LEAP Partnerships: Advancing Educational and Economic Opportunity for Systems-Involved Youth

December 2024

EQUAL MEASURE

FINDING PROMISE
FUELING CHANGE

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

In 2016, the Annie E. Casey Foundation launched Learn and Earn to Achieve Potential ("LEAP"). This national initiative helped youth and young adults ages 14-25 who have been involved in the foster care or justice systems or who have experienced homelessness succeed in school and work by building and expanding education and employment pathways. The focus on systems-involved young people was intentional. Young people involved with these systems, exiting these systems, or who experience homelessness, have unique challenges as they transition to adulthood. Challenges stemming from their systems involvement may include disrupted schooling, housing instability, limited family support, and trauma.[1] In addition, the systems are not adequately designed to support young people when they transition out of them. LEAP was designed to build and strengthen pathways for these populations and improve their educational and employment outcomes and long-term wellbeing.

LEAP Scaling and Systems Organizations (LEAP Partnership Leads)
Coalition for Responsible Community Development, Los Angeles, CA
Covenant House Alaska, Anchorage, AK
The Door, New York, NY
Nebraska Children and Families Foundation, Lincoln, NE
Project for Pride in Living, Minneapolis, MN
SBCS, San Diego, CA

In the first three years of LEAP, 10 partnerships across the country adapted and implemented two evidence-based models – JAG (Jobs for America's Graduates) and Jobs for the Future's Back on Track – to improve connections to education and career opportunities for systems-involved young adults in their communities. In 2019, six of the LEAP organizations received additional funding to strengthen efforts to expand pathways for young people. Through partnerships with public agencies, postsecondary education, housing, service providers, and more, LEAP partners were working toward a **long-term goal of improving policies and practices to place more systems-involved young people on positive economic trajectories.**

Equal Measure served as the evaluation and learning partner to better understand how LEAP partnerships were tackling the root causes of disconnection from education and careers experienced by systems-involved youth in their communities. This report shares findings from the evaluation, reflecting on the four learning questions:

1. **How did the six LEAP partnerships define and implement systems change? What processes did partnerships take to scale systems change across their communities?**

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[1] Treskon, Louisa, Wasserman, Kyla, and Vicky Ho. September 2019. Connecting to Opportunity: Lessons on Adapting Interventions for Young People Experiencing Homelessness or Systems Involvement. MDRC.

The overall strategy taken by all six LEAP partnerships was adopting a **holistic approach** to their work with young people. The approach is highly aligned with systems thinking. While education and success in careers might be the end goal, LEAP partnerships focused on the whole person and all the systems they may interact with. They recognized the need to address young people's basic needs and provide stability to enable success on an education or career pathway.

Under the overarching holistic approach, LEAP partnerships implemented strategies in two main areas: **partnerships** and **advocacy and policy change.** Partnerships both within organizations and across the ecosystem aimed to meet the complex needs of young people and build pathways to education and careers. The partnerships identified advocacy and policy change as critical ways to make systems work better for young people. All the LEAP partnerships participated in this work, and relationships with other organizations, as well as youth engagement, were often essential to identifying and pursuing changes to a wide range of policies and practices within organizations, institutions, and systems. Much of the advocacy and policy change efforts focused on removing barriers within and across systems and increasing access to resources, services, and pathways.

2. **What were the critical factors that hindered or accelerated their ability to implement these strategies?**

LEAP partnerships described a variety of barriers and accelerants in their work to improve systems and scale education and career pathways. Common barriers to doing broader community and cross-sector work included staff transitions, the time and resources needed to build and maintain partnerships, and community distrust. Some partnerships named the high turnover rate among staff in higher education specifically as a challenge to maintaining those partnerships.

LEAP partnerships also named several accelerants or promising practices that helped advance their systems change and scaling work – the five "Cs" that contributed to greater change:

- **Co-location** of services
- **Coaching** or supportive one-on-one relationships
- **Cultural competence** or understanding the context
- **Champions** at partnering organizations and institutions
- **Credibility** as trusted community organizations

3. **What were the signs of success or progress toward making systems changes that benefit systems-involved or homeless young people? To what extent are systems changing and how?**

The LEAP partnerships have demonstrated progress in scaling pathways for young people and in helping to change policies that affect young people, both of which represent changing systems and expanding opportunities. The five types of **scaling** or expansion were:

- Geographic expansion
- More youth reached
- Dissemination of promising practices
- Expansion of programmatic options and pathways
- Expansion of partnerships

In addition to scaling, the LEAP partnerships contributed to **policy and practice changes** resulting in tangible benefits for young people. Policy changes removed barriers to access, which resulted in more young people getting the services they needed and accessing them more quickly.

Changing systems is ultimately about making **positive change in young people's lives**. Progress can be measured in the success stories of those who participated in LEAP. Young people spoke of the confidence they gained, how they felt supported by LEAP staff, and the skills, credentials, and jobs that are helping them move along their pathways.

4. **How were LEAP participants/youth leaders engaged in and informing LEAP systems change work? How, if at all, did youth leadership and engagement influence the success of systems change work? How might youth leadership have meaningful impact in future systems change work?**

Part of changing systems is engaging those most impacted by how those systems operate, including young people. Young people who interact with various systems including education, workforce, foster care, juvenile justice, and others have direct experience in navigating those systems and have ideas about how to make them better. LEAP partnerships approached youth engagement and the development of youth leadership in several ways.

- The Casey Foundation led a **national fellowship program** for LEAP participants to bring youth leaders from across the initiative together.
- The LEAP partnerships aimed to ensure young people built **leadership skills** by embedding skill-building into all programming and services.
- After preparing young people for **advocacy and policy opportunities**, young people participated in advocacy and legislative days, spoke on panels, and attended regional and national conferences.
- Some LEAP partnerships have developed ways to **scaffold opportunities** and create career pathways within their own organizations for young people as they transition from a participant to a young adult leader.
- LEAP partnerships **valued and incorporated youth voice and youth perspectives**, especially those with lived experience of interacting with systems, in their operations and programming.

Engaging youth in authentic ways is not without its challenges. Young people, especially those who are involved in the foster care or justice systems, or who are experiencing homelessness, have many competing demands. While these types of youth leadership experiences may be important to them, it may not be their main priority. LEAP partnerships strongly valued and desired youth involvement and leadership in their programs and organizations; they worked hard to try new approaches and be flexible, adaptable, and understanding of young people.

Conclusion

As the LEAP initiative concludes in 2024, the lessons learned offer a roadmap for future efforts to transform systems and expand opportunities for youth. LEAP has been unique among education and employment pathway efforts in its approach to focus on young people in foster care or involved with the justice system, or experiencing homelessness. LEAP has been intentional in its attention to both programmatic adaptations <u>and</u> changing systems and scaling pathways to education and employment. Many partners noted LEAP gave them the resources and "explicit permission" to think bigger and focus

on partnerships, root causes, policies, and practices. For many involved, LEAP became a mindset and way of working that prioritized partnering.

Based on the learnings from LEAP, we offer the following **recommendations** for those seeking to change complex systems and improve education and career pathways for young people:

> ➢ Create an intentional programmatic and systems change agenda.
> ➢ Help meet young people's basic needs; otherwise, success on pathways will be limited.
> ➢ Work with cross-sector partners; find champions within organizations and institutions.
> ➢ Build supportive one-on-one relationships with young people to understand their needs and dreams.
> ➢ Work on small and large policy and practices changes; even small changes can make a big difference for young people who are impacted by systems.
> ➢ Engage young people in programmatic and systems change work; they have important insights into how systems can better serve young people.

