



Paying It Forward

AT A GLANCE

As organizations realize how much young people can contribute—and want to contribute—some maximize this potential by intentionally hiring former program participants who have expressed a desire to “Pay It Forward” into newly created paid positions or existing roles in the organizations.

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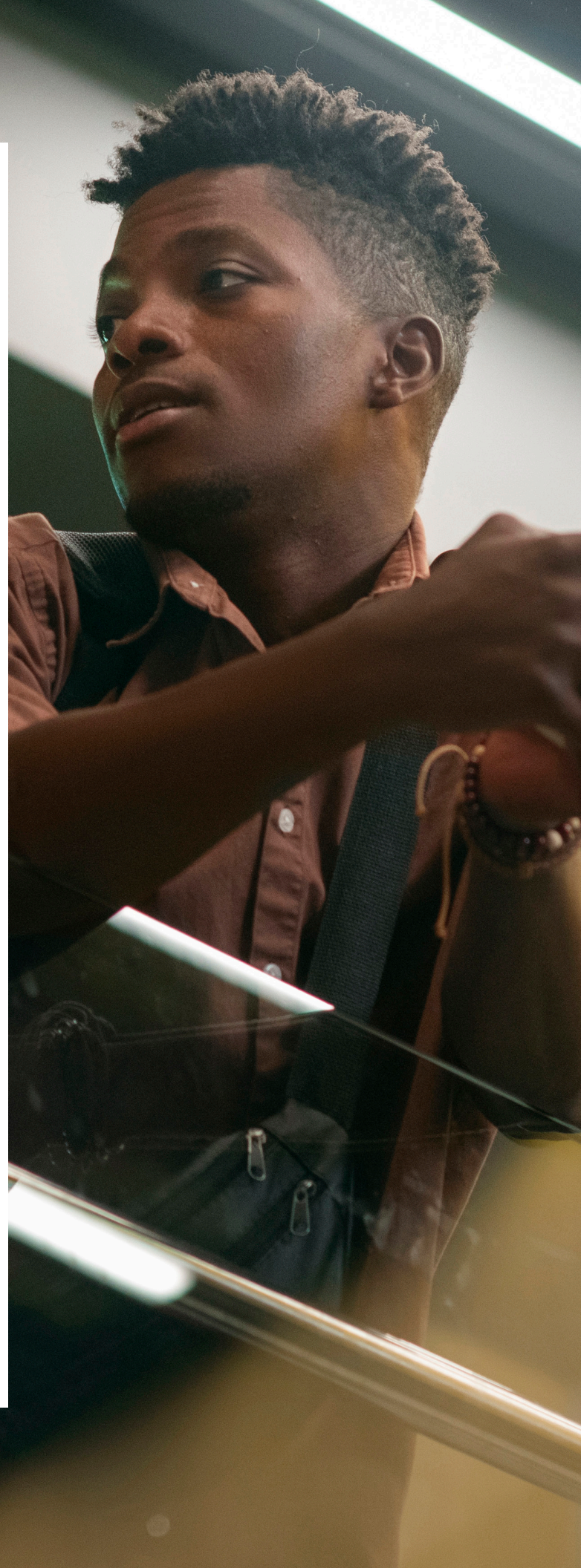
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Introduction

Over the past decade, nonprofit organizations that offer youth development and young adult talent development services have increasingly centered the voices of the young people who are participating in their programs. They have done this by infusing youth-centered practices into their programming and, more formally, creating leadership opportunities such as youth councils and alumni associations. Multisite initiatives bring together youth ambassadors or champions from across different programs. And increasingly, all these efforts are encouraged by both public and philanthropic funding sources. Across the field, organizational leaders are reporting how such practices contribute to both the quality of the programming they offer and participants' longer-term development of leadership skills.

As organizations realize how much young people can contribute—and want to contribute—some of them have taken this a step further: Former program participants who have expressed a desire to “pay it forward,” including Zoryna Lealai and Brian Castro, are being intentionally hired for either newly created paid positions or existing roles in the organizations.





“

One of my passions is to give back to the community that supported me during a difficult time. I knew [Covenant House Alaska] was a pioneer in solving the complex issues of youth homelessness. I wanted to make the community better for my own child. Community engagement and youth voice became my passion.

”

Zoryna Lealai

Recent youth champion fellow and former participant of Covenant House Alaska

This brief draws from interviews with program leaders and the young people they have hired to highlight how and why four partnering organizations in the Annie E. Casey Foundation’s LEAP initiative have brought young people into paid staff positions, what the experience has been like for them, and the meaning they are making of their experience. See [Appendix A](#) for a more detailed description of the LEAP initiative as well as the four sites featured in this brief. We explore the potential for growing a pathway to careers in youth and workforce development, especially in LEAP and other organizations that serve young people ages 14 to 25 who have experience in the child welfare and/or juvenile justice systems and/or are parenting and/or have experienced homelessness.

