



Building Tomorrow's Workforce:

Equitable Education and Career Pathways for Opportunity Youth in Fairfield County

Presented by

Fairfield County's Business Collaborative for Education Equity (BCEE)

With analysis on job availability and remuneration provided by McKinsey & Company and qualitative interview analysis by Philliber Research & Evaluation

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To learn more about the BCEE, visit www.fccfoundation.org/BCEE

Glossary

ALICE: Acronym for *Asset Limited, Income Constrained, Employed*.

ALICE threshold: Represents the bare minimum cost of household necessities to live and work. These essential budget items include housing, childcare, food, transportation, health care, and technology, plus taxes and a contingency fund (miscellaneous) equal to 10% of the household budget.

Fairfield County (FC): A county in the southwestern corner of Connecticut.

Fairfield County's Business Collaborative for Education Equity (BCEE): A strategic partnership formed by local businesses and Fairfield County's Community Foundation in 2020 to promote education equity in Fairfield County.

Livable-Wage Attainment Pathway: A model that stresses building economic mobility for "origin" workers by enabling progression through "gateway" to "target" jobs:

- **Origin jobs:** Below-livable wage (<\$42,000 annual salary) jobs.
- **Gateway jobs:** Livable-wage (>\$42,000 annual salary) jobs with opportunity to build skills.
- **Target jobs:** Middle- to higher-wage (>\$42,000 annual salary) occupations that are resilient to automation and accessible based on job experience, not just credentials.

Livable-wage employment: Employment with salary above the ALICE threshold (~\$42,000 per year in Fairfield County.)

NPO: Nonprofit organization.

Opportunity Youth (OY): Young adults aged 14-24 without a high school or postsecondary degree; an estimated 40,000 OY live in Connecticut.¹

Opportunity Youth Journey: The moments along OY's career journey that most affect career progression. These moments may include:

- Facing decision about the future
- Deciding on next career/education step
- Applying for origin job (if decision was career path)
- Working at an origin job
- Succeeding at an origin job and advancing into a gateway/target job

Replacement Rate: estimated share of employment in an occupation that will be replaced within a given year.

¹ In Fairfield County, there are an estimated ≈9,600 Opportunity Youth (i.e., disconnected youth aged 16-24) according to Measure of America in 2021.

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I. Executive Summary

In August 2020, a group of Fairfield County businesses came together to form the **Fairfield County Business Collaborative for Education Equity (BCEE)** — a bold effort to create new opportunities for the county’s most vulnerable pre-K through 12+ students. The group formed at a time when the COVID-19 pandemic was causing significant disruptions for students — particularly students of color and students from families with low incomes. BCEE companies contribute financially, provide mentorship and internship opportunities to students, and encourage their employees to volunteer for the effort.

Founding members established the BCEE in partnership with Fairfield County’s Community Foundation (FCCF), with a correlating field of interest fund housed at FCCF to support the Collaborative’s work. FCCF provides the BCEE with both strategic and day-to-day project management support to advance educational equity in Greater Bridgeport, Danbury, Norwalk, and Stamford. While the partnership initially focused on addressing the urgent needs of students and their families during the pandemic, it quickly evolved into a longer-term, multi-year effort that supports students, their parents and guardians, teachers, and staff.

As part of the BCEE's last grant cycle, the Collaborative invited nonprofits to tell the funder group how it could support their work beyond grants. Several related themes rose to the top from Norwalk nonprofits, particularly those focused on the older age range of preK-12th students, looking to share their experiences serving Opportunity Youth (OY) — young adults aged 14-24 without a high school or postsecondary degree — and working together with cross-sector stakeholders to strengthen student career path opportunities. Acting on the feedback received, BCEE commissioned a study to understand how to create better conditions for students to pursue postsecondary education and/or employment. To dig deeper into the issue, the study included insights and data from Norwalk nonprofits with programs related to youth education and/or workforce development.

As a result of a combination of economic, health, housing, and educational inequities —many students in Fairfield County face barriers to preparing themselves for meaningful careers when they become adults, which has contributed to **a significant gap in livable-wage employment in Norwalk and Fairfield County generally**. Nearly half of Norwalk’s workforce — 48% — is employed in jobs earning below \$42,000 a year, the minimum livable salary for the area, according to the ALICE threshold². Opportunity Youth (OY) are disproportionately likely to fall into this category. (An estimated 40,000 OY live in Connecticut.) Black and Latino students — who are less likely to earn high school diplomas and attend college than their white counterparts — are also significantly more likely to fall below the ALICE threshold.

Many local organizations are actively working to tackle these challenges, but as our research highlights, truly moving the needle on building tomorrow’s local workforce — and generating a more prosperous local economy — is not the work of one sector or a few organizations working independently. And while robust resources and programs that align with many stages in OY’s career journeys already exist across Norwalk, Fairfield County, and Connecticut, **a more integrated and holistic approach, reinforced by stronger cross-sector partner relationships where stakeholder perspectives are equally valued, is needed to ensure that interventions are optimally coordinated and working toward a common goal.**

² At the same time as the publication of this paper, the new ALICE thresholds were being released. The updated report can be found here: <https://alice.ctunitedway.org/>

As many regional stakeholders know, the data crystallizes the need for an improved approach. Three in 10 Fairfield County employers report they are unable to fill entry-level job postings because of talent unavailability. Nearly three quarters of such companies — 74% — report that it takes them more than six months to fill open positions — if they can fill them at all. In 2023, an estimated 48,000 new entry-level roles have the potential to be filled by OY; of these 48,000 new roles, a projected 14,400 OY-appropriate jobs could go unfilled in 2023 without interventions to fill them.

While this paper focuses on Norwalk and surrounding Fairfield County areas, the issues it explores have resonance more broadly in communities that share Fairfield County’s high levels of income inequality and cost of living. Many communities across the United States are facing similar challenges.

This paper proposes ways to more efficiently address the specific and systemic barriers OY and the business community face in strengthening the workforce system. At the core, it calls for a more fully representative consortium of local nonprofits, employers, educational institutions, and government operating together with an integrated, collaborative strategy.

Successful implementation of this approach could move the needle on this issue and serve as a proof point at the state and national levels. Just within Fairfield County, this could mean lifting almost 9,600 OY out of poverty; saving up to almost \$3 billion in taxpayer dollars and almost \$9 billion in social costs over the course of OY’s lives; and boosting economic productivity by allowing employers to fill roles they were previously unable to fill.

If we can create the conditions for OY to obtain the education and training needed to succeed in these roles and progress into livable-wage careers in Fairfield County, we can tap into the economic potential to strengthen our region overall. Given the vast economic resources that exist in the region, Fairfield County is poised to take meaningful action to enable OY youth to thrive.

This paper outlines steps to achieve a series of positive outcomes for OY pursuing jobs in Fairfield County, including:

- placing OY job seekers into livable-wage career tracks;
- providing upward progression along chosen career paths; and
- enabling further training and industry credentialing.

The following approach is used to identify the optimal strategy to achieve these objectives:

1. Understand existing barriers for OY in Norwalk and Fairfield County.
2. Establish context to inform interventions.
3. Identify potential interventions for OY as they navigate their journey.
4. Identify potential interventions for employers.
5. Propose discussion points to support key stakeholders in creating actionable, collaborative strategies.

Researchers analyzed data and interviewed more than 40 key stakeholders in Fairfield County to identify potential interventions and best practices. This research produced four critical takeaways:

- **Interventions should focus on supporting OY across the Livable-Wage Attainment Pathway, which stresses building economic mobility for workers in origin jobs (below-livable wage,**

<\$42,000 per year) by enabling progression through gateway jobs (livable wage, around \$42,000 per year) to target jobs (middle- to higher-wage, >\$42,000 per year).

- **Getting an origin job is only the first step in the Livable-Wage Attainment Pathway.** The goal of progressing from origin to gateway to target jobs requires that OY are provided the support they need along the way.
- **Identifying the moments that matter most for Opportunity Youth is critical to providing targeted interventions accordingly.** Each intervention should target a specific step in the OY Journey, which consists of pivotal moments along a career pathway that most affect career progression, e.g., applying for an origin job. Interventions broadly involve (1) access to information, (2) job preparation, (3) upskilling and training, and (4) supportive wraparound services.
- **Nonprofit organizations, employers, educational institutions (e.g., high schools, community colleges), private funders, and local governments all have a role to play and expertise to offer in delivering the range of supports OY need** —and all these stakeholders stand to benefit from supporting this population. These intervention strategies must be specific to both the career paths OY choose and the specific industries OY target. By working together strategically, each of these stakeholders have an opportunity to change lives and strengthen Fairfield County’s economy for decades to come.

II. Background

In August 2020, a group of Fairfield County businesses came together to form the **Fairfield County Business Collaborative for Education Equity (BCEE)** — a bold effort to create opportunities for the county’s most vulnerable pre-K through 12+ students. The group formed at a time when the COVID-19 pandemic was causing significant disruptions for students — particularly students of color and students from families with low incomes. BCEE companies agreed to contribute financially, provide mentorship and internship opportunities to students, and encourage their employees to volunteer for the effort.

Founding members established the BCEE in partnership with Fairfield County’s Community Foundation (FCCF), which provides both strategic and day-to-day support managing the Collaborative’s work and houses its correlating field of interest fund. While the partnership initially focused on addressing the urgent needs of students and their families during the pandemic, it quickly evolved into a longer-term, multi-year effort that supports students, their parents and guardians, teachers, and staff to advance educational equity in Fairfield County.

