Last spring, when the pandemic hit and the subsequent shutdowns started, everyone felt the effects of the uncertainty, including Philadelphia’s young people. But in a time when so many doors were quite literally closing, the Philadelphia Youth Network (PYN) and WorkReady partners throughout the city stepped up for our city’s youth, reimagining summer programming so that more than 6,000 could participate in paid work and work-related experiences. This report summarizes that process, reports on outcomes, highlights innovations, and shares lessons learned that will guide WorkReady summer offerings in 2021 and beyond.

**PLANS MEET REALITY**

Prior to the pandemic, WorkReady was well positioned for another successful summer. Millions of dollars had been raised from government, employers, and foundations to support paid experiences for young Philadelphians. A record number of 80 community-based provider organizations were set to manage summer activities, an all-time high, including 35 that were participating for the first-time (43% of the total). Most importantly, thousands of young people were eager to work, earn, and learn.

Nevertheless, as the realities of the pandemic became clearer, PYN and WorkReady partners wondered if it would be possible to provide safe and effective options. And if this were feasible, then what could acceptable approaches possibly look like? These were the questions that dominated conversations and deliberations at PYN in March and April.
THE URGENT NEED TO MOVE FORWARD

In the wake of the pandemic, the nation’s youth unemployment rate surged from 7.7% in February to 27.4% in April (Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2020). Further, youth living in low-income urban communities are only about half as likely to find jobs as their suburban peers. Given these factors, there was a clear sense of urgency about saving the 2020 program.

But in order to do that, it would be necessary to do in weeks what PYN and its partners would normally do in months or even years. In response, in late March and April, PYN redeployed staff, completely retooled youth experiences, and reengineered the system that would be required for implementation. One of the most important steps was consulting extensively with all WorkReady partners, including youth-serving provider organizations, investors, employers, city agencies, and young people.

After four weeks of intensive analysis, planning, and discussions, PYN leaders emerged with what they believed was a viable approach. City officials reviewed these recommendations, and on May 5, Mayor Kenney announced the launch of the redesigned 2020 WorkReady summer program.

**Why Youth Employment Matters**

Research shows that working during the high school years can have many benefits, including:

- Boosting academic performance
- Increasing long-term wages and employment
- Augmenting family income
- Promoting safer communities

**REIMAGINING WORKREADY SUMMER 2020**
IMPLEMENTATION OPTIONS

The 2020 summer redesign gave funded provider organizations several options for offering work-related, income-generating experiences for youth:

DIGITAL EXPERIENCES

made available to providers by PYN in which students worked independently and at a self-directed pace to earn incentive payments up to $595 by completing online tasks in three modules: financial literacy, career exposure, and digital literacy.

VIRTUAL EXPERIENCES

which featured real-time, online interactions between students and adult supervisors, including internships, service learning, and college and career exploration. Participants could earn either incentives or wages ($8.75-$11/hour), depending on program structure and types of experiences.

BLENDED APPROACHES

including a mix of digital tasks complemented by virtual interactions led and supervised by adults, for which participants could earn either incentives or wages.

SAFE IN-PERSON EMPLOYMENT

mostly wage-bearing positions to staff and support the Department of Parks and Recreation’s summer camps and daycare centers.

Provider Highlights

The Office of Community Empowerment and Opportunity offered digital programming for students in two age-ranges, augmented with virtual programming on Fridays which focused on connecting students, building relationships, and offering a variety of engaging, real-world activities like cooking, baking, and gardening.

VietLead developed wage-based virtual internships with partner organizations combining 17 hours of online work and 3 hours of professional and personal development to check-in with participants and trouble-shoot any on-the-job issues or concerns.

West Philadelphia Financial Services Institute conducted their program via Zoom with interns grouped in “mini-departments” – finance, marketing and communications, operations, and research and development – overseen by college coordinators focused on the interns personal and professional development.

Mural Arts transformed its summer service learning program from producing large-scale public art to interactive sessions between students and professional artists to help youth develop their artistic practice and voice.

The Urban Affairs Coalition managed 120 worksites for more than 1,000 young people, including approximately 80 who worked onsite in
INNOVATIONS

Provider Innovations

WorkReady partners produced a number of innovations borne of necessity in the pandemic, many stemming from creative uses of technology.