The first section describes what each young person is doing with and for the organization that has hired them. The second section identifies several key emergent lessons from this early-stage work: the assets these young hires are bringing to the organization; the strategic contributions they can make, especially in outreach and recruitment and in augmenting the organization’s advocacy efforts; the benefits young people can realize when given the



opportunity to play a professional role that aligns to their passions; and the importance of appropriate scaffolding and supports.

The brief concludes with a discussion of three emergent field-level questions that will need to be addressed if more young people are to build from their desire to pay it forward to high-quality jobs and careers in organizations that work at the intersection of youth and workforce development. They are:

- What structures and processes do we need to establish to successfully transition young people from program participants to employees?
- How do we scale up small pilot programs within and across organizations?
- How can we properly recognize, credential, and compensate the value and professional nature of the work while avoiding the pitfalls that could come with such professionalization?

“

I have really enjoyed the journey, and I've fallen in love with the work...It's so much fun...If you want to give back to the community and help out others, this is the field.

”

Brian Castro

Staff member and former participant in LEAP programming at SBCS



Section I: Opening the Door

Each of the organizations participating in this review is taking a unique approach—based on its own mission and history—to employing former or current participants in its programming.

The following are brief descriptions of what each young person is doing with and for the organization they are employed at:

- **Youth champion fellow:** On the statewide initiatives team at Covenant House Alaska (CHA) in Anchorage, Zoryna Lealai, who recently filled this position, participated internally in setting direction for the program. She also worked externally to build a coalition for effective local and statewide advocacy for more housing for unhoused Alaskans, particularly youth dealing with housing insecurity.
- **Peer outreach and engagement specialist:** SBCS in San Diego is taking advantage of a national initiative developed by FHI 360 and the National Institute for Work and Learning (NIWL) to establish youth development practitioner apprenticeships. As part of the initiative, Brian Castro, a former LEAP participant, was brought on as a full-time employee who reaches out to, enrolls, and engages youth in SBCS programs.
- **LEAP Advancement Board (LAB) member:** PPL in Minneapolis has created part-time positions that are open to current and recently graduated participants in the alternative schools that participate in its LEAP programming. Working up to 10 hours each week, Ena Ruiz is participating in and adding youth voice to internal PPL staff meetings and designing and implementing a driver's education program for students.
- **Community engagement manager:** Kristopher King is a full-time employee of The Door, filling a key position in the organization's Adolescent Health Center. He manages the peer educator program he previously participated in as a Door member and does outreach to spread the word about the Door's health services and recruit new Door members.

All four of these positions are indicative of a common recognition of the valuable contributions young people with lived experience can make to the quality of the organizations' programming as well as a common interest in growing a new generation of youth development practitioners. At the same time, there are some differences in how the organizations are defining the work. For example, CHA and PPL both created jobs focused on youth leadership and advocacy, but CHA's youth champion fellow role is a full-time position held by a former participant while PPL's approach was to create part-time positions for a half dozen or so young people who are still part of LEAP.

Similarly, both SBCS and The Door have hired young adults from their programs to fill full-time positions for peer outreach, recruitment, and engagement activities. However, The Door hired a young person into an existing position that had previously been filled by a staff member, while SBCS created a new apprenticeship for a former participant in a role it determined would be useful.

In the remainder of this section, we will elucidate how and why the organizations made their respective choices and how those choices are perceived by and impacting the young people in their current roles.

Seeking Solutions to Youth Homelessness: Covenant House Alaska

Three years ago, CHA created a position for a youth champion fellow to serve as a youth advocate on the executive board of Covenant

House. The fellow's job is to elevate the voices of young people who are participating in CHA services. This includes, for example, conducting surveys, holding internal meetings, reaching out beyond the program to bring together a collective of voices within a range of agencies in the area, and serving on the statewide Youth Alaska Action Board.

Before designing the youth champion fellowship, "we tried multiple different types of peer positions, deploying youth in different ways," explains Josh Louwerse, director of statewide initiatives. "We concluded that it was too challenging for young people just coming out of service to be put into direct service roles helping other youth manage crises that might trigger their own recent traumas." When CHA made the decision to create the youth champion fellowship, it looked for young people with lived experience who had made good progress toward stability, demonstrated leadership, and were no longer receiving CHA services.

The first fellow served for two years and remains on the CHA board while currently holding down a job at a national nonprofit. "The first year is a good learning and growing year and gaining capacity to be really strong," notes Louwerse. "From there, the goal is that they take the skills learned and apply them either with us or elsewhere." Specifically, when the fellows start, they shadow every department in the agency for a day, learning how grants are made, how money moves, and how program decisions are made. The goal is for the fellow to not only have a passion to find new solutions but also know how to get things done organizationally so they



can help other young people understand the processes for how things get developed or fixed.

Lealia recently completed a year in that position. Before finding CHA, she was dealing with the many challenges of being a teenager who was unhoused and on her own in Alaska. As a participant in CHA services, Lealai found “a community that supported me and uplifted my voice. And I thought this is something I want to home in on.” Seeing advocacy as “something I could do,” Lealai took advantage of an opportunity for recipients of CHA services to serve on a youth task force that was part of HUD’s Youth Homelessness Prevention Demonstration, which reinforced her sense that advocacy was a role she could fill.