The BCEE is also working to better understand the challenges facing Fairfield County’s students and find ways to empower them to earn diplomas and postsecondary degrees and prepare for sustainable and rewarding careers as adults. To help achieve this goal, BCEE used analysis on job availability and remuneration from McKinsey & Company and qualitative interview analysis from Philliber Research & Evaluation with input from Norwalk community organizations and educational institutions to study how to create better conditions for students to help them prepare for postsecondary education and/or employment.

This document outlines an approach and findings for increasing the proportion of Opportunity Youth — 14- to 24-year-olds without a high school or secondary degree — who are on track to obtain livable

wage jobs (>\$42,000 in wages annually³). While this paper centers on recommendations for Norwalk, it also contains lessons and recommendations that can be applied across Fairfield County and contributes to other existing and forthcoming research on systems that impact OY. These include an anticipated and recent reports: Dalio Education’s report on Connecticut’s at-risk and disconnected young people, authored by Boston Consulting Group (update due fall, 2023), **and the Campaign for Working Connecticut’s 2023 report, “Connecticut’s Pathways to the Future: Investing in Opportunity Youth to Invigorate Our Workforce.”ⁱ**

This paper draws on more than 40 interviews with key stakeholders from nonprofits (NPOs), employers, local government agencies, and educational institutions and its contents were supported with input from FCCF, Norwalk Acts and its members, The Carver, and other K12 and educational institutions.

III. Context

Norwalk’s workforce is experiencing a gap in livable-wage employment. Nearly half (~48%) of Norwalk’s 29,000-member workforce is employed in jobs that pay below a livable wage. This level of employment is much more likely to apply to Opportunity Youth (OY) — a group that comprises more women and Black workers than the overall US population. Black and Latino communities in Fairfield County face additional challenges, e.g., lower college enrollment and graduation rates, that make the path to livable-wage employment more difficult.⁴

Fairfield County stakeholders across all sectors must create an integrated plan to address inequities and provide end-to-end strategies and actions like the Livable-Wage Attainment Pathway outlined in this paper. The Livable-Wage Attainment Pathway addresses workforce development challenges and provides a framework for a gradual pathway toward livable-wage employment.⁵ This paper also identifies industries that will drive job openings and, in turn, create livable-wage jobs. It also specifies which jobs are more likely to result in a gateway or target job.⁶

NPOs, in partnership with key stakeholders, are uniquely positioned to bridge the gap between OY and employers. NPOs can help match young job seekers with employers — working in partnership with employers, local government, and the education sector. Some of this work is already happening, and the NPOs and partners that are working to address this issue deserve recognition. We now have an opportunity to deepen partnerships across these organizations to create an integrated, coordinated approach to address workforce development and ensure OY are on the path to pursue careers that provide livable wages. Until that happens, Fairfield County’s livable-wage employment gap will persist.

With that in mind, this paper outlines steps to achieve a series of positive outcomes for OY pursuing jobs in Fairfield County, including:

- placing OY job seekers into livable-wage career tracks;
- enabling pursuit of upward progression along chosen career paths; and

³ Annual livable income in Norwalk is \$40,269 according to the MIT Living Wage Calculator.

⁴ Refer to Exhibit 17 in Appendix.

⁵ For a detailed description of the Livable-Wage Attainment Pathway, see Exhibit 10.

⁶ Details available in Exhibits 6, 7, 12, 13, and 14.

- providing further training and industry credentialing.

Some suggested strategies to support these steps towards positive outcomes for OY in Norwalk and greater Fairfield County include:

1. **Provide context** for NPOs, employers, educational institutions, and local government in Fairfield County around career pathways in Norwalk and Fairfield County more broadly for OY and deliver some suggestions for collaboration between NPOs, employers, local government, and educational institutions in Fairfield County.
2. **Inform key stakeholders** of the unique barriers and challenges faced by Fairfield County’s Black and Latino communities — and provide those stakeholders with action plans that specifically advance racial equity in Fairfield County.
3. **Enable employers** to tap into a broader talent pool by shifting hiring practices to reward skills-based achievement rather than relying on degree certifications for job access.
4. **Empower employers** to retain employees at a higher rate and curate healthy workplace cultures by ensuring that workers have opportunities to accelerate their career trajectories.

IV. Understanding Challenges for Fairfield County Opportunity Youth

Our approach for understanding context-specific challenges and opportunity areas for OY advancement into livable-wage jobs seeks to find the answers to three questions:

- (1) What specific and systemic barriers need to be alleviated to make employment for OY more accessible?*
- (2) What hiring challenges do Fairfield County employers face?*
- (3) What programs/interventions are already in place in Fairfield County and how can opportunities for collaboration be supported?*

A. Opportunity Youth challenges:

Unemployment, underemployment, and racial inequity

Unemployment and underemployment pose significant challenges in Fairfield County, particularly among the OY population. The ALICE income threshold defines the minimum income required for a household to meet its basic needs in a specific region.⁷ Nearly half of Norwalk’s labor force is employed in jobs that provide an annual income below Fairfield County’s ALICE threshold of \$42,000.⁸ This data point underscores the need for significant, holistic interventions to secure and grow Norwalk’s local labor market.ⁱⁱ

Workers who lack a four-year college degree are even more likely to have incomes that fall below this threshold. After high school, ~33% of Norwalk graduates do not enroll in college (including community college), demonstrating the need to expand efforts to develop higher education and career pathways for

⁷ ALICE thresholds differ by state and county across the United States. As outlined in executive summary, the new ALICE report is just being released at time of this paper: <https://alice.ctunitedway.org/>

⁸ This level of income (\$42,000) requires an average hourly wage of \$20.20.

high school students.ⁱⁱⁱ Historically, individuals without higher education make 60% the salary of those with a four-year degree.^{9 iv}

Addressing unemployment and underemployment of OY is a critical objective for many organizations in the Fairfield County region. For example, the Campaign for Working CT is calling for a statewide, 10-year initiative that would provide comprehensive support for quality career pathways for OY. This initiative would ultimately have significant long-term social and economic benefits — both to OY and to taxpayers and employers. According to a 2012 study, the lifetime taxpayer cost of one 20-year-old OY who is disconnected from both education and employment is \$310,226, and the social cost (including lost earnings, health expenses, crime costs, and welfare and social services) amounts to \$929,306.^{10 v}

Unemployment and underemployment disproportionately impact Norwalk’s Black and Latino OY populations, perpetuating racial disparities in income and assets with just 20% of Latino adults and 25% of Black adults holding college degrees compared to 59% of white adults. Approximately 35% of Black and 38% of Latino students in Norwalk did not enroll in college during their first year after high school, compared with an average of 30% at the district level and 28.2% at the state level.^{vi} Black and Latino students also face lower graduation rates (87.4% and 86.1%, respectively) than the district average (90.4%) and the state average (88.5%) (Exhibit 1).

Exhibit 1 | Black and Hispanic or Latino populations have lower high school graduation, college entrance, and college persistence rates than the state and district average

Cohort graduation: 4-year¹

	2018-19	
	Cohort Count ²	Rate (%)
Black or African American	167	87.4
Hispanic or Latino of any race	397	86.1
English Learners	116	65.5
Eligible for Free or Reduced-Price Meals	535	86.4
Students with Disabilities	120	73.3
District	861	90.4
State		88.5

Cohort entrance and persistence

	Class of 2019 Entrance ³ Rate (%)	Class of 2018 Persistence ⁴ Rate (%)
Female	75.7	89.9
Male		83.0
Black or African American	65.1	83.5
Hispanic or Latino of any race	62.4	83.8
White	80.3	90.0
English Learners	18.6	71.4
Eligible for Free or Reduced- Price Meals	62.4	82.1
Students with Disabilities	37.9	79.1
District	70.0	86.9
State	71.8	87.6

¹ The four-year cohort graduation rate represents the percentage of first-time 9th graders who earn a standard high school diploma within four years.

² Cohort count includes all students in the cohort as of the end of the 2013-19 school year.

³ College entrance refers to the percentage of high school graduates from the year who enrolled in college any time during the first year after high school.

⁴ College persistence refers to the percentage of students who enrolled in college the first year after high school and returned for a second year (freshman to sophomore persistence).

Source: National Student Clearinghouse



To address Norwalk-wide employment challenges, it is important to recognize and understand the disproportionate impact of lower college entrance rates for these populations. Difficulties securing

⁹ The U.S. unemployment rate for those without college degrees is 4.5%; the unemployment rate for bachelor’s degree or higher is 2.2%, according to the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics.

¹⁰ Converted from 2012 U.S. dollars to 2022 USD using a multiplier of 1.32.