Administration and Management. Provider organizations reported that virtual recruiting was often more efficient and effective than on-site presentations. Program managers also indicated that, once they mastered the technology, they were able to use new techniques to organize working groups, monitor multiple student activities, and maintain regular one-on-one contact.

Program Content. Providers were able to engage professionals from many backgrounds, including many guest speakers—e.g., a CNN White House correspondent and state-level elected officials—who would have been much harder to schedule for in-person presentations. Further, programs were able to connect students to employers without regard to geographic barriers, and to organize virtual field trips to locations that would otherwise have been logistically impossible. Providers also found creative ways to engage students in hands-on learning like gardening, cooking, and art-making by delivering needed supplies and tools and providing online instruction. Some even instituted socially-distanced culminating celebrations, including drive-through opportunities for students and their parents to receive certificates of completion, T-shirts and mugs, and box lunches.

Systems Innovations

The Philly Summer Jobs Fund. Despite the challenges of 2020, PYN was able to introduce a new approach to fundraising for summer programming by launching the Philly Summer Jobs Fund. With support and guidance from the Summer Youth Employment Cabinet, a coalition of leaders representing government, foundations, employers, educators, and youth-focused nonprofit organizations, the fund is designed to expand youth employment opportunities for as many young Philadelphians as possible. Remarkably, in its inaugural year the fund raised almost $2 million in new dollars for WorkReady.

Incentives-Based Payments. Because PYN’s programs are centered on learning, an incentive-based payment was already in use for appropriate models in addition to hourly wages. With incentives tied to project-based benchmarks, this compensation structure was a good fit for the digital experiences launched in summer 2020. Having the infrastructure in place already for this payment method allowed PYN to offer compensation at scale quickly after the pivot. Digital and virtual incentive-based approaches have the potential for expanded use by increasing the numbers of youth who can participate in WorkReady programming and also by providing important learning opportunities that complement and supplement both in-person and remote experiences.

“We quickly realized that online recruiting was more efficient and more targeted than traveling around the city visiting classrooms and lunchrooms. We were doing weekly online recruiting sessions with students from all over, who were truly interested.”
- Samantha Lyons, West Philadelphia Financial Services Institute

“We were intent on engaging students in physical activities in their own homes that could impart real life lessons. That was a challenge for us and required lots of deliveries, but it was worth the effort.”
- Bethany Housman, Office of Community Empowerment and Opportunity

“Our team came up with some really great ideas for students, e.g., working with professional graphics designers to develop materials on Black Lives Matter and COVID safety protocols, as well as producing and administering surveys to gather data to promote voter registration.”
- Charmayne Thompson, Urban Affairs Coalition
Despite the unprecedented challenges, more than 6,000 young people enrolled and participated in 140 WorkReady 2020 summer programs offered by 80 provider partners and supported by $14.5 million in investments from government, employers, foundations, and individuals. WorkReady participants earned more than $4.2 million in wages and incentives. Importantly, these activities constituted the first paid work experiences for more than 20% of participating young people.

Approximately 85% of these experiences were online (digital, virtual, or blended), and the remaining 15% was-person programming. Virtual programming also enabled young people to share the experiences of many professionals during the pandemic, and to learn how to navigate these new workplace norms.

Most participants were pleased with their experiences and found their programs to be beneficial. For example, according to follow-up surveys, more than 90% of 2020 WorkReady summer participants:
- Expressed satisfaction with the overall program
- Developed clearer ideas about careers and a sense of the future
- Built connections to caring adults

In addition, more than 80% stated that they became more aware of their strengths and interests, had opportunities to practice and hone leadership skills, and expanded their financial literacy, including financial products and policies that affect their communities.