Lealai credits CHA with creating a safe space for participants to voice their concerns. As members of the Youth Task Force, she and several peers were called in when CHA was engaging in a planning process or to help with an event or grant with a youth voice component. “I grew up in a culture where kids and women didn’t have a voice. I’m not used to the idea of making my own decisions or having an opinion on anything. Being in a group setting where we are all going through things we are trying to solve

taught me that advocacy is an important piece. The YTF shaped me as an advocate.”

After exiting CHA services, Lealai spent several years pulling her life together, taking advantage of programs and opportunities she learned about through CHA, finding stable housing, and gaining certificates she felt would help prepare her for and land the CHA youth champion position. Like all CHA hires, she went through the process of filling out an application and writing a cover letter explaining her interest in the job and her qualifications for it. She then sat for three interviews with staff before finally landing the job.

Lealai is not the first former participant to serve as a youth champion at CHA. However, she is the first to serve in the role since it moved from a position in DEI to the statewide initiatives group. Lealai has worked closely with Louwarse to learn new skills, such as how to construct surveys that collect good data and how to interpret it, and build a foundation for statewide work in youth advocacy. This has entailed meeting with other youth leaders in the state with the goal of creating a network among them to support the work of building youth boards and centering youth voice in the ongoing struggle to address youth homelessness in Alaska.

Lealai sees her capacity to engage with other people, create an open and safe space for them, and speak up publicly as key assets she brings to the job. She also recognizes it can sometimes be challenging to keep the momentum up in this type of work: “There are weeks where I am really, really busy. Other weeks, I think, ‘OK, what am I doing?’” Still, Lealai is clear about her dedication to the work, noting, “I see this role as a privilege and an honor. I’m not doing this to make me feel good. I realize that I know what I’m asking for, and I know it’s tough.”

What keeps Lealai going is her “consuming passion and undying motivation to seek solutions to youth homelessness.” This passion means she’s “not afraid to tell anyone what young people are experiencing,” she explains. “I’m not afraid to sit down and listen to others and participate in a community setting. If it’s for young people, I’m willing to sit down and listen... I bring a certain type of fire. I’m there for young people.”

Designing Site-Based Projects to Meet Student Needs: PPL

As an intermediary organization, PPL in Minneapolis is implementing LEAP across a number of sites, including alternative high schools and community-based organizations. In looking for a way to elevate youth voice and stay abreast of the work of partnering with local sites as the pandemic receded, PPL staff created the LEAP Advancement Board. Although LAB dates back only two years, it draws from what the organization learned in prior attempts to hire young people. “Our programming has always

been ‘nothing about us without us,’ notes Emily Terrell, director of youth employment strategies. As Terrell puts it, “We’re still in the process of building LAB and learning its potential.”

At this time, three youth have been hired and three more are in the hiring process. The plan is to eventually have representatives from each of the alternative schools and community-based organizations benefiting from LEAP programming. Although members of LAB work part time, they are hired as PPL employees who are on the payroll rather than simply paid stipends or honoraria. Terrell says, “We had to have some backroom conversations about what it means to hire youth as regular employees who go through the whole HR experience. Like other employees, they are expected to have a bank account, have taxes withheld, etc.” As a group, LAB members give input to PPL about LEAP programming. “We hire them for their current experience of going through the program, which keeps PPL connected to what is happening in the sites right now,” notes Terrell. This might include looking over PPL’s new logic model or advising on program design and outcomes. LAB members also work on projects related to their sites—for example, a LAB member might develop a presentation for employers to build their understanding of the experience of opportunity youth and encourage them to create inclusive environments. Eventually, the plan is to have LAB members set up site-based youth-led councils—kind of mini-LABs where more young people gain leadership experience.



When a PPL staff member visited the Merck alternative high school in Minneapolis to inform students in the LEAP program about an opportunity for paid employment helping other young LEAP participants make their voices heard, Ruiz was immediately interested in applying. Then a junior at the school, Ruiz had recently completed a rehab program that helped her get sober but where she felt she and the other young women in the program were not being heard. Speaking about that experience, Ruiz remembers feeling like she and her peers deserved to have their opinions taken more seriously. “We have gone through so many experiences in life, we think like we’re 20 or 30 years old with these life experiences,” she says.

As a LAB employee, Ruiz quickly found herself helping PPL staff recruit new LAB members. During the summer, she helped set up a space for LEAP alumni to reconnect. Now a student at a community college, Ruiz has come up with an ambitious LAB project: “I just started this new program with students who are 18 to get their driver’s permits. A lot of kids drive without a license or permit and don’t have the money for driver’s ed.” After talking about it with a staff member, she began piloting a driver’s ed program for alternative schools.