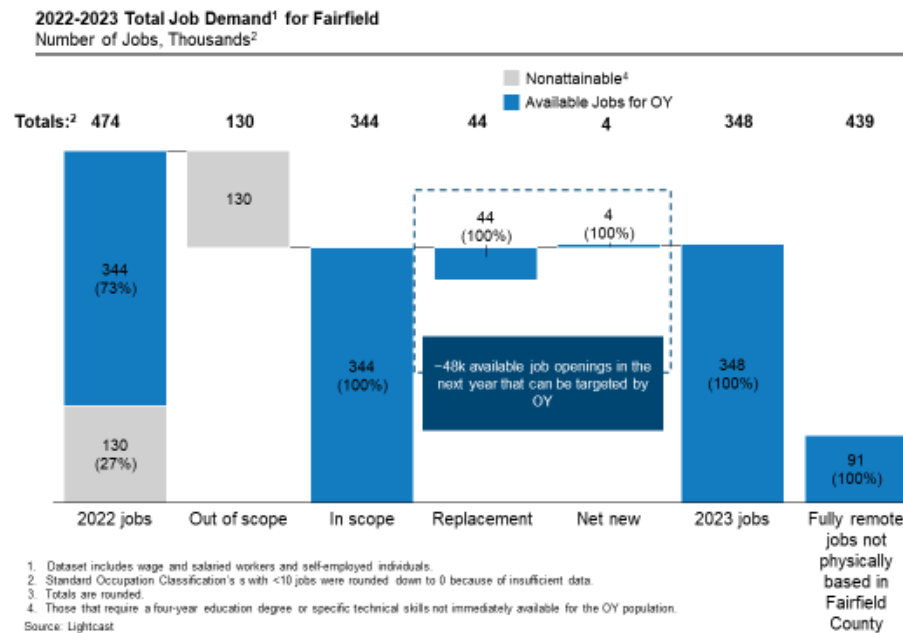
stable employment faced by individuals without higher education credentials¹¹ are exacerbated for Black and Hispanic or Latino OY. Therefore, it is imperative that workforce development programs do not have the unintended consequence of encouraging Black and Latino or Hispanic youth to be less academically aspirant in their life plans; all Fairfield County youth should be supported to make postgraduate plans that work for them, including potentially obtaining a four-year degree. And programs that aim to support those who choose to enter directly into the workforce need to account for diverse populations’ unique barriers, needs and systemic challenges.

B. Employer challenges:

Low supply of qualified candidates

Employers face many complex challenges regarding talent acquisition — challenges that are driven by a progressively aging workforce and increasing replacement rates for key roles. In 2023 alone, Fairfield County projects approximately 48,000 new job opportunities along the OY Career Journey — including both replacement and net-new jobs (Exhibit 2). Many of these jobs do not require a college degree, so they can be well suited for OY who have high school diplomas or GEDs.¹² vii These anticipated new jobs would be added to the existing ≈13,000 unfilled roles in Fairfield County.

Exhibit 2 | In 2023, Fairfield County will create ~48k jobs that can be targeted by OY



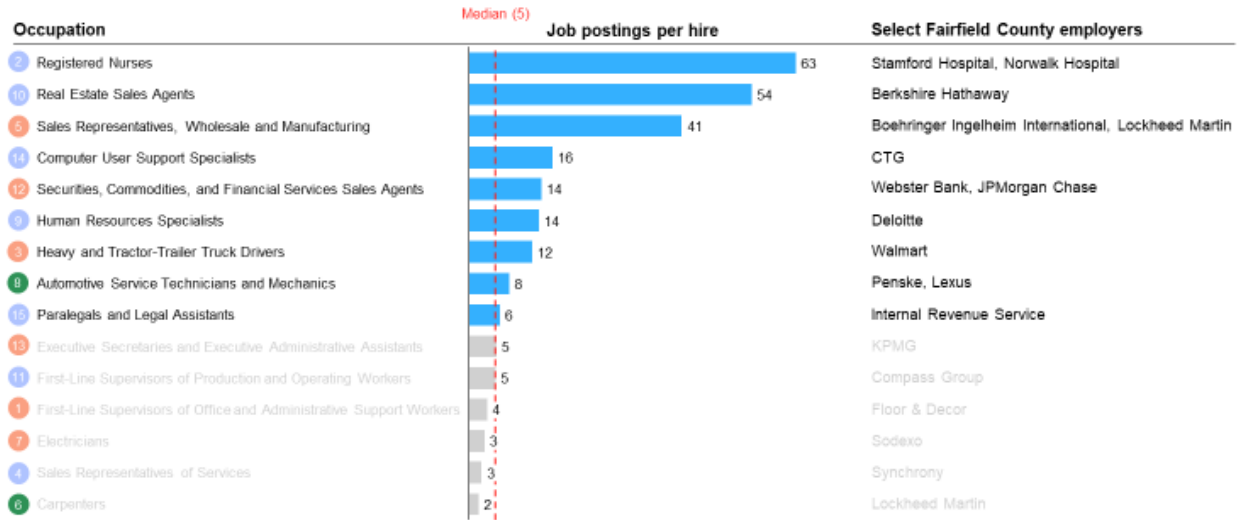
Many employers need help filling these positions, as is evidenced by the high number of job postings required to secure a single hire (Exhibit 3). For example, the ratio of job postings to sales representative

¹¹ Referring to any postsecondary degree.

¹² Refer to Exhibits 12-14 for origin-level job opportunities specific to Fairfield County.

hires is approximately 40 to 1, demonstrating that employers face challenges attracting qualified candidates and selecting the most suitable individuals for a role.

Exhibit 3 | High number of job postings per hire for select ‘good, viable’ jobs suggests employers may have trouble filling these roles



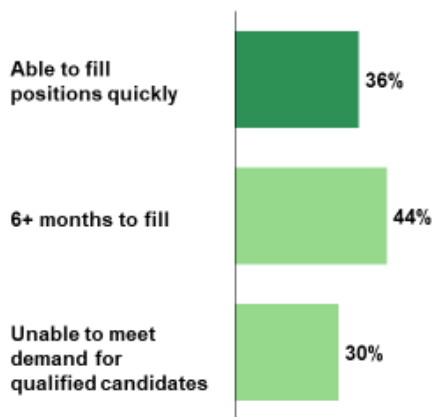
By considering a skills-based hiring approach over strict degree requirements, employers may be able to fill these roles more easily

1. Ratio of online job postings to census-reported hires per role.
 Source: Lightcast, BLS DES, BEA, Moody's, McKinsey analysis, in partnership with Oxford Economics



Exhibit 4 | Norwalk companies are struggling to fill entry-level positions because of the skills gap

Level of difficulty in filling entry-level positions,¹ % of respondents



1. March 2020; N=85 respondents; Question: How would you rate your difficulty in filling open entry-level positions?
 2. March 2020; N=80 respondents; Question: What barriers, if any, do you face in filling your open entry-level and midlevel positions?
 Source: FCCF Workforce Survey, March 2020



Many Norwalk companies find filling entry-level positions (i.e., origin jobs) challenging because there are not enough workers who have the skills needed for these positions (Exhibit 4). Specifically, three in 10

Fairfield County employers report they are unable to fill entry-level job postings because of talent unavailability. Nearly three quarters of such companies — 74% — report that it takes them more than six months to fill open positions — if they can fill them at all. As a result, nearly three-quarters (74%) of origin job positions take more than six months to fill or are ultimately left unfilled. This gap arises from explicit skill shortages ranging from soft to technical skills;^{viii} for example, a March 2020 Fairfield County workforce survey conducted by Fairfield County’s Community Foundation identified a lack of technical skills, communications skills, problem-solving skills, and available training programs as four of the top five barriers to filling job positions.

This research identified 15 key occupations that will drive ~50% of livable-wage job openings in Fairfield County in 2023 (Exhibit 5). The following factors were analyzed across livable-wage job openings to select these top 15 jobs: number of current and future job openings (accounting for replacement rates), percentage of existing employees without a four-year degree, and current job base.

Exhibit 5 | There are 15 key “good, viable” occupations in FC that will drive ~50% of ‘good, viable’ job openings (~4k jobs) in 2023

Top 15 Gateway, Historical Adjacent, and Lower-Middle-Wage Origin Occupations¹

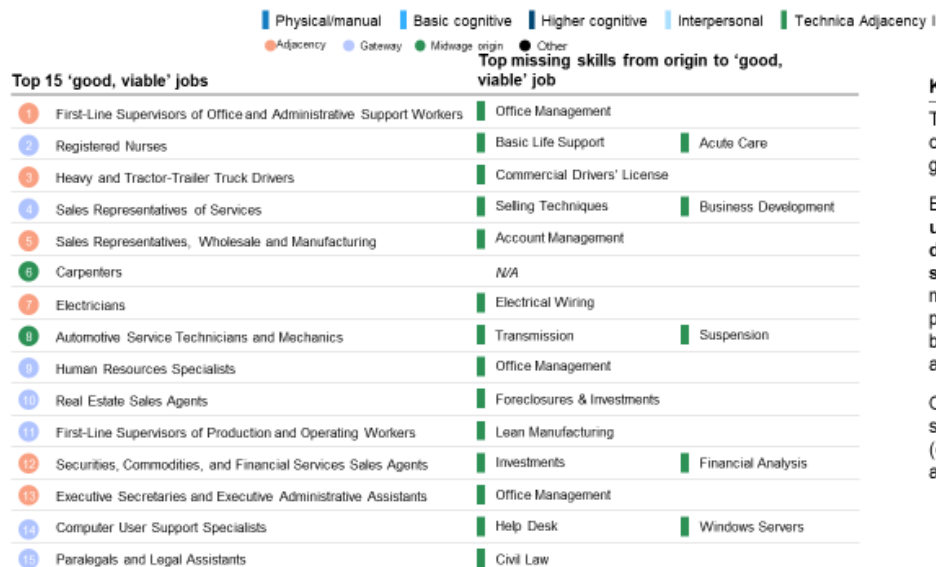


1. Top occupations for each category sorted by the sum of incremental jobs (2022-2023).
 2. Data from 2019.
 3. Excludes SOC's with openings <10 because of insufficient data.
 Source: Lightcast, BLS OES, BEA, Moody's, McKinsey analysis, in partnership with Oxford Economics



For the top 15 livable-wage jobs, candidates often lack technical skills (e.g., selling technique and business development for service sales representatives and office management skills for first-line supervisors) (Exhibit 6).

