NAVIGATING SUMMER YOUTH EMPLOYMENT

PREPARED BY: PHILADELPHIA YOUTH NETWORK
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It has been over a year since the start of the pandemic, and times are still uncertain. Despite this reality, young people demonstrated resilience, responsibility, and the true power of recovery by participating in summer work experiences. Young people gained valuable experiences and benefited greatly from the WorkReady program this summer. Young people impacted their local communities, networked with peers, learned new skills, and so much more.

"One of the skills that WorkReady has taught me this summer is communication skills. I have always been shy and usually never volunteered to speak in a public setting. However, the supportive instructors and the comfortable environment allowed me to practice speaking about my work to my peers and finding the most effective way to communicate. I have always struggled with public speaking and although I do not excel in it even now, gaining experience and practicing speaking through WorkReady will allow me to continue to improve in the future."

~Anjali-Kana B., WorkReady Participant

"WorkReady gave me confidence. It helped me become more vocal and feel comfortable in front of a crowd. I was able to learn how to be organized, work with Microsoft, and Excel."

~Yamilet H., WorkReady Participant

"Working at the Queen Memorial Library has really been a pleasure. I’ve always enjoyed coming here as a patron so simply to be in the book-filled setting was great, but to actually be able to help out with its maintenance was an amazing and gratifying experience. I genuinely enjoyed the work, particularly labeling and reshelving books, and based on my experience here I think I’d really enjoy more librarian work in the future."

~Zuza, Free Library of Philadelphia WorkReady Participant

"WorkReady has taught me to manage my time more wisely, in terms of working on projects, as well as personal goals in my own life. At the time, my goal was to make an animated short in a short period of time. By knowing what I had to work with, my knowledge of the program of choice, and breaking down the tasks at hand, I was able to accomplish it."

~Jonah R., WorkReady Participant

"PYN and the Summer WorkReady program help programs like ours be able to facilitate high-quality programming that allows Philadelphia youth the opportunities to expand their workforce development skills which provides a pathway to students’ success after graduation."

~Public Housing Management Corporation, WorkReady Summer 2021 Provider
Summer jobs are critically important for young people, their families, local communities, local businesses, and the economy in a variety of ways.

- Summer jobs play a pivotal role in providing early employment experiences, job-readiness skills, and long-term financial stability through opportunities to receive much-needed income. These experiences and opportunities position young people for life-long success.
- Research shows that working during the high-school years sets young people up for increased long-term wages and employment, and that involvement in summer youth employment programs has large-scale benefits for youth who are the most vulnerable. For young people in Philadelphia, having access to opportunities like summer jobs ensures that they are on the right path towards a fulfilling future, and that they can break the cycle of poverty.
- For many families, summer jobs offer an opportunity for young people to contribute to household earnings by augmenting family income. This was especially important during the pandemic, when many families were out of work and in need of additional supports.
- Summer jobs also help uplift local communities. Summer jobs promote safe communities and can help combat violence. As Philadelphia works to address violence in the city, focusing on improving local communities and providing young people with safe options to work and learn will become even more important.
- Summer jobs contribute to the local talent pipeline and provide employers an opportunity to give back to their communities. They also allow employers to foster diversity and inclusion and invest in the future. As the world comes to terms with issues around diversity, equity, and inclusion, businesses are a great place to start modeling hiring practices that will be beneficial now and in the future.

**SUMMER OUTCOMES**

Despite the challenges we continue to face, we were able to raise more than $16 million to implement and improve summer work experiences. Additionally, more than 6,600 young people enrolled and participated in WorkReady Summer programs. This exceeds the number of youth served during Summer 2020 programming.
Preparing young people for the expectations of work is our top priority. Many have questioned the process, but we know it is important to teach young people the needs of the workplace, which includes how to prepare for a job, getting working papers, completing an application, following instructions, and responding to prompts. Every job seeker must master these skills and summer work experiences give all young people a safe way to practice with the help of caring adults like teachers, program staff, parents, and mentors.

This year was no different, but even more challenging because the traditional ways that young people are supported were in transition as vaccine protocols were rolled out and youth remained in remote school options. We saw some key themes which presented challenges, but PYN and our partners developed solutions to overcome barriers and improve our processes for the future.

LESSONS LEARNED

Recruiting young people for summer programming typically has resulted in twice as many applicants relative to opportunities available. However, this summer has presented new challenges to youth engagement, and PYN and partners experienced decreased youth participation. This summer, we only received 13,000 online applications for WorkReady programming. This trend was likely driven by multiple factors.

According to the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, in April of 2020, teen unemployment spiked, with rates increasing from 14.1% in March 2020 to 32.1%. However, many states began their “re-opening” with the start of summer, causing teen unemployment numbers to rebound. This has the teen unemployment rate at 6.9% -- its lowest since 1953. For comparison, the adult unemployment rate has decreased but still remains higher than before the pandemic.

These economic conditions have had dramatic effects on the youth labor force. In order to recruit and enroll young Philadelphians, PYN increased outreach and promotion to connect with as many young people as possible. Despite the increased efforts to engage with youth, the number of applications still fell short of historic expectations.

To help decrease barriers to enrollment and ensure that young people had a fair and equitable chance of being placed into programs that interested them, PYN developed the Program Locator Tool to help young people to find and connect directly to programs with available experience. This resulted in over 85% of applicants having a referral code to an available program, which helps increase connection rates. This was a tremendous increase from less than 40% of applications having referral codes during the previous summer.