“We support summer experiences because we know the positive impacts they provide our future adult citizens. The opportunity for young adults in our community to get exposure to career choices and area businesses is vital for regional growth and health.”
- Hayward West, Deloitte Consulting LLP
WorkReady Employer Partner

“I had never done a Zoom meeting, or worked with friends online, or thought I could talk to adults, until I did.”
- 2020 WorkReady Summer Participant

“I’m excited about getting that workplace experience. I know it’s a little different because it’s all online, but I still feel like it will help me get a new perspective on things.”
- 2020 WorkReady Summer Participant
LESSONS LEARNED: STRENGTHENING WORKREADY FOR SUMMER 2021 AND BEYOND

While innovative thinking and dedication by WorkReady partner organizations produced a remarkably successful 2020 program, looking ahead it is clear that improvements are needed in several important areas:

**STREAMLINING ENROLLMENT**
Probably no other area was as frustrating for WorkReady partners than the youth enrollment process. Although the initial application process was relatively easy, the multi-step procedures needed to meet state and federal employment requirements proved to be too challenging for many would-be participants, and also caused headaches for provider organizations supporting young peoples’ enrollment efforts. Given these factors, this year’s process will be more streamlined and better coordinated to ease the burden on both participants and providers.

**STRENGTHENING ACCESS AND CONNECTIVITY**
Most providers reported that at least some of their young people had technology-related problems, i.e., lack of computers and printers, unreliable or unstable internet access, or inadequate knowledge about how to complete required procedures online. While many of these issues are beyond the capacity of WorkReady to address—e.g., the lack of broadband coverage in several areas of the city—PYN will train young people on how to complete needed forms, including enlisting them to help add clarity. Further, PYN will work with WorkReady partners to the extent possible to address systemic barriers young people face, particularly with regard to access and connectivity, digital literacy, and access to vital documents.

**IMPROVING RESPONSIVENESS AND CUSTOMER SERVICE**
Understandably, provider organizations’ and would-be youth participants’ needs for guidance, clarifications, and answers to questions were substantial in preparing for the 2020 program, and often overwhelmed PYN staff capacity to respond. PYN, will adopt practices that result in fewer questions, shorter wait-times and easier access by providers and participants to needed information.

**SUPPORTING EMPLOYERS IN DEVELOPING AND OFFERING VIRTUAL INTERNSHIPS**
In 2020, employers continued to step up by making significant financial contributions, but many could not manage the adjustments needed to offer virtual internships as they focused on the reality that they needed to adapt their business operations in response to the pandemic. To promote greater participation in 2021, PYN will work with private sector partners to develop an employer toolkit featuring a variety of resources designed to expand internships and workplace experiences.

**KEEPING RELATIONSHIPS AT THE CENTER**
Safety concerns meant that only about 15% of WorkReady 2020 summer experiences were in-person, with the balance being virtual and/or digital. This imbalance presented challenges to relationship-building between youth and adults, since even the best remote programming can rarely match positive, in-person interactions. Safety remains paramount as we plan for the 2021 summer, when we aim to significantly increase the number of appropriately structured, in-person experiences. But regardless of the program format, we will ground the experiences of WorkReady participants in high-quality interactions with caring adults trained in youth development principles who can serve as mentors, advisors, and career guides.

**INCORPORATING AND BUILDING ON THE CREATIVITY OF WORKREADY PROVIDERS**
As noted earlier, many WorkReady provider partners were remarkably creative and innovative in developing their own virtual approaches. These techniques—both administrative and programmatic—will be documented and shared broadly not only with youth-serving organizations in the City but around the country as well.
The economic devastation caused by the pandemic makes it more important than ever to create opportunities for young people to safely work, earn, and learn. The Great Recession of 2009 demonstrated conclusively that the most significant burdens of economic downturns fall on younger workers, particularly young adults of color, and that the scarring effects of those hard times can last for years if not decades. Therefore, young people who are now preparing for and/or entering the workforce are likely to experience equivalent or even greater hardships as the nation faces months if not years of limited growth associated with the pandemic.

Philadelphia’s history of creating high-quality opportunities for our young people — including the agility, creativity, and innovation demonstrated by so many WorkReady partners during the 2020 summer — offer hope that we are up to this challenge. Let’s continue to pull together, investing in our young people and creating as many high-quality opportunities as we possibly can—for their sakes, and for our own.
GET INVOLVED

- DONATE to support the Philly Summer Jobs Fund
- HIRE or support young people
- VOLUNTEER to serve on a Career Panel

Learn more at WorkReady.org or contact PYN:
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