 The LEAP partnerships aim to continue their work of helping all young people in their communities achieve economic success through programs and changing policies and practices to ease navigation, access, and persistence, and by using targeted strategies for young people in different contexts and situations.

Acknowledgements

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INTRODUCTION

In 2016, the Annie E. Casey Foundation launched Learn and Earn to Achieve Potential ("LEAP"). This national initiative helped youth and young adults ages 14-25 who have been involved in the foster care or justice systems or who have experienced homelessness succeed in school and work, by building and expanding education and employment pathways. The focus on systems-involved young people was intentional. Young people involved with these systems, exiting these systems, or who experience homelessness, have unique challenges as they transition to adulthood. Boosting economic mobility and well-being for all young people includes developing targeted strategies for those facing the most challenges.[2]

In the first three years of LEAP, with partial funding from the Social Innovation Fund, 10 partnerships across the country adapted and implemented two evidence-based models – JAG (Jobs for America's Graduates) and Jobs for the Future's Back on Track – to improve connections to education and career opportunities for systems-involved young adults in their communities (Figure 1).[3]

In 2019, six of the LEAP grantee organizations received additional funding to strengthen efforts to expand pathways for young people (Figure 2). Through partnerships with public agencies (such as child welfare and juvenile justice), postsecondary education, housing, service providers, and more, LEAP partners were working toward a **long-term goal of improving**

LEAP Scaling and Systems Organizations (Partnership Leads)

Coalition for Responsible Community Development (CRCD) (Los Angeles, CA) is a place-based community development corporation in South Los Angeles providing services such as youth and workforce development programming and housing and supportive services to young people ages 14-26.

Covenant House Alaska (CHA) (Anchorage, AK) is the largest provider of services to homeless and runaway youth in the state of Alaska with a goal of moving youth from homelessness to stability.

The Door (New York, NY) is a large youth-serving organization that empowers young people to meet their potential by providing comprehensive youth development services in a diverse and caring environment.

Nebraska Children and Families Foundation (NCFF) (Lincoln, NE) is a statewide foundation providing funding and resources to communities to support family wellbeing, children's educational success, and disconnected young people's transition to adulthood.

Project for Pride in Living (PPL) (Minneapolis, MN) is a nonprofit organization that builds the hopes, assets, and self-reliance of lower-income individuals and families by providing transformative affordable housing and career readiness services.

SBCS (San Diego, CA) is a large multi-service organization that provides youth and workforce development services designed to give young people the skills they need to reach their full potential.

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[2] The LEAP initiative aligns with a targeted universalism approach. Targeted universalism means setting universal goals and developing targeted strategies to achieve those goals based on the specific needs of different populations. For more information see: https://belonging.berkeley.edu/targeted-universalism

[3] MDRC completed an evaluation in 2019 of the first phase of LEAP focused on participant-level outcomes on postsecondary and employment pathways. See MDRC evaluation reports: https://www.mdrc.org/work/projects/learn-and-earn-achieve-potential-leap

policies and practices to place more systems-involved young people on positive economic trajectories.[4]

FIGURE 1. LEAP TIMELINE

2016-2019

Phase 1: LEAP launches and is implemented across ten grantee partnerships.

2019-2024

Phase 2: Six of the original partnerships receive support to deepen scaling and systems change efforts to expand access to LEAP pathways.
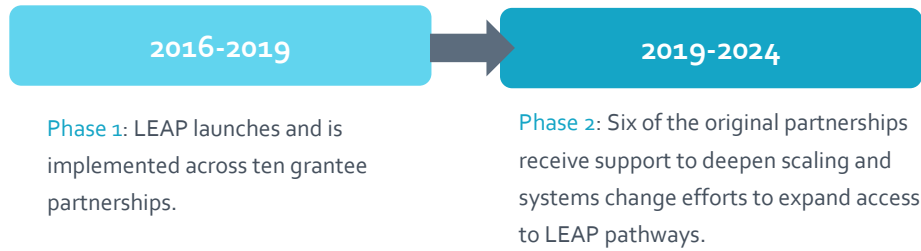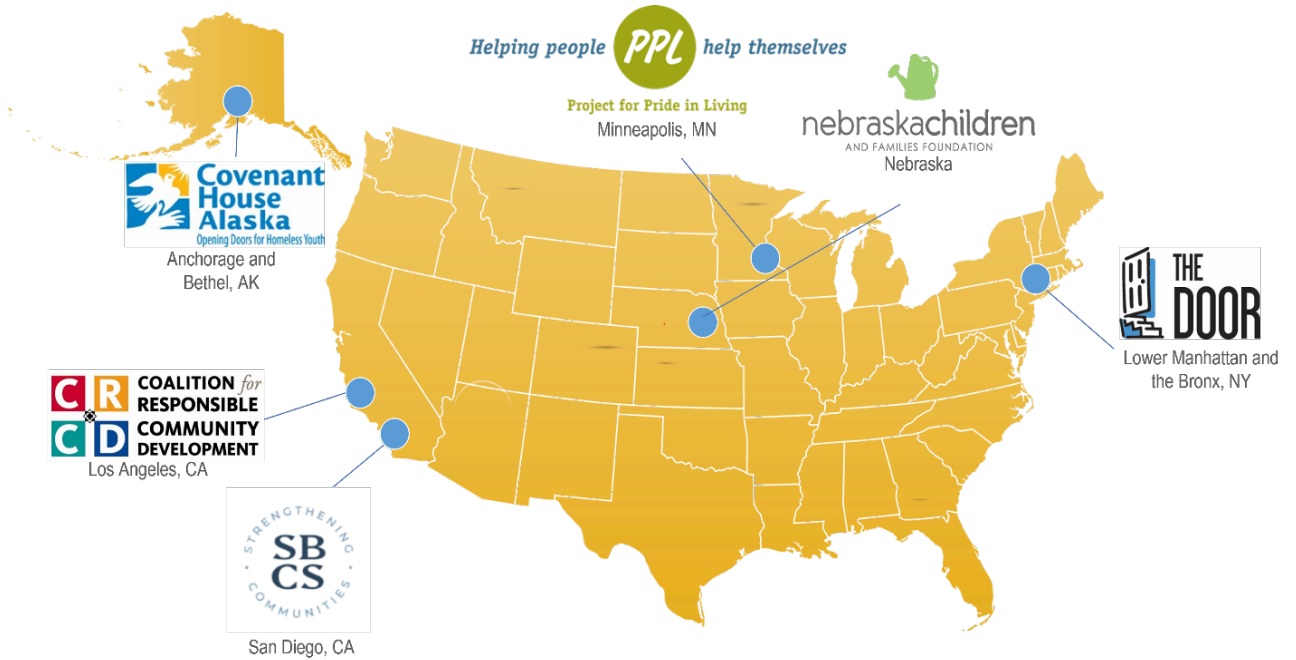
FIGURE 2. LEAP PARTNERSHIP LEADS, 2019-2024

Equal Measure served as the evaluation and learning partner to better understand how LEAP partnerships were tackling the root causes of disconnection from education and careers experienced by systems-involved youth in their communities. In 2023, we conducted a survey with LEAP leads at the six partnerships. We also interviewed LEAP national partners, a set of organizations working closely with the partnerships to provide technical assistance. In 2024, we conducted interviews with LEAP leads, staff, and their partners, as well as focus groups with LEAP participants in each of the six communities. This report shares findings from these data, reflecting on the four learning questions:

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[4] The Annie E. Casey Foundation, LEAP Fact Sheet, https://assets.aecf.org/m/blogdoc/aecf-LEAPfactsheet-2021.pdf

1. How did the six LEAP partnerships define and implement systems change? What processes did partnerships take to scale systems change across their communities?