Exhibit 6 | Employers hiring for ‘good, viable’ jobs are focused on additional technical skills



Key takeaways

The top missing skills from origin to “good, viable” jobs are generally **technical skills**.

By **focusing on technical upskilling**, as well as on **developing higher cognitive skills** (e.g., leadership, management, and complex problem-solving), programs can best equip origin jobholders to ascend.

On the technical front, most skills require formal training (e.g., certifications, on-the-job, apprenticeship programs).

Source: Lightcast, BLS OES, BEA, Moody's, McKinsey analysis, in partnership with Oxford Economics



C. Existing interventions and limitations

Fairfield County employers face difficulties filling open entry- and midlevel positions. In addition, workers who have the skills for entry- and midlevel positions are often unable to move into them because they do not have the required technical training, are not aware of opportunities, or face other barriers that prevent them from pursuing those positions.¹³

Existing wraparound services (e.g., transportation assistance, financial aid) offer some support for filling open positions. However, these services often overlook crucial barriers that candidates may face (e.g., childcare). Comprehensive support systems should include multiple enablers (e.g., transportation, financial assistance, health care, childcare).¹⁴ ix The absence of these comprehensive support systems that address various factors hinders the successful placement of individuals into entry- and midlevel positions (Exhibit 7). There is work in the state being done to address some of these challenges such as [the work of the Connecticut Office of Early Childhood’s Blue-Ribbon Panel](#). One promising example of some work being done in Norwalk and beyond is The Carver’s workforce development programming, which connects students to local industry professionals who provide workplace tours, help create authentic projects, and work side-by-side with high school students through paid internships. [Norwalk Hospital](#) and [Maritime Aquarium](#) are among the employers who partner with The Carver in this program.

In addition to the challenges in filling entry- and midlevel positions, other barriers impede career progression. For example, employers hiring for livable-wage positions prioritize technical skills, which creates an obstacle for individuals lacking those specific proficiencies (Exhibit 6). While various workforce development programs exist, only a subset target the technical skills required for livable-

¹³ Interview with local Connecticut employer

¹⁴ Financial assistance includes housing, basic goods, and so on.

wage jobs and awareness of those programs needs elevating. Consider the non-exhaustive list of current programs in Exhibit 8, which doesn't include workforce development and continuing education components offered by education institutions such as Norwalk Community College and Norwalk Public Schools.

In Norwalk, programs that provide technical training for skills demanded by Fairfield County employers (Exhibit 8) have had limited effectiveness — partially because there is little awareness about these programs. OY with limited access to targeted training and development opportunities may find themselves lacking the necessary qualifications for upward mobility. To support upward mobility, NPOs that create and manage career development programs should partner with employers to ensure training leads to future jobs. Employers could detail the technical skills needed for applicants to succeed in their roles, and NPOs could in turn provide training on the relevant skill sets to attract, engage, and support OY, leading them to become a better fit for the job market.

Together, NPOs and employers can ensure OY are supported throughout the entire employment process. Furthermore, employers need help filling spots when offering specific training programs for applicants, demonstrating that programs need to establish an effective strategy for communicating with OY.¹⁵

Exhibit 8 | Sampling of existing workforce development programs that target these technical skills required by livable-wage jobs

Example programs	Target population	Focus areas	Skill Categories				
			Physical/manual	Basic cognitive	Higher cognitive	Interpersonal	Technical
WorkSkills Program	Unemployed and underemployed individuals looking to advance their careers	Adult basic education, digital competency skills, customer service credentials					
The WorkPlace	Various (i.e., young adults, unemployed & underemployed individuals)	In-demand employment skills-based learning (incl. customer service, sales training, basic technology skills)					
LifeBridge	Young adults and adults in greater Bridgeport and Fairfield County	Creates a customized plan for each client to enable them to acquire occupational training services in adult basic educational skills, digital literacy, occupational skills training					
Youth Business Initiative	Current high school students	Offers a 10-week workforce development program for students					
Urban League of Southern Connecticut	African Americans and other minority groups in southern CT	Provides training for certification in hotel & hospitality, retail, ServSafe, Microsoft Office Suite, and customer service					
Norwalk Youth Summer Program	Norwalk Public School students	Basic cognitive skills					
Norwalk Public Library	Any Norwalk residents	Provides literacy and homework help					
Career Resources Inc.	Low-income job seekers with multiple barriers to employment and other disenfranchised populations	Soft-skills training, subsidized employment opportunities, short-term job training, certificate programs, and Credentials; opportunities for ex-offenders					
WIOA Youth Program	Provides 16- to 24-year-olds high school dropouts in Waterbury, Danbury, and Torrington	Expands job training and workforce activities for youth, including soft-skill development, career exploration, job readiness, and certification					
Greater Norwalk Chamber	Local companies and residents	Entrepreneurial training; various resource connections, career readiness skill training, employer relations					
American Job Center of Bridgeport	Registered CT businesses & job seekers regardless of employment status	Résumé building, interviewing skills, job searching, recruiting					
Stamford Adult & Continuing Education	Ages 18 and above	Help obtaining a high school diploma, GED, NEDP, and ESL service					
AdvanceCT	Eight key business sectors with defined talent/support ecosystem ¹	Job creation, capital investment, business attraction, and expansion					
Connecticut Department of Labor: Education and Training ConneCTion	Can filter by county, qualifications (education levels/skills), and types of training	Search function that shows all schools and jobs locally and the specific job training they provide (e.g., Norwalk International Beauty Academy provides occupational and technical training on barbering and hairdressing)					
Carver Foundation	Norwalk Public School students	Career-readiness skills, including contemporary social and emotional skills					
Youth Business Initiative	Inner-city high school students	Offers a 10-week workforce development training for high school students and paid youth entrepreneurship summer program					
Greater Norwalk Chamber of Commerce	Norwalk residents	Run a small business development training program every year, connect employers with workforce development programs, and help employers find employees and, on occasion, vice versa.					

Existing programs provide basic skill and talent development, leaving gaps in development of technical and higher cognitive skills; there are also few employer-driven programs



¹⁵ Interview with local Connecticut employer

V. Establishing Context to Inform Interventions

Our approach for identifying potential interventions to address the problem has three parts:

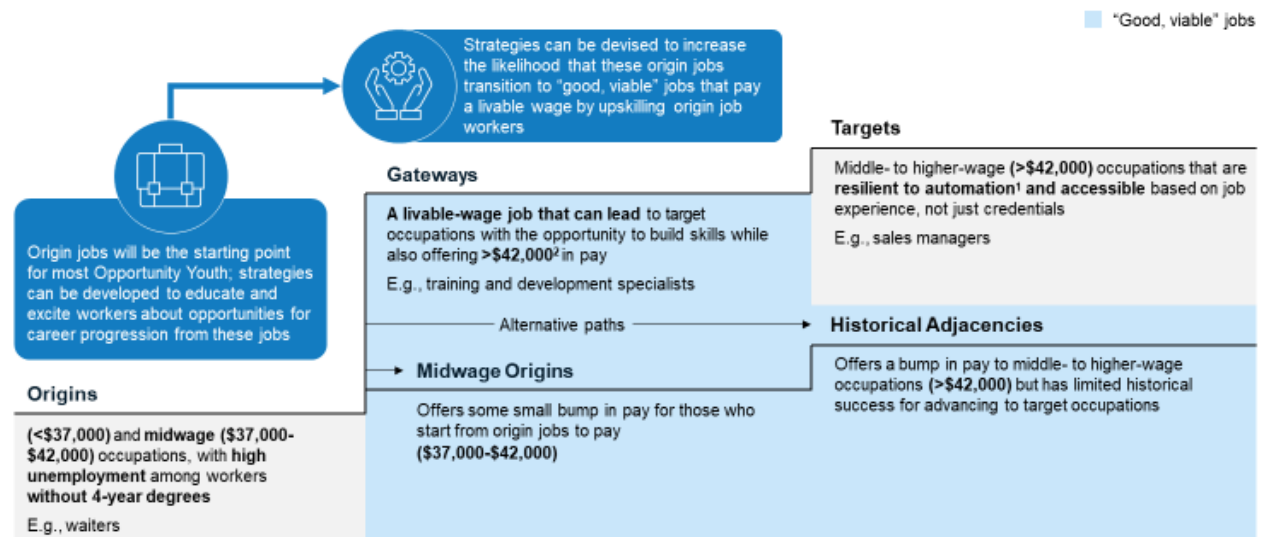
- (1) Identify a framework demonstrating the career and education progression path followed by OY.
- (2) Identify pivotal moments that matter most in OY career progression.
- (3) Understand context-specific industry and job dynamics to evaluate the largest region-specific opportunity areas for OY.

A. Framework for OY’s path to livable-wage employment: Livable-Wage Attainment Pathway

Opportunity Youth often need help accessing livable-wage jobs. However, for many OY — especially those without four-year degrees — the prospect of immediately getting livable-wage jobs is often not feasible. This paper uses a Livable-Wage Attainment Pathway approach to rethink OY job opportunities as part of a long-term effort to provide a pathway toward livable-wage employment. Drawing on the work of the Rework America Alliance and McKinsey research, this model includes career progressions for young adults, especially those without a postsecondary degree (Exhibit 9).