Ruiz put a curriculum together to help students move through the Minneapolis Driver’s Manual and learn how to interpret the wording, which, Ruiz says, “tricks you with the language.” She goes to the schools with a PPL staff member to deliver the course. When learners are ready, LEAP pays for the test for those who pass it as well as the permit fee. The day of the test, Ruiz goes with the students and takes them out for breakfast afterward. “The project is something I love, and I’m dedicated to it,” she says.

“This is a professional job,” Ruiz adds. “I have my own email and Outlook calendar. I’m learning how to be in a professional role at 19. It’s not like serving at a restaurant.” She credits her LAB involvement with helping her learn how to juggle everything and manage her time. At the community college, Ruiz is majoring in psychology with a minor in communications. She hopes to transfer to the university and work toward a master of social work and the credentials to work as an addiction counselor in a rehab program.

The experience of being in LEAP and LAB has also opened Ruiz's eyes to what PPL and other nonprofit organizations do and has whetted her appetite for working in such organizations in the future. For example, she has seen how PPL supports Native American communities in the area, including efforts to raise and manage money for the work her aunt does to address the need for Native American housing.

Offering a Youth Development Practitioner Apprenticeship: SBCS

Bringing in new talent, especially in youth-serving roles, is a goal at SBCS, a large multiservice organization in greater San Diego. When the opportunity arose to participate in a unique national youth practitioner apprenticeship program, co-led by FHI 360 and NIWL, SBCS leaders were ready to sign on. In the initiative, employers (in this case, SBCS) recruit, supervise, and pay apprentices while the national organizations support them by providing training and resources. For example, apprentices get access to classes on Google Classroom to learn skills in areas such as networking, business technology, and budgeting.

After interviewing young people across various SBCS programs, Program Director Chris Zures and his team chose Brian Castro for the apprenticeship. As a LEAP alumnus, Castro used the interviewing and other job-readiness skills he learned in the program to secure the opening. He says he made the decision to apply for the apprenticeship because of frustration with other jobs he had held since completing LEAP, including work toward a firefighting career and

as a machinist, noting he could not get enough hours to support himself and his wife. Looking for a better opportunity, he reconnected with staff at SBCS and was intrigued by the possibility of interviewing for an apprenticeship there.

As an apprentice, Castro began to work on peer intake. Program coordinator Alejandro Garcia says Castro has the skill set necessary for the job and the team is committed to "move him up with more responsibility" as he progresses in his work. Now in his second year, Castro is intake specialist for SBCS's work-readiness services, funded under the Workforce Innovation and Opportunity Act. In this role, he recruits, engages with, and enrolls young people in programs that help them prepare for getting a job and pursue further education or training. Castro says he is aware of the importance of the support he is getting and what his supervisors and mentors are doing to help him grow into his role. In his view, everything about the experience has been just right: "I have been very fortunate to have a lot of training and people who were so willing to take the time to explain to me what the role is, what it consists of, and to teach me how to do the paperwork and provide the services in a more efficient and strategic way. ... A big thing that I really appreciate about this job is that they let me do a lot of trial and error; they let me figure out how to walk a mile from messing up to fixing it. They'll always help me fix it, but they let me mess up so I can learn from my mistakes. I'm very appreciative about that."



In his mid-20s now, Castro is not sure where he wants his career journey to go next, noting, “I’m still at a crossroads.” He says he might go back to pursuing firefighting work or explore other avenues. For now, however, Castro says he’s content: “I do enjoy the work a lot. It’s food for my soul. I get to help out youth and families in need.”

Castro is not the only former LEAP participant SBCS has hired. Several graduates have come back via short-term internship programs, earning \$20 an hour for up to 240 hours within a five-month period. “This gives our sites a way to see if they are a good fit, with the goal that they might eventually become a staff member at that site,” says Zures. Zures and Garcia see the afterschool programming SBCS offers at 15 school sites as a good entry point to the organization. Each site has four to 10 staff slots, with frequent turnover. A few graduates have applied and been hired part-time for standing jobs at SBCS—for example, one alumnus works as a videographer and another works at the front desk while also studying in a graduate program.

Promoting Adolescent Health and Wellness: The Door

The Door hired former Door participant Kristopher King as the community engagement manager at The Door’s Adolescent Health Center. As Alex-Ann Espeut, managing director of career and education services, explains, “We’re preparing young people for employment, and so if there’s a job available at The Door and we’ve given them the tools to be successful, then just like anyone else would obtain the position with us, they are able to do so.”

She points out that because The Door operates as a multiservice center, it offers a wide variety of employment opportunities for young people.

When a position for a managerial job at the Adolescent Health Center became available, King knew he wanted to apply. During his four years as a Door member, King had worked in the health center in a part-time paid internship, as a peer educator and then a senior peer educator. In those roles, he and other peer educators were deployed to schools and community-based organizations where they ran workshops for youth on a range of adolescent health issues and topics. To prepare for the work, peer educators learned the necessary health-related content and practiced facilitation skills.



When King learned about the opening at The Door, he was working as a benefits engagement specialist at a drop-in center primarily serving runaway and homeless youth. In that role, he helped clients sign up for entitlements such as SNAP and offered support with identification and document procurement, including name and gender marker changes for many transgender or gender nonconforming clients. He credits his time as a peer educator at The Door with helping him learn both the content and skills for working in this field.