2. What were the critical factors that hindered or accelerated their ability to implement these strategies?

3. What were the signs of success or progress toward making systems changes that benefit systems-involved or homeless young people? To what extent are systems changing and how?

4. How were LEAP participants/youth leaders engaged in and informing LEAP systems change work? How, if at all, did youth leadership and engagement influence the success of systems change work? How might youth leadership have meaningful impact in future systems change work?

Background

Many structural factors can influence whether a young person ends up in the foster care system, justice system, or homeless, including poverty and family instability.[5] Young people experiencing these systems, or exiting them, face challenges stemming from their systems involvement such as disrupted schooling, housing instability, limited family support, and trauma.[6] For example, involvement in the foster care or justice system is tied to homelessness; among the four million youth and young adults who experience homelessness each year, over half (57%) are estimated to have been in foster care, justice involved, or both.[7] Young people who have a history of involvement in the foster care or justice systems, or who are experiencing homelessness, are also disproportionately represented among "opportunity youth" or young people who are not in school and not working.[8] Youth of color are overrepresented in child welfare[9] and justice systems [10] and thus are more likely to experience the negative consequences of systems involvement such as homelessness, and poor education and economic prospects. The systems are

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JAG Core Components
- Curriculum on career and personal development, basic skills, and job skills
- Simultaneous enrollment in high schools or high school equivalency programs
- Personalized goal setting and support from a JAG specialist
- Connections to employers and job placements
- Student-led career association
- 12 months of follow-up support services

JFF's Back on Track Core Components
- Bridging curriculum and experiences to build college and career success skills
- Academic skills development to prepare for postsecondary study
- Personalized guidance and exploration of college and career training programs
- Help navigating enrollment and financial aid
- Connection to postsecondary resources, student organizations, and activities
- Continued support during the first year of college

Source: MDRC, Lessons from the Implementation of Learn and Earn to Achieve Potential, https://www.mdrc.org/sites/default/files/LEAP%20Issue%20Focus%20Final_0.pdf

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[5] See https://www.chapinhall.org/ for extensive research on youth homelessness and child welfare involvement.

[6] Treskon, Louisa, Wasserman, Kyla, and Vicky Ho. September 2019. Connecting to Opportunity: Lessons on Adapting Interventions for Young People Experiencing Homelessness or Systems Involvement. MDRC.

[7] Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention, March 2023, Youth Homelessness and Juvenile Justice System Involvement, https://ojjdp.ojp.gov/library/publications/youth-homelessness-and-juvenile-justice-system-involvement#:~:text=It%20notes%20that%204.2%20million,juvenile%20justice%20involvement%2C%20or%20both.

[8] Measure of America, Youth Disconnection in America, https://www.measureofamerica.org/DYinteractive/

[9] The Annie E. Casey Foundation, May 2023, Foster Care Race Statistics, https://www.aecf.org/blog/us-foster-care-population-by-race-and-ethnicity

[10] Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention, Racial and Ethnic Disparity in Juvenile Justice Processing, https://ojjdp.ojp.gov/model-programs-guide/literature-reviews/racial-and-ethnic-disparity

not adequately designed to support young people when they transition out of them, and they often cannot rely on family to provide a positive pathway to education and work.

LEAP was designed to build and strengthen pathways for these underserved populations and improve their educational and employment outcomes and long-term wellbeing. In the first phase of LEAP (2016-2019), 10 partnerships adapted two established national programs: Jobs for America's Graduates (JAG), which serves young people who have not yet completed high school, and JFF's Back on Track, which serves young people making the transition to college or postsecondary training. Adaptations to these programs to meet the needs of systems-involved young people focused on the elements in the theory of change (Figure 3) such as flexibility, youth engagement, and meeting basic needs.[11] As LEAP transitioned to scaling and systems change in phase two, collaborative systems and partnerships became a priority.

FIGURE 3. LEAP THEORY OF CHANGE
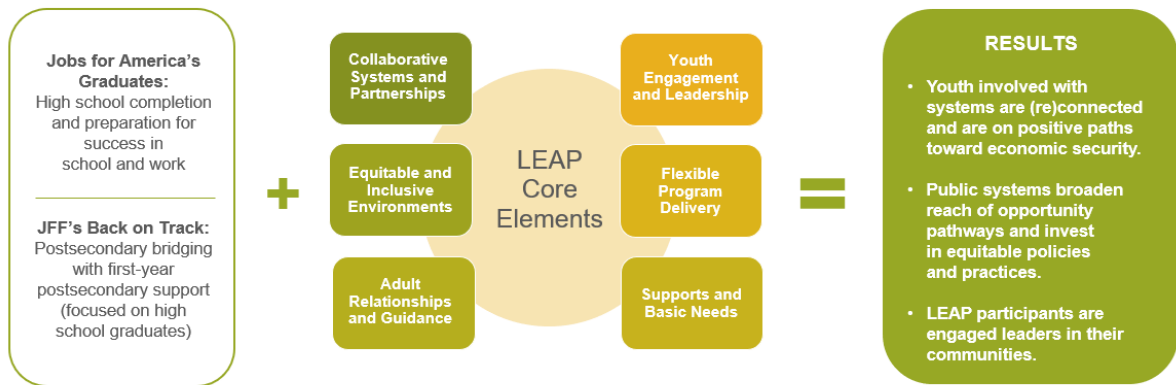
FINDINGS: LEAP SCALING AND SYSTEMS CHANGE

Learning Question #1. How did the six LEAP partnerships define and implement system change? What processes did partnerships take to scale systems change across their communities?

Systems change in the context of the LEAP initiative sought to make the multiple disconnected systems young people interact with – education, workforce, human services, justice – work better for systems-involved young people and young people experiencing homelessness. Improving systems often meant removing barriers and easing navigation through complex bureaucracies to increase access to resources and services. Relatedly, LEAP partnerships sought to change systems by scaling pathways – by expanding opportunities for young people to get education, training, and high-quality jobs to put them on the path to economic success and wellbeing. LEAP scaling and systems partnerships continued to focus on young people with current or previous involvement in systems such as justice or foster care, or who experienced homelessness, whose access and persistence in pathways was especially tenuous.

Strategies

The overall strategy taken by all six LEAP partnerships was adopting a **holistic approach** to their work with young people. The approach is highly aligned with systems thinking. While education and success in careers might be the end goal, LEAP partnerships focused on the whole person and all the systems they may interact with. They recognized the need to address young people's basic needs (e.g., housing, food, mental health, transportation) and provide stability to enable success on an education or career pathway.

LEAP partnerships examined the barriers and root causes of disconnection from education and career pathways, often by listening to youth and other partners working on the ground. The focus on barriers and root causes resulted in a shift in partners' mindsets from what the *young people* could be doing differently to what the *systems* could be doing better.

"…they [LEAP staff] understand that in order for education to be reached, your basic needs must be met first because otherwise you're not going to be able to focus on work, on school, on family. Your basic needs is essential. So, they help you get your basic needs [met] in order to be able to focus on all the other areas of your life that you want to work on and grow in."