OPPORTUNITIES IN THE YOUTH LABOR FORCE DON’T ALWAYS EQUATE TO ENROLLMENT NUMBERS
To better understand what lead to decreased youth participation, PYN is collecting survey data directly from young people who opted out of programming to gain further insights. PYN also conducted qualitative interviews to collect anecdotal data from providers. We were also interested in hearing a program perspective.

The response to this outreach, as well as national employment trends, shows that young people had greater access to the labor market and opportunities with higher wages. Many young people and caretakers have reported being hesitant to return to youth opportunities due to the health and safety risks of COVID-19 and gun violence in communities. Responses also point to young people having increased responsibilities at home that limited or deterred their availability for summer program opportunities.

Many factors impacted participation in the first summer following the global pandemic.

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<thead>
<tr>
<th>Percentage</th>
<th>Description</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>87.5%</td>
<td>87.5% of providers interviewed cited youth difficulties completing the online application.</td>
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<tr>
<td>62.5%</td>
<td>62.5% of providers cited an increase in competition with higher wage opportunities for youth workers.</td>
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<tr>
<td>62.5%</td>
<td>62.5% of providers mentioned hesitance to enroll in summer programming due to COVID concerns.</td>
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For many young people, access to information, engagement, and ads is now much greater than it ever was before. Having access to the internet, social media, and personal devices means that there are often alternate mediums taking up the attention of users.

The pandemic has also limited in-person engagement opportunities (such as in-school announcements or outdoor advertising) that would normally increase awareness and connection to summer programming from personal interactions.

To better connect with young people – and ensure that they were not only receiving our message, but acting on it – we had to update our communications strategies.

This year, PYN and our partners prioritized communicating via mediums that young people use most frequently.

- PYN shifted our communications strategies in 2021 to send more frequent email blasts, making it easy for young people to have information right in their inbox.
- Since many young people have their own cell phones, we sent text messages to participants.
  - 82% of enrollees this summer received communications via text message.
- Because many young people prefer to access information at any time, we also created video playlists with helpful “how-to” videos.

**Lesson 2**

**As the workforce shifts, so do the mediums used to communicate**
Early in the pandemic, many offices were forced to close in response to health and safety concerns, many are still practicing visitor restrictions, and others continue to operate in virtual or hybrid environments. These adjustments have made it difficult to develop and manage workplace experiences for young people.

Many partners have been forced to limit or restrict outside visitors, including youth participating in programs such as WorkReady. In addition to workplace restrictions, many employers nationally are experiencing labor shortages, further straining their ability to support youth experiences.

Our non-profit partners, just like many businesses, were not fully returned to in-person services and were extremely cautious when bringing people together. Identifying young people who could benefit from this program was more challenging in a world struggling to define how we were going to resume safe interactions.

PYN developed the Virtual Internship Toolkit in the spring to assist employers with resources and guidance for hosting virtual interns. Employers provided us with positive feedback and indicated the toolkit was a valuable resource. In a survey of worksites, conducted at the end of the summer, 95% of respondents found the virtual internship toolkit somewhat helpful to very helpful.

Using technology to facilitate work is here to stay as we embrace new concepts about the value of the workplace, remote-work, and hybrid approaches. We know this adjustment will mean additional consideration for young people -- and that translates to additional support.

To adapt to the realities of the pandemic, many processes were moved online. In nearly every sector, workers have been required to increase their flexibility to continue being successful. While many employers use electronic applications as the start of the job-seeking process, many young people might not have experience with these digital applications. In response to this, PYN shifted WorkReady processes to be digital, therefore providing early exposure to the digital application process and helping young Philadelphians build the skills necessary to compete for jobs in the future.

- Now the WorkReady application, documentation upload, review, and background check submissions have all been moved online.
- Barriers associated with digital literacy have led to many participants and caregivers needing additional supports to navigate the changes to the application process.
- To assist young people with questions and with completing their applications, PYN launched the Customer Service Center in March of 2021.
  - The Center received more than 7,800 incoming calls for assistance, and more than 2,000 outgoing calls were made to proactively follow up and offer support.
- These efforts supported more than 8,000 young people completing required paperwork, submitting all documents, and being eligible to work.
CONCLUSION

PYN and partners continue to adapt to the needs of young people to provide and meet their programming needs. Despite the unique challenges we have faced over the last few years we are still striving to meet the needs of our constituents. We are proud of our success, innovations, and impact, despite the lessons that we have learned this summer.

We are grateful to our providers for working with PYN to serve our young people. We look forward to growing and improving the services we provide young people. We are thankful to public, private, philanthropic and individual donors who provided much-needed funding that allowed PYN and our partners to pivot with speed and precision this summer. It is our priority to improve overall processes.

We are working with provider partners to understand and adapt their experience recruiting and enrolling young people. We are re-thinking how we engage and utilize employer partners to provide experiences. We are also re-visiting how we can use our workforce partnerships to develop and influence policy recommendations that ultimately benefit young people. Lastly, we are improving the efficiency of how we ensure that workplaces are safe, and young people can connect directly with caring adults or programs that best fit their needs.

As we look towards the future, we will reflect on our lessons learned. We are actively implementing our learnings into all of our programming to ensure that we are impacting as many young people as possible.
GET INVOLVED

**DONATE** to our work

**HIRE** young people

**CONTACT** us to discuss alternate ways to get involved

Contact PYN to learn more.