“I expressed an interest in wanting to learn, so the manager shared a lot with me: what the reports looked like, the importance of funding, what funders needed,” he says. “She was very transparent with me because she knew I wanted to learn and pick up management skills.” As a peer educator, King also took advantage of the Door’s offer to pay for additional training opportunities, including CPR, opioid addiction, and sex education.

In his current managerial position at The Door, King works closely with the community engagement educator to train peer educators in facilitation skills and oversee their work with other Door members as well as in the field. King

is responsible for setting up and maintaining the schedule of the health education workshops peer educators conduct in classroom and community settings. He works closely with the membership department, since the work of peer educators is a key way the organization spreads the word about its health services. When teachers or counselors come to see what the health center has to offer, King coordinates that as well.

In the immediate future, he wants to continue growing and learning in this role. Eventually King sees himself returning to college to finish a bachelor’s program in exercise science he started and then earn an advanced degree in public health with a focus on making fitness affordable to all. Since many of the young people the health center serves are migrant or immigrant youth in families that are seeking asylum, King also wants to learn more about international policy: “Because I’m so passionate about being in the field and helping people I know, I’ll apply whatever degree I have.”



Section II: Emergent Lessons

Among both program leaders and young people across the four sites, there is widespread agreement about the assets former participants bring and the contributions they make when they are hired by the organizations that helped them stabilize and move forward in their own lives. It is also evident that both former participants and organizations benefit when young people are in roles that draw on their passion to pay it forward and are offered a scaffolded set of opportunities to build their skill sets and explore a possible career in social services.

Program leaders and participants also cite many of the same challenges of doing this work well and describe similar ways they are trying to mitigate those challenges. This section organizes these areas of agreement into a set of emergent learnings that may be helpful to other organizations seeking to hire former program participants into staff roles.

Adding Targeted Value to the Organization

Although the job descriptions and roles taken on by former participants vary across the four organizations in this report, all of them evidence a recognition of the value these young people bring. Several of the hires mentioned being the youngest person in the organization and noted how they have been able to bring a generational perspective they believe might have been missing. For example, in addition to his ongoing work in peer intake and engagement, Castro says he has been called into SBCS meetings to represent a youth viewpoint: “Definitely one of the big assets I feel that I bring is I believe I am the youngest in the whole agency. Wow. So it’s definitely a fresh mind and also kind of gives them more of the perspective of the youth...They call me in and ask me for that perspective.”

All the program leaders talked about how valuable it is to have young staff who have lived experience in both navigating various systems and participating in the organization’s programming and services. Both leaders and alumni on staff link these assets to specific valuable contributions the alumni hires are making to the quality of what their organizations offer.

Key assets program leaders cite include:



Lived experience, including firsthand experience navigating broken systems



Empathy for prospective or new participants



Firsthand experience and knowledge of the organization's programming and services



Experience exercising voice and leadership

In youth development, organizations frequently cite peer outreach, recruitment, and engagement as challenges. Both The Door and SBCS have found great value in placing some of that responsibility in the hands of King and Castro. PPL also quickly realized that Ruiz could be quite effective in explaining LAB to current alternative school students and recruiting them into it.

Garcia points out the specific strategic advantages of having Castro do intake with new participants: Having gone through LEAP program, “he can give them more real-time experience of what the program will be like. We’ve been able to assess participants better through the real conversations that happen when someone with the lived experience is the first face they see.”

The Door’s Espeut elaborates further how the experiences of the young person hired translates to “a different level of empathy that exists within a person who has had so many of the same experiences as the population that they’re serving and navigated some of

the same challenges.” She adds, “It fosters the opportunity for them to form ... a deeper connection—‘I’ve been there; I understand you’—which is then experienced by someone coming into the program as ‘I don’t feel like I’m talking to someone who has never walked in my shoes.’”

Advocacy work is another area where former participants can contribute strategic importance to the field. Before being hired as employees, three of the young people in this report had taken advantage of opportunities offered to them as program participants to develop a public voice and leadership skills: Lealai was a CHA representative on the HUD youth task force, Ruiz became a LAB member while still a LEAP participant, and King participated in the Door’s peer educator program.

When CHA first created the position of youth champion fellow, its leaders placed the role within CHA’s DEI department, where they could support and supervise the young person in the work of reinforcing an inclusive culture in the organization. After several years, CHA moved the position to its statewide initiatives group in recognition of the valuable contributions Lealai could make to the agenda of the department Louwse leads—by developing a network beyond CHA with the potential to drive a statewide advocacy agenda.

As Louwse notes, “When you recognize that systems are not built for young people, and especially for young people of color, to succeed, then you have to take an honest look at yourself and ask, ‘Who can tell us that best?’ ...



We have to trust our young people to build what works. We need to be able to incorporate their voice and leadership.”

Terrell concurs, noting, “The young people who are closest to the problem are always closest to the solution. ... They have wisdom to offer, especially transition-age youth.”