—LEAP participant, SBCS

Under the overarching holistic approach, **LEAP partnerships implemented strategies in two main areas: 1. partnerships** and **2. advocacy and policy change**. Youth engagement and leadership was also a critical component, described under learning question #4.

STRATEGY #1: PARTNERSHIPS

Partnering was not new to the LEAP partnerships. The LEAP grantees were large human service organizations, intermediaries, and a foundation that collaborated with other organizations in their ecosystem to reach young people and provide programming. In the early years of LEAP, there was greater intentionality around reaching young people in systems (justice, foster care) or experiencing homelessness, and in some cases new partnerships formed. The transition to the scaling and systems work in phase two of LEAP heightened the role of partnerships with a variety of adjacent partners in the local ecosystem.

Partnerships varied across the LEAP network. Large multi-service organizations such as SBCS, The Door, and CRCD, sought to improve relationships and coordination *within* their organizations. For example, SBCS sought to overcome siloes created by different contracts and budgets and improve internal partnerships and referrals within their organization. The strategy to overcome siloes was partly informed by the experience of a Youth Fellow who was co-enrolled in multiple SBCS programs; her experience illuminated the need for stronger collaboration to reduce barriers and maximize the opportunities for young people. By improving referral systems, SBCS was able to more efficiently connect youth with internal and external programs and resources. In addition, all the LEAP partnerships built relationships with *external* organizations and institutions. Recent data[12] indicate that the LEAP partnerships connected with over 400 partners from local systems including child welfare, justice, housing, education (PK-12 and postsecondary), workforce, employers, community-based organizations, and government, and the number of all types of partners has increased over time.

Establishing partnerships either internally or externally served a variety of purposes, all aligned with the goal of improving positive pathways for young people. Some partnerships helped meet young people's basic needs, again recognizing that without establishing stability in young people's lives, the odds of success in education and career pathways were slim. LEAP partnerships connected with a variety of community-based organizations and government agencies to meet basic needs such as housing, food, and health services. Housing was a key barrier to stability across many of the LEAP communities due to rising prices and limited supply in places like San Diego, L.A., and New York City. LEAP partnerships worked to address these needs. For example, SBCS connected with homeless agencies, transitional living programs, and rapid rehousing programs in San Diego to connect LEAP participants with housing resources, as well as to reach young people who might need SBCS' services.

Partnering with education and workforce systems was also a critical part of scaling pathways. LEAP partnerships formed relationships with traditional and alternative K-12 schools to reconnect young people to high school; with postsecondary schools and training opportunities to connect youth to higher education, training, and certificate programs; and with employers for internships, apprenticeships, and employment opportunities. For example, PPL partnered with alternative high schools to support young people in earning a secondary credential, CRCD partnered with YouthBuild to serve youth disconnected from the traditional high school setting, and CHA partnered with the Anchorage School District to expand JAG programming. The Door partnered with CUNY (The City University of New York) schools to provide occupational skills training. SBCS built partnerships with high-wage employers (e.g., at fiber optic, solar panel, and healthcare companies), integrating them into programming through paid internships and apprenticeships for young people which has resulted in new employment opportunities for them.

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[12] Source: Self-reported data from LEAP partnerships, June 2024.

Partnerships also varied in their formality and structure. Some were informal relationships, others were based on MOUs or other written agreements, and the most structured were coalitions or collective impact approaches.[13] For example, CRCD was a member of SLATE-Z (South Los Angeles Transit Empowerment Zone), a cross-sector collective impact effort whose mission is to revitalize South Los Angeles and increase economic mobility for residents. CRCD has been working with systems partners through SLATE-Z to reduce barriers for youth in foster care. The Nebraska Children and Families Foundation also participated in the collective impact approach through their Connected Youth Initiative, a statewide approach to provide coaching and educational and financial literacy support to opportunity youth. The collective impact model provided particularly strong opportunities for cross-sector learning and sharing.

STRATEGY #2: ADVOCACY AND POLICY CHANGE

Advocacy and policy change are critical ways to make systems work better for young people, especially those with complex needs. All the LEAP partnerships participated in this work,[14] and relationships with other organizations, as well as youth engagement, were essential to identifying and pursuing changes to a wide range of policies and practices within organizations, institutions, and systems. Efforts focused on removing barriers and increasing access to resources, services, and pathways. For example, PPL worked to expand access to unemployment insurance for young people during the COVID-19 pandemic, increasing access to needed benefits for youth workers. NCFF helped inform potential legislation for Nebraska's foster youth to fill postsecondary education financial gaps by covering living expenses for postsecondary students, with the goal of increasing the ability of young people to access and persist on postsecondary education pathways in the state. CRCD worked to improve access to tax refunds for youth in the foster care system, informing advocacy efforts around the Foster Youth Tax Credit and the creation of an IRS-certified income tax assistance site, increasing dollars available for young workers.

Intentionally or unintentionally, bureaucracies and the "red tape" of public systems often discourage or delay access to services and resources. For example, CRCD and the SLATE-Z collaborative identified compiling vital documents such as birth certificates, social security, and verification of foster care status as a barrier to young people's quick access to workforce development services. They worked to automate the sharing of vital documents and facilitated cross-partner communication by having the case worker send the documents directly to the workforce partners. The workforce agency then reached out to the young person to enroll them in services. The new process removed the burden from the young people and put the onus on the systems to coordinate and ease access for young people. CRCD also advocated for changes to eligibility requirements to increase access to needed services and improve pathway persistence, for example adjusting eligibility requirements for NEXT UP, a campus support program at community colleges in the region.

LEAP partnerships looked across systems to identify barriers large and small, and worked to make change. For example, PPL described their multi-pronged approach to policy change in the justice system as: *prevent* entry into the system (such as through diversion programs), *change the system* to be more caring and trauma-informed, and *change post-system policies* such as automatic expungement to

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[13] "Collective impact is a network of community members, organizations, and institutions who advance equity by learning together, aligning, and integrating their actions to achieve population and systems level change." Collective Impact Forum, https://collectiveimpactforum.org/what-is-collective-impact/

[14] Each of the six LEAP grantees had multiple funding streams supporting their LEAP implementation. Please note that grant funds from the Annie E. Casey Foundation are not used to support lobbying activities.

increase access to a wider range of employment opportunities for young people. PPL's approach exemplifies taking a holistic and systemic lens to a system that young people interact with and develop strategies to improve the experience (or avoid it) and strengthen long-term outcomes.

Learning Question #2. What were the critical factors that hindered or accelerated the LEAP partnerships' ability to implement these strategies?

LEAP partnerships described a variety of barriers and accelerants in their work to improve systems and scale education and career pathways.

Barriers

Common barriers to doing broader community and cross-sector work included staff transitions, the time and resources needed to build and maintain partnerships, and community distrust. Some partnerships named the high turnover rate among staff in higher education specifically as a challenge to maintaining those important partnerships. Relationships are often built between individuals over time, and there is a sense of having to "start over" when that person leaves or changes roles within the institution.

Partnership and advocacy work both require time and resources, and the partnerships appreciated that the LEAP funding allowed them to focus on these areas, as opposed to only providing programming dollars. Building trust with community organizations and community members also takes time, especially as many of the communities where LEAP partnerships are working have experienced disinvestment and years of initiatives that come and go with no real change. For example, as CHA expanded into Bethel, AK, they intentionally took time to build trust with local organizations and the local indigenous community which had experienced decades of colonization. CHA described the distrust of outside agencies as over the years providers and government agencies have tried, often unsuccessfully, to make lasting positive change. Building relationships is critical to the work and requires time and resources.

