



Executive Summary

# Changing Workforce Development Systems to Better Serve Young Adults and Advance Equity

The First Five Years of Generation Work

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MAY 2023

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APRIL 2023

# FUNDERS

The evaluation of the Generation Work initiative was funded by the Annie E. Casey Foundation. The findings and conclusions presented in this report are those of the authors alone and do not necessarily reflect the opinions of the foundation.

Dissemination of MDRC publications is supported by the following organizations and individuals that help finance MDRC's public policy outreach and expanding efforts to communicate the results and implications of our work to policymakers, practitioners, and others: The Annie E. Casey Foundation, Arnold Ventures, Charles and Lynn Schusterman Family Foundation, The Edna McConnell Clark Foundation, Ford Foundation, The George Gund Foundation, Daniel and Corinne Goldman, The Harry and Jeanette Weinberg Foundation, Inc., The JPB Foundation, The Joyce Foundation, The Kresge Foundation, and Sandler Foundation.

In addition, earnings from the MDRC Endowment help sustain our dissemination efforts. Contributors to the MDRC Endowment include Alcoa Foundation, The Ambrose Monell Foundation, Anheuser-Busch Foundation, Bristol-Myers Squibb Foundation, Charles Stewart Mott Foundation, Ford Foundation, The George Gund Foundation, The Grable Foundation, The Lizabeth and Frank Newman Charitable Foundation, The New York Times Company Foundation, Jan Nicholson, Paul H. O'Neill Charitable Foundation, John S. Reed, Sandler Foundation, and The Stupski Family Fund, as well as other individual contributors.

The findings and conclusions in this report do not necessarily represent the official positions or policies of the funders.

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# ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

This report would not have been possible without the contributions of many people. We are especially grateful to the staff from the five partnerships who implemented the Generation Work initiative and whose experiences inform the lessons presented in this report. In particular, we thank the partnerships' leaders, including Grace Heffernan, Rebecca Kusner, and Kaci Roach in Cleveland; Jennifer Gifford in Hartford; Michelle White in Indianapolis; Anna Latshaw in Philadelphia; and Annie Laurie Armstrong and Chris Pierson in Seattle.

We are grateful to the staff at the Annie E. Casey Foundation for their valuable feedback on the study and for reviewing drafts of this report. Specifically, we thank Allison Gerber, Laura Burgher, Jeffrey Poirier, Ranita Jain, T'Pring Westbrook, and Martena Reed for their support. However, we acknowledge that the findings and conclusions presented in this report are those of the authors alone and do not necessarily reflect their opinions or those of the foundation.

We appreciate our research partners from other organizations who played an important role in the implementation of some initiatives and provided feedback on the research activities. In particular, we thank Hannah Lantos, Kristen Moore, and Zakia Redd at Child Trends; Amy Blair and Ranita Jain (who has since joined the Annie E. Casey Foundation) at the Aspen Institute; Marcia Kingslow at Kingslow Associates; and Sheila Maguire.

We thank the following individuals for reviewing a draft of this report and providing valuable feedback: Rebecca Kusner, Jill Rizika, Grace Heffernan, Michelle White, Jen Gifford, Roxy Goals, and Heather Worthey.

Finally, we are grateful to the many staff members at MDRC who worked on the project—Alexandra Pennington, Shelley Rappaport, Luisa Cardenas, Gloria Tomlinson, Andrew Rock, and Alexandra Ubalijoro—for their contributions. Carolyn Hill and Joshua Malbin reviewed drafts of the report and provided helpful comments. Christopher Boland edited the report, and Carolyn Thomas prepared it for publication.

The Authors



# EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

A 2014 report on global human capital trends found that many employers across the United States had difficulties maintaining a skilled and committed workforce.<sup>1</sup> Yet unemployment among young people ages 16 to 29 years was well above the overall unemployment rate. In 2016, 8.2 percent of this group were unemployed, while the national average was 4.9 percent. However, among Black young adults it was even higher: 13.8 percent. Indeed, unemployment among young Black men was more than triple the national average.<sup>2</sup> To help address racial inequity and increase employment among young people, workforce systems and other systems that serve young adults would need to change.