The Power of Passion: ‘More Than Just a Job’

In addition to the assets enumerated by program leaders, the young people highlighted here emphasized the passion they bring to the work because of their experiences with the various systems that have impacted their lives. In short, they see the work they are doing as much more than just a job.

As an advocate addressing youth homelessness in Alaska, Lealai is clear about how much this issue means to her and how it fuels her advocacy. “It’s my consuming passion, my undying motivation, to really seek solutions to youth homelessness,” she says. “I bring a certain type of fire. I’m not so easily swayed. I’m really there for young people.”

Ruiz approaches her LAB work for PPL with a similar energy and candor. “I’m a very strong-willed person, very passionate,” she says. “If I’m doing a project, I’m really passionate about it. I love to talk. And I’m very open and honest. If it’s a project I don’t like, I’ll be honest about it and talk about it.”

King brings a focus on transgender and gender nonconforming youth issues to his job at the Door’s Adolescent Health Center. He says he is “always thinking about how we can be more inclusive for those youth ... always thinking about language we use, gender expansive language. ... I think about the lived experiences of trans young people now. I can help them with clothes, name changes, other benefits they need—help make things cohesive.”

In thinking about and planning for the future, the opportunity to hold a job they are passionate about is a factor for several of the young people interviewed. Lealai and Ruiz both mentioned pursuing an MSW, seeing it as a potentially helpful credential in making a career in social service work. King envisions not only finishing his bachelor’s in exercise science but possibly completing an advanced degree in public health.

Scaffolds and Supports

Before being hired for their current jobs, each of the young people in this report took advantage of opportunities to build relevant skills and understand various aspects of their organization's work. For example, while a program participant at The Door, King worked for several years as a peer educator before landing his full-time job as a community engagement manager. Lealai had the benefit of honing her advocacy skills on the Youth Leadership Taskforce for CHA's HUD grant before returning to the organization as a youth champion fellow. Castro is receiving support from both SBCS staff members and NIFL's Youth Practitioner Apprenticeship program. And Ruiz joined LAB while still a high school student and has gradually increased her number of paid hours and the range of tasks she is doing.

Organizational leaders reported several ways in which they are addressing challenges that have emerged—starting with anticipating issues before they become difficult to address. All four of the nonprofit organizations cited are well established and have structures and processes in place to orient, support, and mentor new hires as they enter and learn their roles, as well as support, coach, and supervise employees who might be experiencing challenges inside or outside of work. They also shared ways they have offered support to former program participants that differed somewhat from that provided to other employees.

For example, Lealai met weekly with Louwerse, who supported and supervised the advocacy

work they were co-designing in his capacity as director of state initiatives. Both Castro and Ruiz talked specifically about needing—and getting—help from their supervisors to better understand the professional nature of the work and the expectations that go along with that, especially in contrast to other types of jobs they had held. At The Door, the staff try to anticipate and provide the help the young people need to successfully make the shift from program participant to staff member as well as navigate and handle the life challenges that may arise.

Whether the young hires are still in their teens, like most LAB members, or in their 20s, both they and the program leaders cited the challenge of starting in new roles that can seem somewhat ambiguous or require different capabilities than those required in prior jobs. As a college student and LAB employee, Ruiz says she has had to learn how to juggle everything and manage her time. “It’s not like serving at a restaurant,” she says. “I have my own email and Outlook calendar. I’m learning how to be in a professional role at 19.”

Terrell has at times found it challenging to recruit for LAB because it’s hard to explain to young people what they will be doing or what the scope of the work is. She’s seen some young people have difficulties moving from “just saying what they think about something to designing projects or programs that aren’t directly for them. ... We know what program oversight is; they don’t...We need lots of examples and for other young people to describe it.” Ruiz now accompanies PPL staff in going to the alternative high schools to explain LAB.

Putting young people in an advocacy role creates a particular set of new challenges. Although Lealai was not the first youth champion fellow at CHA, she was the first to work on statewide advocacy as part of the state initiatives team. Her predecessor had been on the DEI team, with a more internal focus. “Mainly my job is engagement, networking, and connecting,” explains Lealai. She acknowledges that she sometimes feels frustrated with the pace of the work and the challenges of keeping up the momentum. “Josh and I had to figure this out,” she says. “We are laying the foundation of what this role can be [and] what I can do and can’t.”

Anticipating and Mitigating Trauma Triggers and Boundary Issues

Program leaders and the young people they hire are also candid about other challenges that sometimes emerge. Two of the program leaders talked about earlier experiences hiring former program participants that led them to make changes in the way they approach hiring and supporting young people on staff.

Challenges cited by program leaders and young people include:

- The potential for reactivating trauma
- Boundary issues
- The rhythm and demands of professional roles

In the past, CHA had multiple types of peer positions deployed in different ways. For example, a decade ago, CHA hired young people to be peer outreach workers and to work in the homeless shelter. Louwerson offered this assessment of those years: “We found it to be challenging for folks just out of service to be put in roles where they could experience re-traumatization. ... As we better understood the nature of trauma and brain science and saw the struggles of young people in direct service positions, we started to shift to figuring out positions that are not youth facing, not managing crises.”