> **The COVID-19 Pandemic**
>
> The pandemic hit early in phase two of the LEAP initiative and had dramatic and long-lasting impact. Social distancing and shelter-in-place orders led to drops in engagement and participation in programming for young people, as well as reduced engagement across partners. The pandemic increased youth disconnection to education and work[1] and has exacerbated a mental health crisis among youth. LEAP partnerships are continuing to address ripple effects and adjust to new ways of engaging young people who are less tied to "brick and mortar spaces."
>
> The silver linings of the pandemic included new practices and structures such as the use of Google classroom across SBCS which has increased inter-organizational connections and collaboration; the creation of a trauma-informed committee at The Door; and mindset shifts at PPL that allow for more flexibility and "pauses" for young people on their pathway journeys when needed.

Accelerants

LEAP partnerships also named several accelerants or promising practices that helped advance their systems change and scaling work. These are the five "Cs" that contributed to greater change:

- **Co-location**: LEAP partnerships sought to ease navigation challenges for young people by locating services within institutions and systems, such as providing services and programs at K-12 or postsecondary schools, at justice facilities, or within a housing program. For example, SBCS placed staff at the MAAC Community Charter School high school campus, on the Southwestern College campus, and offered a bridge program at a local justice facility for young

people prior to release. Co-location greatly increases access to services by meeting young people where they are.

- **Coaching**: LEAP partnerships used supportive one-on-one relationships between adult staff (called coaches, case workers, navigators, specialists, and other similar titles) and young people. Personalized support was named as critical in helping young people navigate complex systems and get the support they needed. LEAP participants also named the one-on-one support from LEAP staff as helpful for overcoming roadblocks, connecting to resources, and providing personal guidance and mentorship.

> "...they give you a personalized navigator, a career navigator to guide you to any scholarships that you need to apply to. How to apply to it, how to do resumes, how to do cover letters. Anything to the smallest detail they go down in-depth with you so that you understand how it is out there, and they give you that guidance and they personalize whatever educational goals or career goals that you have. And then they provide you opportunities so that you're able to explore whatever areas you would like to explore."
>
> —LEAP participant, SBCS

- **Cultural competence**: LEAP partnerships described the need to understand the context in which they were working. For example, CHA noted when they expanded to working in Bethel, AK they proceeded with cultural humility as they worked with organizations serving indigenous youth in rural Alaska. SBCS was attentive to the needs of transborder young people, adapting classes at MAAC Community Charter School to meet bilingual needs and working with employers that were supportive of Spanish speakers. The Door has added new languages to their ESOL (English for Speakers of Other Languages) and legal services as more French-speaking young people of African descent are seeking out their services.

- **Champions**: LEAP partnerships noted the importance of finding "champions" at organizations or institutions that they hoped to partner with. Supportive partners can facilitate institutional support and successful partnerships. For example, NCFF has a strong reciprocal relationship with the executive director of Durango's Advancement and Support Hub (DASH) at the University of Nebraska, Omaha. DASH supports students with lived experience in the foster care system and the justice system, as well as pregnant and parenting students and students facing hardship. They provide scholarships, case management, referrals to community resources, peer mentors, and a safe space on campus. SBCS developed a strong partnership with the MAAC Community Charter School over the course of LEAP, characterized by open communication and integration between the two organizations.

- **Credibility**: The LEAP grantee organizations' existing status as trusted community organizations with established track records of serving young people facilitated generative partnerships and relationships throughout their ecosystems. The LEAP grantee organizations ranged from large multi-service nonprofits to national organizations, foundations, and intermediaries, located in geographically diverse areas and serving diverse populations. Yet they all brought experience and credibility in their communities which accelerated their ability to change systems and scale pathways through partnerships and advocacy.

Learning Question #3. What were the signs of success or progress toward making systems changes that benefit systems-involved or young people experiencing homelessness? To what extent are systems changing and how?

Progress in Scaling

The LEAP partnerships have demonstrated progress in scaling pathways for young people [15] and in helping to change policies that affect young people, both of which represent changing systems and expanding opportunities. Scaling greatly benefited from the partnership efforts in the local ecosystems and occurred across the LEAP partnerships in five ways. The five types of scaling or expansion were:

- **Geographic expansion**: Some LEAP partnerships moved into new geographic areas to bring their work and model to more and sometimes new and underserved populations of young people. CHA and PPL are two examples of geographic expansion. CHA, based in Anchorage, expanded their services into Bethel, an isolated area in Alaska, and worked in partnership with the local high school to bring JAG to the school, a community foundation, and two shelters (see case study on page 18). CHA also expanded in Anchorage through their partnership with the city school district. Minneapolis-based PPL expanded from collaborating with school systems in Hennepin County into neighboring Ramsey County, which is using the JAG curriculum in collaboration with local nonprofits. PPL helps the new sites get started and then they adapt to their local context.

- **More youth reached**: There is evidence that the LEAP partnerships are reaching more young people (Figure 4) through reducing barriers to access – particularly through driving policy and practice changes. LEAP partnerships expanded to more youth populations; for example, NCFF described aiming to reach all youth in Nebraska including justice-involved, pregnant/parenting, youth in foster care, youth experiencing homelessness, and youth experiencing trafficking. LEAP partnerships provided more options and opportunities that resulted in serving more young people with different needs and interests. For example, CHA increased the housing options it offers (shelter beds, transitional living beds, micro unit housing, etc.) and The Door provided more diverse workforce opportunities based on youth interest including pathways for EMTs, IT jobs, and certified medical assistants.

FIGURE 4. CUMULATIVE LEAP PROGRAM ENROLLMENT AND COMPLETION
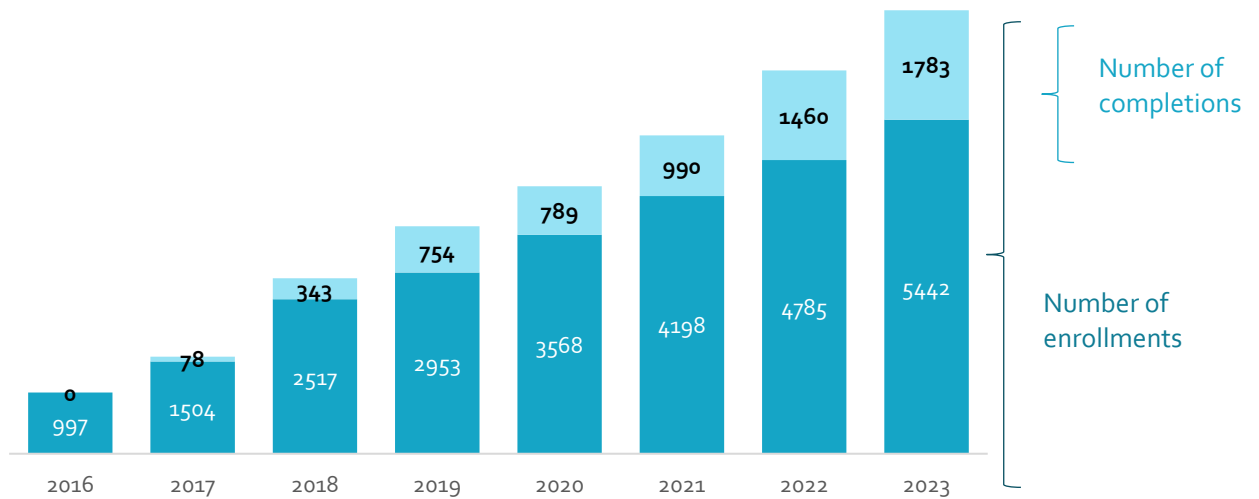
Source: Self-reported data from LEAP partnerships, June 2024.