Given this context, in 2016, the Annie E. Casey Foundation (the Casey Foundation) launched Generation Work™ to connect more young adults—especially young people of color from families with low incomes—with meaningful employment by changing the way public and private systems prepare them and support their search for jobs. As part of the initiative, it asked partnerships made up of key workforce organizations in five cities to change how their workforce systems operated by better aligning education, training, and support services across organizations, and weaving into their systems best practices related to employers and youth. In 2017, the Casey Foundation began working with the partnerships to help them incorporate a racial equity lens into their work.

The Casey Foundation asked MDRC to conduct a study examining the experiences of the five partnerships implementing Generation Work and to ascertain lessons for the partnerships as well as policymakers, practitioners, and funders.

The study found that most of the partnerships pursued three broad types of strategies to change their respective workforce systems. They include the following:

1. strategies to change policies or regulations that constrained or facilitated workforce systems coordination, including influencing the funding priorities of key public funders of workforce services (such as the mayor or the local workforce investment board) to increase resources for the system, and changing funding allocation systems to encourage collaboration across organizations;
2. strategies to change how workforce-related organizations interacted with each other to better serve young adults, such as co-locating service providers and fostering trust and

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1. Deloitte Consulting LLP and Bersin by Deloitte, *Global Human Capital Trends 2014: Engaging the 21st-Century Workforce* (New York: Deloitte University Press, 2014).

2. Ranita Jain and Amy Blair, “Now Jobs” in *Young Adult Workforce Programming* (Washington, DC: The Aspen Institute, 2018). The calculation is based on the Bureau of Labor Statistics’ 2016 current population survey data, available at [www.bls.gov/cps/cpsaat03.pdf](http://www.bls.gov/cps/cpsaat03.pdf).

collaboration among workforce organizations by holding regular cross-organizational staff meetings; and

3. strategies to change the practices of workforce organizations, including incorporating a racial equity lens into their work, using organizations' data to identify problems and solutions, providing staff with professional development and training to develop the new skills or knowledge needed to act differently, and obtaining technical assistance to help staff move from “awareness to action.”

The experiences of these Generation Work partnerships demonstrated that, in order to change a workforce system, leaders must first clearly articulate a broad vision that they and their staff across multiple organizations share and will work together to achieve. For this to happen, senior leaders had to trust each other and agree on how they wanted their respective staff to interact differently. They needed to build trust among staff across organizations. One of the main strategies to build this trust that the partnerships deployed was holding regular cross-organizational meetings of various types.

The partnerships' experiences also showed that external funders (in this case, the Casey Foundation) can play an important facilitating role.

All Generation Work partnerships encouraged organizations in the workforce system to adopt practices aimed at improving outcomes for young adults and making them more equitable in terms of race, ethnicity, and gender. The partnership undertook a number of activities to accomplish this task. They include the following:

- using data (both quantitative and qualitative) to identify and describe a local problem or issue and to better understand the challenges that young adults face,
- training staff on racial equity and developing a common language for staff across organizations to discuss and advance it,
- creating spaces (such as learning communities, events, and meetings) for staff to explore equity issues in depth and brainstorm solutions,
- procuring equity technical assistance to help organizations move from “awareness to action,” and
- developing tools to support staff in adopting a new practice.

In conclusion, leaders and funders who are interested in changing a workforce system so that it better serves young adults and advances racial equity can learn from the experiences of the Generation Work partnerships as they will likely want to make many of the same improvements—changing constraining policies, improving how workforce organizations interact, and incorporating practices throughout the system that promote racial equity. However, the Generation Work experience also showed that changing a system requires building trust



among partner organizations and developing a shared vision for how the workforce system can best serve young adults. External funders can be instrumental in the development of strong partnerships and strategies for change when they provide the financial support that allows leaders and staff to meet, learn from each other, and plan for coordinated action.

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Founded in 1974, MDRC builds and applies evidence about changes in policy and practice that can improve the well-being of people who are economically disadvantaged. In service of this goal, we work alongside our programmatic partners and the people they serve to identify and design more effective and equitable approaches. We work with them to strengthen the impact of those approaches. And we work with them to evaluate policies or practices using the highest research standards. Our staff members have an unusual combination of research and organizational experience, with expertise in the latest qualitative and quantitative research methods, data science, behavioral science, culturally responsive practices, and collaborative design and program improvement processes. To disseminate what we learn, we actively engage with policymakers, practitioners, public and private funders, and others to apply the best evidence available to the decisions they are making.

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