The Door also has a long history of hiring young people and similarly found that some of them had trouble creating boundaries. “The transition from being a young person to being a staff member can be a challenge. ... We have a couple of instances where they would share inappropriate information with other young people.” The Door’s response has been to “provide a lot of coaching and redirection around appropriate behaviors in the workplace. [That includes] communication styles, why we can’t share certain things, setting boundaries internally, and not crossing those lines.”

Other program leaders say they also had to figure out how to help and support young people transitioning from program participant to employee. SBCS leaders have found that young hirees and the staff members working directly with them may need to adjust the ways they relate—moving from a somewhat casual relationship to a more formal and professional one. As Zures points out, “It’s a different thing

being late for a meeting as a participant vs. when you are a co-worker. It's important to understand the emotions and challenges that can create among other employees in the workplace."

Several of the young people interviewed also talked about boundary issues, offering their perspective as young adults with similar backgrounds to those still in programming. For example, Castro describes his biggest challenge this way: "When the youth figure out I'm around the same age as them, a lot of times, they don't take me as seriously or they see me more as a friend. I mean, I'm not going to say that's a bad thing, but then, seeing me as a friend takes away from the seriousness of the program that I'm trying to provide for them. They might think, 'Brian, he's cool; he's got me,' but [I'm thinking], 'No, I need you to do this.'" He adds, "I like to be very funny at times or very talkative. I'm learning how to balance it. Like, when it's time to be very serious and explain the program, give the youth the help they need. Recently, I want to say the last four months, it's been pretty good in that regard."

In her work as a LAB member, Ruiz has faced a similar boundary challenge, noting how she had to set boundaries with a friend who signed up for the driver's education pilot she was running. "Sometimes I have to stop her from talking about her personal life," she says. "It has been a little bit difficult. I have to say, 'This is my boundary. Today, I'm your teacher.'"

King adds that as he has gotten older, he has had to become clearer about his boundaries as well,

and that such issues come up frequently for the younger peer educators he manages: "We talk about that during training: what's OK and not OK [and] how boundary issues might show up, like examples of questions students might ask, like 'What would you do?' We train the team on how to have those conversations and steer back to the main point of the lesson...I have more respect now for what teachers do—classroom management, developing lessons. It's not always easy."

Given these challenges, The Door and CHA encourage the young people in their programs to work in other organizations for several years before applying for openings at the programs they participated in. King worked at a youth drop-in center for runaway and homeless youth before going back to The Door. Lealai spent two years working on projects in organizations that partnered with CHA, noting how she "doubled down to seek multiple certifications." Castro worked on becoming a firefighter and then worked part time as a machinist before applying for the apprenticeship at SBCS. All three were in their mid-20s when they started working at the organizations that had helped them.

By anticipating the challenges for both the organization and the young hires, program leaders have been able to mitigate or minimize issues, giving the young people the space and support to grow into their new roles and new relationship to the organization. There is clearly a learning curve for both the organization and the alumni hires, but it is also clear they all feel quite positive about how things are progressing.



Section III. Implications for the Field

This report speaks to three emergent questions that organizations working at the intersection of youth and workforce development will need to answer if more young people are to attain their dream of paying it forward:

- 01** What conditions, structures, and processes do we need to establish for young people to successfully transition from program participants to employees?
- 02** How do we scale up small pilot programs both within and across organizations?
- 03** How can we properly recognize, credential, and compensate the value and professional nature of the work while avoiding the pitfalls that could come with such professionalization?

While it is too early to produce a how-to guide or playbook, the organizations and young adults profiled here offer valuable insights into these questions. Organizations with former program participants in paid positions are learning in real time about where and in what specific roles these young adults can add the biggest strategic value. They are also addressing the challenges that can emerge and providing the supportive structures and processes that can help these new employees be successful. In addition, at various points in the process of determining whether and how to grow this work, they are bringing on more former participants as well as others who have lived experiences that are directly relevant to the organization's mission.

Laying the Groundwork for Success

As with all hires, ensuring the right fit is key to success on the job. The organizations interviewed have been thoughtful about what the best job match might be for the young people who have come through their programming. In some ways, the most obvious match for these hires might be in frontline, direct service positions, where high turnover can lead to frequent openings. However, as noted previously, while former

participants have highly relevant experiences to bring to bear on such positions, these jobs also have the most potential for triggering boundary issues and traumatic responses. The roles former participants are playing in their organizations make use of their talents and fill important functions that are vital to the organization without carrying a high risk of reactivating trauma. Such roles include recruiting and engaging young people in the organization's offerings and building youth leadership, voice, and advocacy both within and beyond the organization. In several cases, the young people had the opportunity to try out aspects of these types of roles while still participating in the program. Lealai's work on the youth task force helped prepare her for the advocacy role she went into. King's work as a peer educator is invaluable to the work he does now as the community engagement manager at the health center.

