

## **Community Forum Explores How to Re-connect Baltimore's "Opportunity Youth" to Work and Education**

At a June 9th forum co-hosted by the Baltimore Workforce Funders Collaborative, over 100 workforce development experts, employers and youth leaders came together in an energetic conversation about efforts to strengthen workforce training and support services for the city's large population of young people who are neither in school nor in a job.

Among the speakers were Marty Molloy, Director of Vocational Programming for the highly regarded YouthBuild Philadelphia Charter School, and Ranita Jain, Senior Evaluation Manager at the Washington, D.C.-based Aspen Institute Workforce Strategies Initiative. Baltimore healthcare employers and a youth also took part in the discussion. Attendees were overwhelmingly enthusiastic about building stronger collaboration among the many stakeholders who in some way or another are involved in the lives of Opportunity Youth.

**More than one in five young people ages 16 to 24 in Baltimore City are neither working nor enrolled in school – approximately 18,000 young people – one of the highest city rates nationally.** Within that population, about 38 percent lack a high school diploma or GED; on average these young people have a 7th grade reading level and 5th grade math ability. Despite these challenges, we choose to refer to these young adults as "opportunity youth," a recognition that we ought to approach this conversation by recognizing the tremendous assets that each young person can bring to our city and to their own families and communities.

The June 9<sup>th</sup> forum followed the release earlier this year of research reports developed collaboratively by Baltimore's Promise, the Baltimore Workforce Funders Collaborative at ABAG and the Job Opportunities Task Force.

["A Call to Action,"](#) a summary of the two reports, found that "a major, cross-cutting response is needed" to expand and improve opportunities for Baltimore's youth who are disconnected from jobs and education.

"Drifting away from school and work during those early-adult years can leave deep scars," the summary document notes. "These youth and young adults fail to build workplace experience and employer relationships and miss out on the chance to explore jobs and careers. Over time, this disconnection tends to cripple a person's lifetime earnings potential; and research shows that disconnected youth will end up costing society more through criminal justice, social service and other types of public spending."

And yet, as noted by several speakers at the forum, young people represent an enormous opportunity for helping to meet the employment needs of regional Baltimore employers. This Call to Action goes on to say:

**"These young people have talents, dreams and goals for their lives and stand ready to be important assets to their families, local employers and the community. With the right assistance and support, they can contribute deeply to Baltimore's future."**

“To begin to fulfill that opportunity, Baltimore’s civic leaders, including foundations, elected officials, community leaders, business groups, workforce development entities and others nonprofits, must recognize the critical need to do more to re-engage disconnected youth,” the summary document states. “A new concerted strategy and expanded resources will be required.”

The June 9th event was hosted by the [Annie E. Casey Foundation](#) and the [Baltimore Metropolitan Council](#).

There is clearly a robust desire among a large group of stakeholders in Baltimore to increase collaboration directed to the Opportunity Youth crisis. More than 90% of attendees who responded to an evaluation of the June 9<sup>th</sup> forum reported having gained an increased understanding of Opportunity Youth issues, usefulness of the information presented to their work, and an increased desire to work on OY issues and satisfaction with the event. A majority of participants chose to opt into a shared participant list designed to increase collaboration regarding OY efforts. And we heard a number of comments such as “Keep it moving! Don’t stop this opportunity!” and “We need more opportunities to come together and share. We need ongoing work on these issues as a large group.”

**Who:** Speakers included **Sophie Dagenais**, Annie E. Casey Foundation; **Mary Molloy**, YouthBuild Philadelphia Charter School; **Ranita Jain**, Aspen Institute - Workforce Strategies Initiative; **Shawnice Jackson**, National Council of Young Leaders; **Jo-Ann Williams**, University of Maryland Medical Center; **Darleen Won**, LifeBridge Health; **Tomi Hiers**, Baltimore’s Promise; and **Jason Perkins-Cohen**, Baltimore Mayor’s Office of Employment Development

**Additional Resources:**

[A Call To Action: Creating New Opportunities for Baltimore City's Disconnected Youth](#) (JOTF, Baltimore’s Promise and BWFC)

[Connecting Baltimore's Opportunity Youth To Careers](#) (JOTF & Baltimore’s Promise)

[Expanding Sector Employment Opportunities for Young Adults in Baltimore](#) (BWFC)

[Optimizing Talent: The Promise and the Perils of Adapting Sectoral Strategies for Young Workers](#) (Aspen Institute WSI)

[Connecting Young Adults to Talent, Results from a National Survey of Service Providers](#) (Aspen Institute WSI)

[Recommendations to Increase Opportunity and Decrease Poverty in America](#) (National Council of Young Leaders)

*AN AUDIO RECORDING OF THE JUNE 9<sup>th</sup> EVENT WILL SOON BE AVAILABLE.*