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[15] See more in: "*Tipping the Scale: Opening Opportunities for Systems-Involved Youth*" https://www.aecf.org/resources/tipping-the-scale

- **Dissemination of promising practices**: As LEAP transitioned from adapting JAG and Back on Track to leveraging the programs for systems change and scaling, sharing lessons learned from the first phase of LEAP was an important element of the work. The LEAP partnerships scaled promising practices internally and externally. For example, SBCS spread the Back on Track model across their organization as part of internal integration efforts. SBCS also shared the model and its practices with external partners such as Southwestern College through capacity building, facilitation of classes, building partnerships with community colleges and training programs, and sharing retention strategies. NCFF also described scaling best practices in addition to expanding a program. Their partner, Central Plains Center for Services, trained all coaches across the state on the Back on Track approach including the three stages of building adult/youth relationships — building trust, identifying strengths, and tying those strengths to individual goals. Coaches then applied the model as appropriate, recognizing the need for flexibility in a wide variety of contexts.

- **Expansion of programmatic options and pathways**: LEAP partnerships sought to be expansive in their pathway offerings to reach a variety of youth needs and interests. Several partnerships noted they had broadened their postsecondary pathways to include apprenticeships, certificates, and the trades, with the goal of long-term sustainable wages. Other partnerships looked to creative career opportunities in fields such as the arts and media, green jobs, entrepreneurship, as well as more traditional fields like healthcare, construction, and IT. For example, PPL partnered with employers to provide apprenticeships in solar energy and glassblowing. CRCD provided training in lead abatement that included paid hands-on training in the field. These changes were in response to what they heard from youth about building long-term careers with living wages and job satisfaction.

- **Expansion of partnerships**: Both an outcome and a critical element of the other four types of scaling, LEAP partnerships expanded their network of partners and connections during LEAP. When LEAP partnerships offered new programs or pathways, or expanded geographically, or shared promising practices from their model, they worked with new partners such as employers, training providers, and postsecondary institutions. For example, NCFF worked with postsecondary partners across the state of Nebraska, and CRCD expanded Back on Track to additional community and technical colleges in Los Angeles. Partnership data shared with the Casey Foundation shows increases in the number of all types of partners (systems, employers, community-based organizations, etc.) from 2020 to 2024 (Figure 5). Partnerships are how the LEAP partnerships shifted systems to be more supportive of young people, and the number and depth of the connections built are both a sign of progress, and a means of facilitating many kinds of scaling.

Expansion into Bethel: A Case Study of Culturally Responsive Scaling

Covenant House: Alaska (CHA), located in Anchorage, helps unhoused young people meet their basic needs and connects them to educational and career opportunities. As part of their strategic vision for preventing youth homelessness, CHA looked to Bethel, AK, a remote town of about 6,000 residents in western Alaska only accessible by plane. Many of the youth CHA serves in Anchorage have relocated from western Alaska. As CHA considered upstream prevention efforts, it made sense to focus on that community.

The Bethel Community Foundation and a local mining employer initially reached out to CHA with an opportunity to serve local young people as part of Bethel's housing coalition work. After an initial trip, CHA staff spent significant time in the area – visiting for a week a month for six months – building relationships with community members and agencies such as housing, schools, and mental health providers. Bethel's residents are primarily of American Indian and Alaska Native heritage, a population subjected to years of colonization and its economic consequences. CHA was intentional about taking time to build trust and demonstrating cultural humility in learning about the area and its people.

"It was really clear to me, just in that initial trip, that there had been a lot of service providers and a lot of government agencies and other things who had come out to Bethel and tried to start things and failed. And there's empty facilities and there's just this distrust of outside agencies, in part because of the colonization piece." (CHA)

Through visits to Bethel, CHA and local organizations developed a community needs assessment and a plan for the LEAP work. CHA worked in partnerships with the housing coalition to bring JAG programming to the local high school, using federal dollars and hiring a local graduate of the school to run the program. CHA continued to provide support and capacity building to local organizations in Bethel, such helping to expand housing options and funding for anti-trafficking efforts, as part of its plans for a long-term partnership.
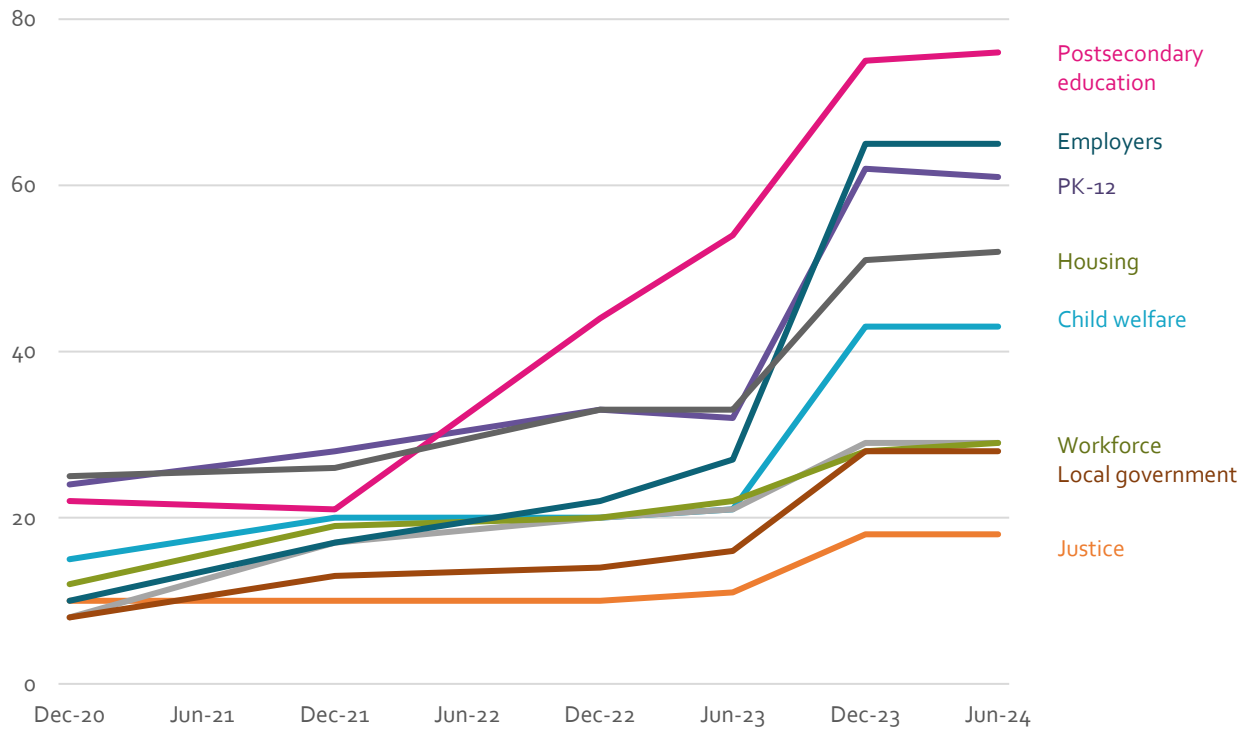
"It was important to me that we came with cultural humility and said, okay, we're coming from Anchorage. We know how to do this in Anchorage, but that doesn't mean we know how to do this here. And so we have some ideas about how to do this, but we really need to work with you and you need to tell us, what does this mean in Bethel, and what could this look like in Bethel?" (CHA)

Source: Self-reported data from LEAP partnerships, June 2024.