Organizational leaders have also been thoughtful about placing young people in positions where the work will be scaffolded, supported, and well supervised. For example, in addition to her weekly meetings with Louwrese, Lealai can take advantage of Homeless to Heroes, a mentoring group CHA offers given 40% of its staff are people with lived experiences. In his work as community engagement manager for the Door's Adolescent Health Center, King works closely with a seasoned colleague who is the chief peer educator. When boundary issues emerged for a former participant in a staff role, The Door opted to not go directly to corrective action but instead provide coaching and redirection support to try to resolve the situation. In his

work at SBCS, Castro says he has enough support and supervision that he feels it is safe to "learn from my mistakes." As a LAB member, Ruiz has both staff and peer support, and in her driver's education program work in alternative schools, she works closely with a PPL colleague who accompanies her on all school visits.

Progressing From Pilots to Pathways

Several of the organizations have begun to think about what it might look like to hire more alumni—the type of preparation it would take and potentially what a pathway into youth and workforce development careers could look like.

A large multiservice organization that employs 400 people, SBCS serves thousands of youth who participate in a variety of different programs. Zures says there is potential for alumni positions in each of the programs. As a possible starting point, he says, SBCS operates afterschool programs at 15 school sites, each of which employs four to 10 staff members. Zures and Garcia see these jobs as potential entry points into working at the agency or in other social services settings.

They recognize that for this to happen, however, the agency would have to change its HR practices and create a structured pathway that is recognized across greater San Diego. Zures and Garcia envision the possibility of creating a pathway to certify young people as youth development practitioners.

Their experience as part of the FHI/NIWL youth development practitioner apprenticeship has shown them the potential of a well-designed



pathway to teach, support, and ultimately offer credentials that recognize the skills of such a position. Like other pathways in fields such as health care, construction, and IT, a social services pathway could lead to certificates—ideally, recognized by other large nonprofits in San Diego, such as the YMCA. The aim would be to form a hiring network in which all the organizations agree to honor the certificates.

The idea of a career pathway for youth development work has long been a dream of PPL’s Terrell. “The work youth workers do is imperative,” she says. “Safe and trusted adults are the key to resilience and outcomes.” Terrell sees the potential for a young person to start with population-level experience—such as from coaching younger children in a sport or being a big brother or sister—and from there develop concrete, demonstrable skills. The pathway could lead to a site-based or outreach-oriented role, with opportunities for the young person to develop a pedagogy and philosophy along the way. Such a pathway could also include a transition into a postsecondary program in which future youth workers can further hone their understanding of the field and skills.

The four young adults profiled in this report

are clearly pleased to be in a position to help other young people still being served by the organizations that helped them. They are also excited by the opportunity to experience professional roles in the social sector. However, in the absence of a defined pathway, they are less clear about what might prepare or best position them for long-term careers in this field. Lealai and Ruiz are both hoping an MSW will position them well. King sees that he may need to go beyond a bachelor’s degree and seek a graduate degree in public health. And Castro is thinking of going back to training for a firefighting career. Future generations of alumni hires might benefit from a more defined sequence or pathway to careers in social service agencies or organizations like the ones employing them now.

The Professionalization Dilemma

A key and longstanding issue the field will need to resolve in developing pathways that offer training and certifications for youth development and young adult talent development work is how to properly recognize the value and professional nature of this work and compensate it fairly, while avoiding setting up new barriers that could come with such professionalization.

Before developing and offering a pathway into youth and workforce development careers, the field would need to determine how such a pathway could meet the criteria it uses for other pathways, in sectors like health careers and IT. Does the pathway lead a young person through a progression of guided work and learning and apprenticeship experiences that build a foundation of skills and knowledge akin to the growing field of pre-apprenticeship to Registered Apprenticeships? Are there recognized, portable credentials that will help participants secure jobs in the field? Ultimately, will the pathway lead to high-quality jobs with family-sustaining wages?

In describing her dream of a pathway for youth workers, Terrell offers this caveat: “They should be well trained, supported, supervised, and well paid. Often, most of these aren’t true. I really would love to professionalize youth work, but I’m scared of unintentional gatekeeping and ruling out people with lived experiences...I want to train and support frontline staff to create an apprenticeship pathway, but I don’t know if we would lose more than gain by doing that...I don’t know how to make a youth apprenticeship pathway without getting in our own way.”

The Road Ahead

The organizations and young people in this report are teaching us in real time what is involved in helping more young people pay it forward. They have helped clarify some of the critical questions and dilemmas the field will need to tackle. They have also demonstrated how providing well-structured experiences while young people are still participating in the program can serve as an on-ramp to a longer-term pathway into this type of work.

As more organizations in the youth and workforce development fields hire alumni of their own or other similar organizations to fill vital roles, it will be important to continue to capture what they are learning and begin to establish a set of best practices to guide further development. This will help in further unpacking and addressing head on the pathway development and professionalization issues cited by organizational leaders.

Appendix A: [LEAP Initiative Fact Sheet](#)



Building a Future
That Works
For Everyone