship and resource safety nets, and recognizing that the pathway to a self-sufficient adulthood is not always linear.

Notes and References

1. Youth workforce development encompasses a broad range of models and activities. For the purposes of this brief, youth workforce development includes the following models and activities: career awareness and exploration, career and technical education (CTE), work-based learning, and work experience programs, among others. Work-based learning refers to structured opportunities for participants to build skills through unsubsidized or subsidized work experiences, often with supervision and support from program staff members.
2. Jim Lindsay, Katherine Hughes, Shaun M. Dougherty, Kelly Reese, and Megha Joshi, *What We Know About the Impact of Career and Technical Education: A Systematic Review of the Research* (American Institutes for Research, 2024).
3. Emma Alterman and Louisa Treskon, *Responding to Young People: An Analysis of Programs Serving Young People Not Connected to School or Work* (MDRC, 2022); Andrew Wiegand, Michelle Manno, Sengsouvanh Leshnick, Louisa Treskon, Christian Geckeler, Heather Lewis-Charp, Castle Sinicrope, Mika Clark, and Brandon Nicholson, *Adapting to Local Context: Findings from the YouthBuild Evaluation Implementation Study* (MDRC, 2015).
4. In a semistructured interview, the interviewer asks the interviewee open-ended questions from a protocol/list of formal questions that align with the research questions. At Brotherhood Crusade, the team conducted seven interviews with staff members, three interviews with program participants, and one interview with an employer partner. At the LGBT Center, the team conducted fourteen interviews with staff members, five interviews with program participants, and two interviews with employer partners. To compensate young people for their time, MDRC offered a \$50 gift card to program participant interviewees. The team did not offer an incentive for program staff or employer partner interviewees.
5. It is well documented that LGBTQ+ youth make up a disproportionate share of young people experiencing homelessness and housing instability. See The Trevor Project, *Homelessness and Housing Instability Among LGBTQ Youth* (The Trevor Project, 2022); Soon Kyu Choi, Bianca D.M. Wilson, Jama Shelton, and Gary J. Gates, *Serving Our Youth 2015: The Needs and Experiences of Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, and Questioning Youth Experiencing Homelessness* (The Williams Institute at the UCLA School of Law with True Colors Fund, 2015); Matthew H. Morton, Amy Dworsky, Jennifer L. Matjasko, Susanna R. Curry, David Schlueter, Raúl Chávez, and Anne F. Farrell, "Prevalence and Correlates of Youth Homelessness in the United States" *Journal of Adolescent Health* 62, 1 (2018): 14-21. While it is difficult to establish the exact prevalence of homelessness and housing instability, researchers have estimated that between 20 and 40 percent of youth experiencing homelessness are LGBTQ+. Matthew Morton, Gina Miranda Samuels, Amy Dworsky, and Sonali Patel, "Missed Opportunities. LGBTQ Youth Homelessness in America" (Chapin Hall at the University of Chicago, 2018). LGBTQ+ individuals are more than two times as likely to experience homelessness in their lifetime than the general population, at 17 percent compared with 6 percent. Bianca D.M. Wilson, Soon Kyu Choi, Gary W. Harper, Marguerita Lightfoot, Stephen Russell, and Ilan H. Meyer, "Homelessness Among LGBT Adults in the US" (The Williams Institute at the UCLA School of Law, 2020). See also Brandon Andrew Robinson, *Coming Out to the Streets: LGBTQ Youth Experiencing Homelessness* (University of California Press, 2020) for an ethnographic account of LGBTQ+ housing instability.
6. Martha Ross, Richard Kazis, Nicole Bateman, and Laura Stateler, *Work-Based Learning Can Advance Equity and Opportunity for America's Young People* (The Brookings Institution, 2020).
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11. Megan Millenky, Louisa Treskon, and Farhana Hossain, *A National Scan of Policies, Practices, and Systems Affecting Young People* (MDRC, 2024); Wiegand et al. (2015).
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New York
200 Vesey Street, 23rd Flr.
New York, NY 10281
Tel: 212 532 3200

Washington, DC
750 17th Street, NW
Suite 501
Washington, DC 20006

Oakland
475 14th Street, Suite 750
Oakland, CA 94612
Tel: 510 663 6372