Progress in Policy Change

In addition to scaling, the LEAP partnerships contributed to policy and practice changes resulting in tangible benefits for young people. As described above, policy changes removed barriers to access, which resulted in more young people getting the services they needed and accessing them more quickly. Greater coordination and efficiency in sharing vital documents with America's Job Centers led to increased enrollment and faster connection to workforce development services for Los Angeles youth in foster care. According to a LEAP partner, tax assistance led to one million dollars in tax refunds for four hundred youth in Los Angeles. Changes to eligibility allowed more youth to access support in community colleges in California with the goal of increasing postsecondary persistence rates. Youth benefited from advocacy around unemployment insurance, tax credits for foster youth, automatic expungement, drivers' education, and ending solitary confinement. Policy is strongly tied to funding (see "Examples of System Wins" on page 20) and LEAP partnerships reported over $10 million in public and non-public co-investments.[16] Even small changes to policies and how systems operate can have an outsize impact on many young people who interact with those systems.

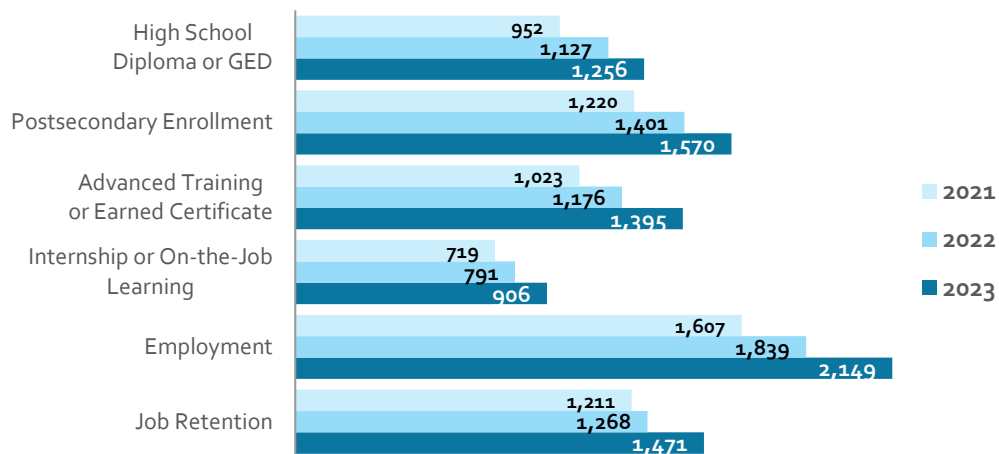[16] Source: LEAP 2.0 Data Snapshot, June 2024.

Progress in Young People

Changing systems is ultimately about making positive change in young people's lives. Progress can be measured in the success stories of those who participated in LEAP. Young people spoke of the confidence they gained, how they felt supported by LEAP staff, and the skills, credentials, and jobs that are helping them move along their pathways (Figure 6).

For example, a LEAP participant at The Door described how the program gave him a "blueprint" or pathway to a successful future. He said "*Now I actually know where I'm at, where I'm heading, what I need to do to get there, what I need to learn, how I need to learn it. It's given me that framework to now go with. So that was very, very helpful. I was someone who I used to just dip and dabble into every single thing, trying to just find something that would work. But The Door actually gave me a structure that's very reasonable and something that actually gave me hope.*"

A LEAP participant at PPL described how her life was impacted by LEAP: "*I'm biased, but I think LEAP Minnesota slays. I think all their opportunities, they really do a good job, because I think we all, at moments in our lives, thought we weren't going to graduate, thought we weren't going to get a permit, thought all these things. I think for me, my biggest thing was last Friday was my three-year sober anniversary … Three years go forward, I'm moving into my own apartment at 19. … Then being [in] an alternative school and having all these opportunities, like the college, the driver's ed, this specifically, like being advocates for our own schools, helped us out, I think all out, really tremendously.*"

FIGURE 6. CUMULATIVE EDUCATION AND EMPLOYMENT OUTCOMES FOR LEAP PARTICIPANTS

Outcome	2021	2022	2023
High School Diploma or GED	952	1,127	1,256
Postsecondary Enrollment	1,220	1,401	1,570
Advanced Training or Earned Certificate	1,023	1,176	1,395
Internship or On-the-Job Learning	719	791	906
Employment	1,607	1,839	2,149
Job Retention	1,211	1,268	1,471

Source: Self-reported data from LEAP partnerships, June 2024.

Question #4. How were LEAP participants/youth leaders engaged in and informing LEAP systems change work? How, if at all, did youth leadership and engagement influence the success of systems change work? How might youth leadership have meaningful impact in future systems change work?

Youth Engagement and Leadership

Part of changing systems is engaging those most impacted by how those systems operate, including young people. Young people who interact with various systems including education, workforce, foster care, juvenile justice, and others have direct experience in navigating those systems and have ideas about how to make them better. LEAP partnerships recognized "those closest to the problem are closest to the solution" and put it into action.

LEAP partnerships approached youth engagement and the development of youth leadership in several ways. The Casey Foundation led a **national fellowship program** for LEAP participants to bring youth leaders from across the initiative together. The year-long fellowship opportunity held over multiple years supported LEAP youth in strengthening their leadership and advocacy skills, shaping how LEAP was implemented in their local communities, and building personal and professional networks. Youth Fellows also had the opportunity to design and lead "passion projects"— projects that addressed issues in their communities the Fellows cared deeply about such as homelessness, addiction, and beautification.[17] The opportunity not only inspired growth in the individual fellows but supported the local LEAP partnerships. For example, SBCS staff noted that the Youth Fellows program provided them with invaluable insights and perspectives and the Youth Fellows helped to shape initiatives that are more relevant and effective for their peers, such as the yearly march to end homelessness, local beautification projects, and providing essential supplies to homeless youth.

The LEAP partnerships aimed to ensure that young people built **leadership skills** by embedding opportunities to practice leadership into all programming and services. Through this, LEAP was supporting the growth of new leaders who understand systems and have lived experience with them, and who can work to change those systems now and in the future. LEAP partnerships noted training was particularly important to prepare youth interested in engagement in policy advocacy efforts, which often requires communications training. For example, The Door will be offering two new youth leadership cohorts at the Bronx Youth Center in support of advocacy work and recruitment and outreach. Young people will receive work readiness and leadership development training and learn how to effectively communicate The Door's mission and values. Other examples include NCFF's partnership with the University of Nebraska: Omaha's student leadership internship program and CHA's hands-on training that prepares young people for the National Career Development Conference for JAG participants.