Exhibit 9 | How we are thinking about livable-wage employment: The origin-to-gateway-to-target model

Building economic mobility for “origin” workers by enabling progressions through “gateway” to “target” roles



1. Based on McKinsey Global Institute’s analysis of risk of offshoring and automation (2019).
2. Annual livable income in Norwalk is \$40,269 according to the MIT Living Wage Calculator.
Source: McKinsey analysis using EMSI Burning Glass, U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, and McKinsey Global Institute



Origin jobs are the starting point for most OY. Origin jobs are entry-level positions with low- or midlevel wages that do not require a four-year degree. Gateway jobs are livable-wage jobs that likely lead to target jobs. Target jobs are middle- to higher-wage (i.e., \$42,000+) occupations resilient to automation and accessible based on job experience. Based on this framework, OY are better positioned to reach a

livable-wage job by obtaining an origin job, transitioning into a gateway job, and then landing a target job. Therefore, community programs and key stakeholders need to shine a spotlight on origin jobs that can be the starting point for career progression into a livable-wage job; likewise, programs and stakeholders need to provide support during job transitions to higher levels of wage earning. Section C outlines the industries and origin jobs that will most likely lead to a livable-wage job in Fairfield County.

B. Identifying the right moments for intervention:

The Opportunity Youth Journey

Connecticut has a strong desire to ensure that children are set up for success through early interventions (e.g., the School Readiness Preschool Grant Program and Baby Bonds).^x While such interventions are essential, more interventions along the education continuum are also vital and need to be strengthened. Ten percent of Norwalk School District's class of 2019 did not graduate from high school within four years. Of those who did graduate in 2019, 30% did not enroll in college within a year. In addition, not all students who enrolled in college will graduate. From the class of 2018, approximately 13% of students who went to college did not continue for a second year.^{xi} Even with early intervention, some older youth will go directly into the workforce. OY should receive the same comprehensive support as youth who go straight to college after high school.

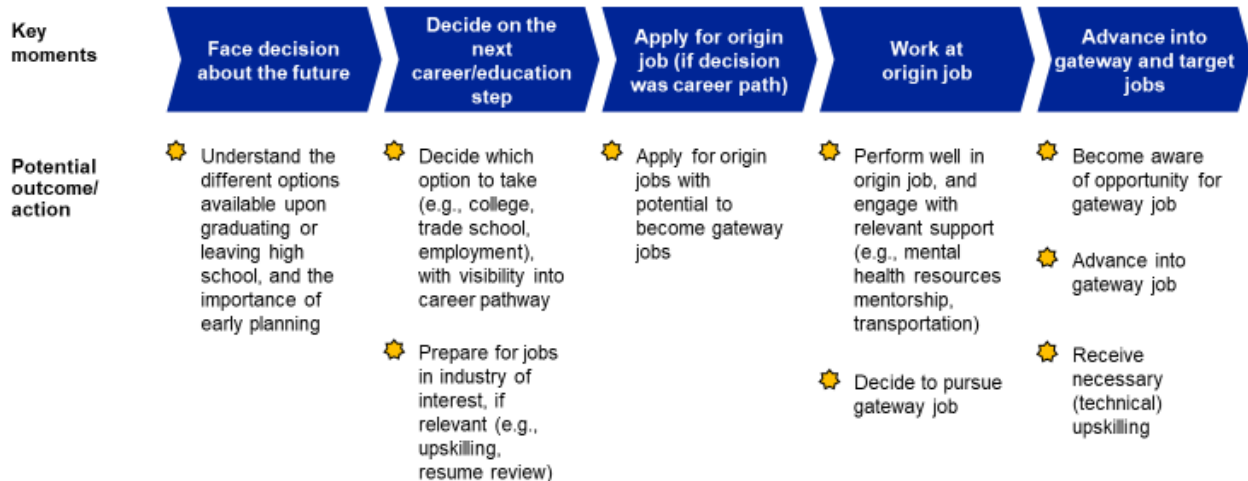
More investment in early-stage support programs in middle and high school would aid more OY with targeted interventions at key moments throughout their educational journey to reach a target job. Nonprofits, employers, schools, community colleges, and local government all have roles to play in supporting OY through this process. Significant efforts are already underway — including the efforts of providers that sit on the Governor's Workforce Council, and other examples mentioned earlier in this paper. However, nonprofits and other service providers need more resources, support, and intentional trust-based collaborations to increase the positive impact of their work.

Many interventions will require close collaboration across stakeholders. Various working groups will need to be engaged in activities ranging from skills mapping to program development to industry-specific initiatives. Several steps should be accomplished before undertaking this work.

1. **Create a collaborative central body focused on OY interventions across sectors.** A consortium of nonprofits, key educational institutions and other community stakeholders committed to valuing all voices and contributions could best organize and coordinate stakeholders and accelerate impact.
2. **Develop a funding plan and allocation model for initiatives across the Opportunity Youth Journey.** Ideally organized by a collaborative of community stakeholders, this model may include government and philanthropic investments. Efforts are underway to secure funding for Opportunity Youth in Connecticut, which, if confirmed, could provide monetary support for this work in Fairfield County.^{xii}
3. **Identify employers who will engage as thought partners and operators across initiatives throughout the Opportunity Youth journey.** Employer representation in working groups is needed to shape the journey and key initiatives; their guidance on skills-based hiring priorities over credential-based hiring can help inform strategies and direct tactics. Employers have compelling reasons to invest in this work: the program presents a future talent pipeline, can support communities, and would improve employee job performance overall.^{xiii xiv}

The Journey

Exhibit 10 | There are key moments along the Opportunity Youth journey that disproportionately affect decision-making and prospects



Robust resources and programs already exist across Norwalk, Fairfield County, and Connecticut. These resources and programs align with many stages in the OY journey. However, it's important to further develop an integrated and holistic approach reinforced by strong relationships and trust to ensure all interventions are coordinated and work toward a common goal.

The journey (Exhibit 10) provides a comprehensive view of the interdependent steps of the Livable-Wage Attainment Pathway. This framework covers each phase youth pass through to reach gateway and/or target jobs. The critical enablers for completing this journey are interventions (detailed below) and attainment of the skills youth need to succeed.

Exhibit 11 provides a skills road map for the top 15 livable-wage jobs. An approach to supporting OY that covers only one skill type or offers disjointed interventions may present unnecessary difficulties as youth must seek out upskilling from separate sources. The road map presented here provides perspective about different skills and the degree to which they are needed across occupations. It enables a stakeholder to assess which skills are most relevant for an individual — based on their interests — and allows for a targeted approach to skill building. The road map looks at five types of foundational skills:

- **Basic cognitive skills** primarily rely on cognitive processes but are relatively straightforward and can likely be taught (e.g., customer service, sales, use of Microsoft Office).
- **Higher cognitive skills** are more complex and rely on a foundation of many different cognitive skills (e.g., leadership, management, complex problem solving).
- **Interpersonal skills** involve interaction with or somehow involve other people (e.g., public speaking, negotiation, team building).
- **Physical/manual skills** primarily involve a physical effort (e.g., unloading materials, mowing, palletizing).
- **Technical skills** are highly task-specific (e.g., medical/surgical nursing, cardiopulmonary resuscitation, software skills).

A comprehensive approach to workforce development will likely need to cover all these skills types, with different emphases based on individuals and their interests as seen in Exhibit 11.

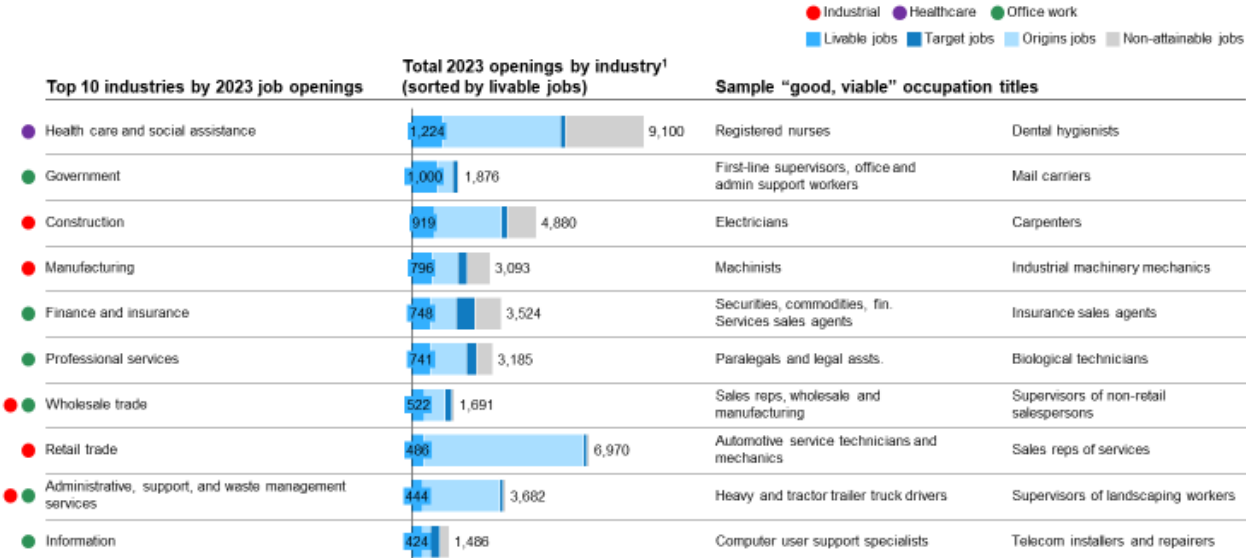
Exhibit 11 | Varying skills across key categories are needed for the top livable-wage jobs, which can help youth consider which occupation is best suited to their strengths

Occupation						Key learnings	
	Basic cognitive	High cognitive	Interpersonal	Physical/manual	Technical		
First-line supervision of production and operating workers	1	2	2	3	2	Lean manufacture	
Registered nurses	1	2	2	3	3	Life support	Acute care
Heavy and tractor-trailer truck drivers	2	1	1	2	1	Forklift	
Sales representatives, services, all other	3	1	3	1	1	Selling techniques	
Sales representatives, wholesale, and manufacturing	3	1	3	1	1	Account management	
Carpenters	1	2	1	3	3	Renovation	
Electricians	1	2	1	3	3	Wiring	
Automotive specialty technicians	1	3	1	2	3	Transmission	Suspension
Human resources specialists	3	2	3	1	1	Sourcing	Application tracking
Real estate sales agents	3	1	3	1	1	Foreclosures	
First-line supervisors of office and administrative support workers	3	2	2	1	1	Office management	
Sales agents, financial services	3	1	3	1	2	Investments	Foreclosures
Executive secretaries and executive administrative assistants	3	1	2	1	1	Event planning	
Computer user support specialist	2	2	1	1	3	Help desk	
Paralegals and legal assistants	1	1	1	1	2	Civil Law	

Source: Lightcast, BLS, BEA, Moody's; McKinsey analysis, in partnership with Oxford Economics

C. Tailoring interventions to regional context: Industry and job analysis in Fairfield County

Exhibit 12 | 10 industries will account for ~80% of livable wage job openings in Fairfield County in 2023



¹ Assumes industry breakdown mirrors that of 2023 job base
 Source: Lightcast, Bureau of Labor Statistics, and McKinsey Global Institute



For Fairfield County, research indicates that 10 industries will account for nearly 80% of the livable-wage job openings in 2023 (Exhibit 12). These industries can be grouped into three main categories — health care, industrial, and office work. The “attainable” jobs, as defined in glossary, are broken into categories above.

Additional research reveals 179 origin jobs have the highest probability of leading to the top 15 livable-wage jobs in Fairfield County (Exhibit 13). For example, occupations such as payroll clerk and concierge are particularly likely to provide opportunities for advancement into livable-wage positions (e.g., first-line supervisors). Therefore, if applicants aspire to become a first-line supervisor, they should be shown how being a payroll clerk can lead them to that position, even if the initial compensation is lower than other alternatives.

Stakeholders who aim to empower OY in their career paths should consider the Livable-Wage Attainment Pathway in their conversations. For example, when advising students on potential careers, high school career counselors should encourage them to focus on target jobs they are passionate about and help them understand common pathways to those positions.

Exhibit 13 | 179 origin occupations that historically lead to the top 15 livable wage jobs will add an estimated ~32k job opening in 2023

NOT EXHAUSTIVE

● Gateway ● Historical adjacencies ● Midwage origins

Top 15 livable wage jobs	Origin jobs with >4% probability of transition ¹	Origin jobs with <4% probability of transition ¹
1 First-line supervisors of office and administrative support workers	Payroll clerks, concierges	Preschool teachers, retail salespersons
2 Registered nurses	Psychiatric technicians, EMTs	Patient representatives
3 Heavy and tractor-trailer truck drives	Light truck drivers	Construction laborers
4 Sales representatives of services	N/A: none listed above threshold	Telemarketers, customer service reps
5 Sales representatives, wholesale and manufacturing	Merchandise displayers	Parts salespersons
6 Carpenters	N/A: entry-level midwage origin	N/A: entry-level midwage origin
7 Electricians	Electricians' helpers	Alarm installers
8 Automotive service technicians and mechanics	Tire repairers	Vehicle cleaners
9 Human resources specialists	Legal secretaries	Word processors
10 Real estate sales agents	Crossing guards	Title examiners
11 First-line supervisors of production and operating workers	Machinists	Sheet metal workers
12 Securities, commodities, and financial services sales agents	Computer operators	Repair workers
13 Executive secretaries and executive administrative assistants	Secretaries and admin assistants	File clerks
14 Computers user support specialist	Computer operators	Bus drivers
15 Paralegals and legal assistant	Legal secretaries	Medical transcriptions

There are many different pathways to "good, viable" jobs, allowing for customization by workers' interests

1. Threshold determined by average transition probability of 4% across all 15 "good, viable" jobs and their origins.

Source: Lightcast, BLS OES, BEA, Moody's, McKinsey analysis, in partnership with Oxford economics

VI. Potential Interventions

Our approach for identifying potential interventions looks at interventions through two lenses:

- (1) the Opportunity Youth Journey and
- (2) industries with the most opportunity for gateway and target jobs.

A. Potential interventions across the Opportunity Youth Journey

The following sections present deep dives into interventions across the OY Journey. It is important to emphasize that there are many paths OY can take to attain the education, skill development, and/or wraparound supports needed to find employment with a livable wage. As with most career journeys, the path is not linear. Restarts, pit stops, and course adjustments are neither uncommon nor necessarily problematic. Providing this messaging to OY throughout their education and early employment is critical to building their confidence and trust in the support provided by various stakeholders. A synthesis of these interventions can be found in Exhibit 14.

Exhibit 14 | Potential interventions by key stakeholders across the opportunity youth career journey

NON EXHAUSTIVE

	Face decision about the future	Decide on next career/education step	Apply for origin job (if decision was career path)	Work at origin job and advance into gateway and target jobs
NPOs	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Create career pathways resource on top jobs in region and conduct outreach to share with OY no longer affiliated with school 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Co-create career aptitude assessment with employers Develop mentorship programs for OY Run job fairs 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Create database of best origin job openings Run job application process workshops (e.g., resume, interviews) Help employers reduce bias in hiring Co-create upskilling hub Co-develop wraparound services 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Continue providing wraparound services Support employers in developing employment mentorship programs
Employers		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Co-create career aptitude assessment with NPOs Attend job fairs Host job shadowing programs/internships 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Co-create upskilling hub Co-develop wraparound services 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Move toward skills-based hiring over credential-based hiring (e.g., remove college requirement) Provide additional support in onboarding for OY (e.g., for HR paperwork, tax documents) Create inclusive feedback culture
Local governments			<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Create financial incentive to hire locally Co-develop wraparound services 	
Educational institutions	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> High schools review career pathways resource with students 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> High schools host job fairs 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> High schools host job application process workshops Community colleges co-create upskilling hub 	

i. Facing decisions about the future

Some students opt to exit high school early, others will graduate, and some may age out of the system. In all cases, students are faced with the question: “What comes next?” While the Norwalk Public Schools’ (NPS) website offers information about workforce development, apprenticeships, and training opportunities, an opportunity remains to provide more comprehensive resources so that existing workforce development efforts can be fully realized.^{xv} Nonprofits, educational institutions, local governments, and employers can collaborate to create additional resources to help youth who are planning to enter the labor market after high school understand their options and make informed decisions.

Target outcome of interventions:

- Youth understand the many options available after high school (e.g., college, trade school, career pathways) and recognize the need for early planning.

Potential interventions

- Nonprofits assemble a high-level informational career pathways resource (e.g., a published book or guide that is updated annually) about in-demand jobs and potential job progression in the Norwalk region. To accomplish this, employers across industries would commit to continuing to provide input about possible career progression and in-demand skills to community organizations and educational institution partners, while engaging the expertise of those partners on best methods for supporting new hires.** The top 15 livable-wage jobs in Fairfield County are all in health care, industrial, or office work, making these industries natural

areas of focus. A career road map document within target companies could show potential progression through origin, gateway, and target jobs; potential salaries along the journey; and specific examples of roles in Norwalk/Fairfield County (Exhibit 6).

- **Guidance counselors and in-school workforce development staff, with the support of NPOs and other resources, review the career pathways resource document with students early in their high school journeys.** This resource would give insight into different career options available to students, allowing them to understand all potential opportunities. To avoid possible discrimination or bias, anyone sharing the resource or advising students should avoid labeling youth as belonging to a given path based on identity (e.g., race, immigration status, language ability).
- **NPOs conduct outreach to OY no longer affiliated with Norwalk Public Schools to share the career pathways resource document.** Outreach may entail directly contacting former students or leveraging a network of existing organizations that already reach youth and young adults for various supports or programs. Presumably, these youth would be challenging for schools to connect with, and nonprofits with strong community ties may be best positioned to reach them and share information about career pathways.

ii. Deciding on the next step

This section focuses on what is necessary to make an informed decision about pursuing career pathways.

Youth need to take an active role in pursuing their career pathways — ultimately, the decision is theirs. Other stakeholders can provide support and information, ideally as advisors, while intentionally avoiding bias.

Target outcome of interventions:

- Youth actively engage with career pathway resources and make informed decisions about their individual paths. Youth create a tactical plan that identifies their preferred origin occupations, obtain well-vetted lists of potential employers, and pursue the skills needed for their desired origin and potential gateway jobs.
- If they choose employment directly out of high school, youth prepare to apply for origin jobs.