> *"For me, I think the thing that I'm most proud of is being a youth leader. I got a certificate of becoming a youth leader, showing that I have the confidence of becoming this leader, where other students might need help with."*
>
> *—LEAP participant, CRCD*

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17 For more information on passion projects, see: https://rise.articulate.com/share/XQT9q_Yc4L_2revI41CkrLe2q5nt8sbR#/

Once they were prepared for **advocacy and policy opportunities**, young people participated in advocacy and legislative days, spoke on panels, and attended regional and national conferences. Legislative Days provided opportunities to learn how advocacy and the legislative processes work as well as time with legislators. Young people from The Door participated in a panel as well as focus groups to share their experiences in the foster care system and help influence new policies for how the Administration for Children's Services (ACS) workers investigate and interact with families. LEAP partnerships noted youth voices can be very powerful in identifying priorities and influencing policy change. NCFF reported young leaders participated in an advocacy effort to encourage the state to opt into a federal summer electronic benefits program. According to young leaders, the state's governor noted the young people helped change his mind about the state's participation in the program. Young people have provided specific recommendations to government agencies on policies such as enhanced vetting, oversight of foster care placements, and expanded access to feedback and information for youth.

"Sometimes it's really difficult to find your footing, and what you want to do, where you belong, how you can be more involved in the community, and whatnot. So just being a part of this program, almost like what [peer] said, she just needed a car, but then also found her voice to advocate for issues on certain matters. I guess that aspect, which has really helped me, because now I didn't even realize how much our stories really meant to help others like us in our situation, but people are part of the board or senators, legislators who are making laws for juveniles, and for the system that that's actually something that is needed. I didn't realize that before, so being able to be involved in that has been really exciting."

— LEAP participant, NCFF

Some LEAP partnerships have developed ways to **scaffold opportunities** and create career pathways within their own organizations for young people as they transition from participant to a young adult leader. For example, several LEAP partnerships have hired young people as staff – SBCS hired a former LEAP participant as a youth advisor/mentor for a WIOA contract; a former LEAP participant serves on CHA's board and is contributing to curriculum development; and PPL hired youth from different sites to staff the LEAP Advancement Board to advise on LEAP activities. As youth leadership and the value of lived experience has become more central to their work, these partnerships described moving away from stipends and towards paid staff positions with greater access to professional development, leadership development, and experience on resumes for future job opportunities. [18] LEAP partnerships such as CRCD are also developing alumni engagement networks to continue to engage young people over the long term. These efforts are integrating young people with lived experience into the organizations that serve young adults like them, which may ultimately shape the organizations and the opportunities they offer.

"For me, I really liked the after-school classes where we come together and our specialists help us within our students' voice … We decide to learn what we want to learn. If we want to learn how to budget, our specialist hears us, and they give us information about it. Also, I really enjoyed that we get to learn what's really important for us, what we need to know."

— LEAP participant, CRCD

LEAP partnerships **valued and incorporated youth voice and youth perspectives**, especially those with lived

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[18] For more on how LEAP lead organizations are hiring and supporting young people as paid staff, and how these young people are impacting the organizations, see: Stenberg, Adria, May 2024, Paying It Forward, Jobs For the Future, https://www.jff.org/idea/paying-it-forward/

experience of interacting with systems, in their operations and programming. The partnerships regularly sought input and feedback on their programs and services, including through advisory groups, panels, and surveys. For example, CHA described placing JAG young people in leadership positions where they contributed to program improvements. CRCD's Youth Policy Council conducted interviews for candidates for the JAG specialist role as one way to involve youth more extensively in JAG programming and planning. Opportunities for input and feedback can shape program offerings and better meet youth needs and interests.

Challenges to Youth Engagement

Engaging youth in authentic ways is not without its challenges. Young people, especially those who are involved in the foster care or justice systems, or who are experiencing homelessness, have many competing demands. While these types of youth leadership experiences may be important to them, it may not be their main priority. They may be working in jobs and in school; they may be parents; they may have unmet basic needs. It can be quite challenging to consistently engage these young people in programming and leadership opportunities. Staff also want to ensure that young people who participate in systems advocacy have training and support to minimize any potential risk of re-traumatization. LEAP partnerships strongly valued and desired youth involvement and leadership in their programs and organizations; they worked hard to try new approaches, such as advisory boards, testimonials, and intentional feedback processes, and be flexible, adaptable, and understanding of young people.

CONCLUSION

As the LEAP initiative concludes in 2024, the lessons learned offer a roadmap for future efforts to transform systems and expand opportunities for youth. LEAP has been unique among education and employment pathway efforts in its approach to focusing on young people in foster care or involved with the justice system or experiencing homelessness. LEAP has been intentional in its attention to both programmatic adaptations and to changing systems and scaling pathways to education and employment. Many partners noted that LEAP gave them the resources and "explicit permission" to think bigger and focus on partnerships, root causes, policies, and practices. For many involved, LEAP became a mindset and way of working that prioritized partnering.

Based on the learnings from LEAP, we offer the following **recommendations** for those seeking to change complex systems and improve education and career pathways for young people:

- ➢ Create an intentional programmatic and systems change agenda.
- ➢ Help meet young people's basic needs; otherwise, success on pathways will be limited.
- ➢ Work with cross-sector partners; find champions within organizations and institutions.
- ➢ Build supportive one-on-one relationships with young people to understand their needs and dreams.
- ➢ Work on small and large policy and practices changes; even small changes can make a big difference for young people who are impacted by systems.
- ➢ Engage young people in programmatic and systems change work; they have important insights into how systems can better serve young people.

The LEAP partnerships will aim to continue their work of helping all young people in their communities achieve economic success through programs and changing policies and practices to ease navigation, access, and persistence, and by using targeted strategies for young people in different contexts and situations.

APPENDIX

From 2022-2024, Equal Measure served as the evaluation partner for the LEAP initiative. The evaluation was guided by four learning questions:

➢ How are the six LEAP partnerships defining and implementing systems change? What processes do partnerships take to scale systems change across their communities?
➢ What are the critical factors that hinder or accelerate their ability to implement these strategies?
➢ What are the signs of success or progress toward making systems changes that benefit systems- involved or homeless young people? To what extent are systems changing and how?
➢ How are LEAP participants/youth leaders engaged in and informing LEAP systems change work? How, if at all, does youth leadership and engagement influence the success of systems change work? How might youth leadership have meaningful impact in future systems change work?

There were three phases of data collection and analysis:

1. **Systems change survey**
   In 2022, through document review and a set of initial interviews with the LEAP leads (seven interviews with 11 key staff) and four systems partners (four interviews with five individuals), we developed a systems change framework that identified six systems change strategies the LEAP partnerships were implementing. In spring 2023, we administered a survey to the six LEAP leads and a sample of their systems partners (n=17) to further understand whether and to what extent these strategies were being employed across the LEAP cohort, and to understand their perceived impact.

2. **National partners' perspectives**
   In fall 2023, we conducted interviews with representatives from SMI, JAG, Jobs for the Future, Opportunity Youth United, and the Urban Institute (11 interviews with 14 individuals from five organizations) to capture the perspectives of those working directly with LEAP partnerships in a technical assistance role. See https://www.equalmeasure.org/casey-leap-brief/

3. **Virtual site visits**
   The final stage of data collection was qualitative interviews with multiple staff and partners at each of the LEAP partnerships, as well as virtual focus groups with young people at each partnership. In total, 19 interviews (one-on-one and small group) were conducted with 34 LEAP stakeholders and six focus groups with 28 young people during the spring of 2024. Interviews aimed to elicit concrete examples of systems change and scaling activities and strategies, as well as the factors that influenced those efforts. The focus groups covered topics including young people's experiences in LEAP, leadership opportunities, and involvement in systems change strategies such as policy and advocacy.