Potential interventions

- **Nonprofits collaborate with employers to develop an assessment (e.g., career fit survey) to help youth identify their interests and strengths, customized to the local population and potential origin jobs in Fairfield County.** Stakeholders may consider incorporating the skills map (Exhibit 12), which shows the relative skill needs for the county’s top 15 livable-wage jobs.¹⁶ This assessment would help youth understand which jobs may best suit them based on their current skills — though it should be only one data point among many. For instance, the origin job “electrician’s helper” may be recommended to someone who enjoys working physically, is a tactile learner, and is interested in electrical work. Such a student could then see the potential career progression to electrician and the pathway it offers to a livable-wage job. The nonprofits could share the survey with schools to advise students.

¹⁶ Skill categories include basic cognitive, higher cognitive, interpersonal, physical/manual, and technical.

- **Nonprofits develop pre-employment mentorship programs for current OY to connect with role models — former OY who are now employed in gateway jobs.** Ideally, nonprofit mentorship programs extend until youth transition into an employment mentorship program (detailed in Section iv). The goal is to provide mentorship services throughout the OY Journey while being tailored to the given stage(s). Additionally, compensation for mentors and OY mentees may promote attendance and assuage the opportunity costs for program participation in lieu of working.
- **Nonprofits collaborate with schools and employers to run job fairs, showcasing specific employers hiring for origin jobs and what those jobs entail.** Job fairs present an opportunity to educate youth on potential career pathways.
- **Employers host job-shadowing programs and/or summer internships for youth who have expressed serious interest in the industry or type of job.** This shadowing would help OY understand both origin and gateway jobs while showing them the skills needed for those roles. Another option is a one-day job-shadowing experience, similar to San Antonio WORX’s Job Shadow Days. This program helps students explore careers through a half-day of learning.^{xvi} Internship programs such as the Norwalk Mayor’s Summer Youth Employment Program and the ASPIRE internship program with Norwalk Hospital managed by the Family & Children’s Agency provide similar opportunities.^{xvii} Other employers could also consider internship programs that may lead to origin job employment. Stipends, operating as compensation for youths’ time and as an incentive for continued participation, should also be considered for such programs.

iii. Applying for an origin job

Assumes youth has chosen to go directly into a career path

With support from stakeholders, youth apply for origin jobs. For those in high school, this process should happen before the student has left Norwalk Public Schools to ensure maximum support throughout the process. Youth who engage in career exploration early in their high school careers could apply for an origin job as a summer or part-time position, potentially accelerating their path to gateway jobs. (Guidance counselors, however, must use caution not to “track” students into a career pathway rather than college.)

Target outcome of interventions:

- Youth apply for origin jobs in their chosen pathways of interest, receive compelling job offers, and accept positions.
- Youth upskill prior to starting jobs.

Potential interventions

- **Nonprofits, in collaboration with employers, create and maintain a database of origin job openings (including relevant virtual jobs) that can lead to gateway jobs in Fairfield County.** Employer inclusivity practices should be a key criterion in this database, as the existence and quality of such practices is vital to creating trust with OY employees and prospective hires. A few key aspects that convey an employer’s commitment to inclusivity include: leadership diversity; fair and merit-based performance evaluations; existing internship programs, which may be particularly helpful for OY; and access to top company leadership.^{xviii} A representative database

called JobLaunch (now part of Get Schooled), geared toward employment/college opportunities for low-income youth, registered 94,000 youth nationwide in the 2021-2022 school year.^{xix}

- **Employers, NPOs, and local governments unify in a cross-sector coalition to identify and address wraparound services (e.g., transportation, English language classes, childcare, mental health resources) that best serve youth.** Specific offerings may vary on an employer-by-employer basis. For instance, a large manufacturer with a site outside town could provide van transportation, while a small business in town may subsidize public transportation.
- **Nonprofits collaborate with schools to run résumé reviews, interview preparation workshops, and post-interview coaching (e.g., follow-up emails, emotional support to continue pursuing other origin jobs if they do not receive an initial offer).**¹⁷
- **Employers, nonprofits, and community colleges unite to form an upskilling hub — including a physical location, clearly defined roles, and a mapped-out plan for upskilling youth.** The upskilling hubs will (1) develop and implement plans for soft-skill development and (2) identify noncredit certificate coursework for community colleges/educational programs to provide youth with technical skills and credentials needed for origin and gateway jobs (e.g., training for EMT). Stipends should also be considered for this program. Propel America, for example, provides health-care-career exploration boot camps and training for 18- to 24-year-olds in Louisiana, New Jersey, and Pennsylvania; students have guaranteed interviews and stipends for basic needs.^{xx} After engaging with Propel America, students' wages increased by 53% (i.e., rose from a starting wage of \$11.96 to \$18.25), demonstrating a significant impact.^{xxi}
- **Support employer investment in identifying ways to reduce bias in the hiring process to strengthen the future workforce.** For example, employers could remove racially identifying information from résumés, given research showing different callback rates based on racial indicators, including names and experience (e.g., National Society for Black Engineers).^{xxii} Additionally, companies can train hiring managers on de-biasing techniques and recruitment goals, and employers can then track bias in performance management (e.g., evaluate how many diverse individuals applied versus were hired).^{xxiii}
- **Government provides a financial incentive for employers to hire locally, creating a win-win for the OY and employers.** In addition to financial incentives, government can support in other ways; for example, New York City implemented an advertising campaign in 2018 that encouraged NYC businesses to hire local interns.^{xxiv}

iv. Work at an origin job; advance into a gateway job; advance into a target job

The ultimate goal of the OY journey is for youth who decide to pursue a career pathway to be equipped to obtain a target job. Guided by nonprofits, the journey centers on youth who have a goal of full-time employment in a livable-wage job. Employers also play a role and could benefit greatly — from filling vacant positions to developing a predictable talent pipeline.

Target outcome of interventions (youth):

- Youth perform well in their origin jobs.
- Youth decide to pursue gateway jobs.

¹⁷ Interviews with school-based personnel

- Youth receive the necessary upskilling to be successful in gateway jobs.
- Youth advance into gateway jobs and repeat the process for target jobs.
- Youth receive messaging that career paths in general are not linear and often include setbacks or restarts, but on-going support can be found along the way.

Target outcome of interventions (employers and the community):

- Better access to the local talent pool to fill job openings.
- Employ people with strong commitments toward success (e.g., youth who understand their origin jobs could lead to gateway jobs may have stronger motivation to excel in their origin jobs).
- Improved local employment generates additional economic benefits within the community, including increased spending at local businesses.
- Business/nonprofit coalitions increase a sense of community belonging and engagement.

Potential interventions for nonprofits

- **Nonprofits and employers and government continue providing wraparound services.** Employers can directly provide or enable access to relevant wraparound services to their employees, and nonprofits can play a role in providing transitional wraparound services for unemployed individuals. For example, if an OY gets laid off and loses highly subsidized on-site childcare he/she receives through his/her job, a nonprofit or government agency could provide childcare assistance to avoid childcare becoming a barrier to the OY getting a new job.
- **Nonprofits work with educators from upskilling hubs to support employers in developing employee mentorship programs, integrating mentor and upskilling interventions.** At a given company, youth in a similar position (e.g., same role, same tenure) would meet regularly with a more senior leader who progressed from that same position and can serve as a mentor to the group; the mentors can help OY with their interpersonal skills, performance, and transition into gateway and target jobs. McKinsey research has shown the importance of such programs on retention — “a sales organization implemented a mentorship program that helped their frontline with career pathing, [and] they saw a double-digit increase in the retention percentage of salespeople.”^{xxv} Early on, a nonprofit could help establish regular meetings and share best practices around mentoring; ultimately, the program’s administration should be transitioned to the employer. Educators may join the group regularly to provide on-site upskilling.

Additional potential interventions employers can consider include:

- **Transition from credential-based hiring to skills- and experience-based hiring based on success in origin jobs.** This process fosters retention because employees may have more opportunities for growth within an organization. In fact, hiring for skills is a stronger indicator of job performance than education- or work-based hiring.^{xxvi} Furthermore, employers can complement the ongoing work of upskilling hubs with additional professional development and training so that youth can build job-specific skills.
- **Clearly state in job descriptions that college is not required; remove qualifiers such as “college preferred”.** This change may help shift emphasis away from credential-based hiring and mitigate

youth from being discouraged from applying for a job if they do not have a college degree.¹⁸ The BCEE sees evidence of this already happening; in fact, the Burning Glass Institute analyzed 51 million jobs across the United States and found that now fewer of these positions require a college degree.^{xxvii}

- **In collaboration with nonprofits, provide an enhanced onboarding experience for youth with additional support for tasks such as HR paperwork, tax documents, and opening a bank account.**
- **Create an inclusive feedback culture.** An employee mentorship program is part of building this culture, as youth can regularly connect with and learn from mentors. Additionally, formal and informal feedback from managers could help youth adjust their performance or may help them seek out specific skill-building opportunities before they reach their performance reviews. Managers should have ongoing conversations with employees in formal and informal ways, and feedback should be fair and backed by data and analytics, helping employees feel empowered to give and receive frequent feedback.^{xxviii}

B. Potential interventions for employers by employer type

While some interventions will be applicable across companies, others are more specific to a pathway or industry. In Fairfield County, three main categories of industry interventions are based on its top 15 livable-wage jobs: (1) health care, (2) industrial, including manufacturing and construction, and (3) office work, which may be in-person or virtual. There are nuanced differences in interventions for each, but all interventions broadly fall into the following categories:

1. Access to information
2. Job preparation
3. Upskilling and training
4. Supportive wraparound services.

Exhibit 15 shows an illustrative example of what the Opportunity Youth Journey might look like for jobs in health care:

¹⁸ Interview with government/economic development agency

Exhibit 15 | Interventions should support Opportunity Youth in Norwalk who are interested in employment in attaining liveable-wage jobs and beyond

Illustrative example – Adrian’s progression through the Opportunity Youth Journey in health care



Health care: Mentorship and upskilling & training

Top health care livable-wage job in Fairfield County: Registered Nurse (Exhibit 6)

Large hospital systems may be uniquely situated to provide in-house many of the necessary interventions and wraparound services for OY. Currently, local programs work to engage students/youth through internship programs and job shadowing. One local healthcare provider’s internship program explicitly aims to hire youth over the age of 18 at the end of the program. The hospital offers certifications, upskilling, and language classes, and provides financial support — from reimbursing tuition for applicable coursework to paying student debt for nursing programs.¹⁹ Health care is an important local industry to target, given that registered nurses are the No. 2 livable-wage job in the region and that many youth are interested in the field (Exhibit 6). Thirty percent of youth who applied and interviewed for Norwalk Mayor’s Summer Youth Employment Program in 2023 listed Health Care & Social Assistance as a top industry, which was double the next most popular response.^{xxix}

Hospitals can build on their existing efforts by partnering with NPOs and schools already engaged in interventions across the OY Journey. Such partnerships can create a talent pipeline to fill open origin jobs, especially those that lead to livable-wage jobs (e.g., registered nurses). These partnerships should enable youth in origin jobs to access employment mentorship programs, further driving employee retention.

¹⁹ Interview with local health care employer

Hospitals can strongly emphasize hiring youth into EMT and psychiatric technician positions, as these origin jobs offer a >4% probability of transition (Exhibit 14). Hospitals may consider:

1. working with local community colleges to offer intensive EMT training courses and reimbursing hired youth who participate in those courses, or
2. offering their own training course as part of on-the-job development.

An EMT certificate course at Norwalk Community College is offered to high school seniors, providing an excellent opportunity for youth. Hiring youth and then offering an intensive version of this course would enable new hires who did not take the class in high school to also access this occupation.^{xxx}

Furthermore, hospitals can provide the necessary technical skills training for registered nurses, such as life support and acute care. Hospitals can then take current student debt repayment further by paying for RN coursework upfront for youth in origin jobs — with an obligation for the youth to work as an RN for a defined time. This format presents a win-win for both parties; the hospital gains a reliable talent pipeline for RNs, and youth avoid the financial burden otherwise necessary to become an RN.

Working in a hospital can take a physical and emotional toll on workers. To mitigate burnout, hospitals can consider work schedules that incorporate time for physical recovery and offer mental health services to employees. And, given their scale, hospitals may be able to offer free or highly subsidized childcare.

Industrial: Transportation services, early access to job information, and upskilling & training

Top industrial livable-wage jobs in Fairfield County: Heavy and tractor-trailer truck drivers; carpenters; electricians; automotive service technicians and mechanics; first-line supervisors of production and operating workers (Exhibit 5).

Large industrial companies within Connecticut have expressed hiring challenges, potentially driven by a limited local talent pool. For example, Electric Boat needs to hire more than 5,000 people this year — with further needs over the next few years — and is looking for local solutions to address its talent needs.^{xxxi} Offering a transportation program for Norwalk youth to reach industrial work sites could grow the pool of potential employees. Industrial companies could also engage in interventions earlier along the OY Journey, attracting youth to jobs, particularly through job fairs and job shadowing. Many youth may not know what industrial work looks like today. Often there is a perception gap with manufacturing jobs, as people think of historical assembly lines versus more modern techniques that rely heavily on technological processes. In return, companies could fill vacant positions with well-supported youth who understand the type of work and can physically commute to the job. In Eastern Connecticut there is a strong focus on manufacturing in an initiative called MATCH Fair Haven that is an example of a promising industry and nonprofit partnership dedicated to filling employer needs and supporting young people along a pathway.

Small- and medium-sized companies may need more resources to engage in as many interventions and support services as large companies. Instead, they may consider forming a coalition to pool resources for technical upskilling and job-shadowing programs. Such coalitions could reduce administrative burdens while engaging youth to fill open jobs.

Regardless of size, companies may consider offering youth in origin positions on-site job training for gateway jobs (e.g., automotive service technicians and mechanics) to facilitate technical upskilling.

Supervisors of youth who are successfully upskilled can advocate for their promotion to gateway jobs or recommend them for such jobs at other companies. When on-the-job training is insufficient, employers may consider partnerships with community colleges, using company funds for employee training.

Furthermore, companies can consider funding licenses (e.g., electricians licenses) for high-performing youth in origin jobs. Such funding can be provided contingent on youth committing to perform that job function for a set time with the company. This arrangement provides a reliable talent pipeline for the company, reduces turnover costs, and removes the cost burden for youth who take the training.

Office (in-person): Upskilling & training

Top livable-wage job(s) in Fairfield County: First-line supervisors of office and administrative support workers; sales representatives of services; sales representatives, wholesale and manufacturing; HR specialists; real estate sales agents; securities, commodities, and financial services sales agents; executive secretaries and executive administrative assistants; computer user support specialists; paralegals and legal assistants (Exhibit 5)

Office jobs span a range of industries, but across these positions, soft skills are critical. While ideally OY will have received soft skill upskilling earlier in their journey, employers should consider adding regular opportunities (e.g., workshops, actionable feedback systems from supervisors) to support OY in continuing to build and practice these skills. An in-company mentor or buddy program may also help youth receive regular feedback and build the interpersonal skills needed to be successful.

Office (remote): Connectivity and wraparound services

It is unlikely that employers hiring for remote positions will engage with Fairfield County-specific interventions suggested for the Opportunity Youth Journey. However, they can engage in best practices that support youth working in origin positions remotely. Remote employers should foster opportunities for employees to meet virtually and build connections. In-company mentorship programs will be vital to promote connectivity and provide visibility into career paths. Companies should consider wraparound services specific to remote work (e.g., access to broadband internet; providing the equipment needed for remote work, such as a laptop and desk). If companies cannot provide the necessary tools, nonprofits may consider organizing funding to support youth with wraparound support tailored to remote work.

VII. How We Move Forward

Our approach for moving forward with implementing interventions has two steps:

- 1. Establish an action plan that identifies relevant local stakeholders who will lead the interventions.*
- 2. Establish platform, metrics, and cadence for tracking progress of the intended outcomes for OY.*

A. Action plan

Norwalk has a robust nonprofit sector, and many of the interventions outlined in this paper are already underway. The following steps can be taken to ensure that the various stakeholders work effectively toward a unified vision and support OY across their entire career journey.

1. **Assemble the relevant local nonprofit organizations and other key stakeholders who will partner to lead this work;** nonprofits will then identify/engage:
 - a. Key government stakeholders who will participate in relevant working groups/coalitions and already run complementary programming (e.g., Norwalk Mayor’s Summer Youth Employment Program).
 - b. Workforce Development staff at NPS as early thought partners and continue close collaboration throughout the journey.
 - c. Guidance counselors and school employees who are excited to support this work.
 - d. Community colleges that can support upskilling and technical training courses.
 - e. Employers best suited to join this program (e.g., have origin job openings that lead to gateway jobs; company cultures welcoming to youth from a diverse range of backgrounds; willingness to offer wraparound services that youth may need).
2. **Determine primary sources of funding,** the level of funding needed, and the necessary steps to secure funding; also consider which funding scenarios will lead to a self-sustaining OY placement system (e.g., nonprofits receive small remuneration for each OY placed; top hirers sponsor program at different levels).
3. **Establish smaller working groups,** likely industry-based or initiative-based, or both.
4. **Map responsible stakeholders for each initiative,** develop timelines, a working cadence, and key deliverables.
5. **Iterate on initiatives** — Track and assess progress; review strategies and tactics, adjusting as necessary; review and assess players (e.g., NPOs, employers).
6. **Measure success** (see next section).

B. Continuous evaluation of progress and measures of success

To determine the success of the interventions mentioned throughout this paper, it is necessary to keep track of metrics in line with the intended outcomes established at the beginning of the paper. To evaluate the impact of these outcomes, both leading and lagging key performance indicators have been established for each outcome:²⁰

Intended outcome	Lagging KPI	Key leading KPI	Other leading KPIs (non-exhaustive)
#1: To place OY job seekers into livable-wage tracks	% of Fairfield County OY employed in origin jobs	% of OY that accepted origin job offers	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • # of origin jobs available • # of organized campaigns communicating origin jobs • # of job fairs hosted in Fairfield County within a year

²⁰ Leading KPIs are used to predict changes or trends, are forward looking, and help to manage the performance of any system or process. Lagging KPIs measure performance after the process follows a pattern or trend and are used to confirm long-term trends.

			<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Attendance at job fairs • # of job applications submitted by OY • % acceptance rate of applications submitted by OY • Origin job retention rates for OY
#2: To enable OY to pursue an upward progression along a chosen career path	% of Fairfield County OY with wages above the ALICE threshold	% of Fairfield County OY promoted from an origin job to a gateway or target job	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • # of gateway and target jobs available • % of gateway and target jobs filled with external vs. internal hires • % of Fairfield County employers with internal upskilling programs • OY job satisfaction scores in origin jobs • OY employer satisfaction scores
#3: To enable OY to obtain further training and industry credentials	% of Fairfield County OY with wages above the ALICE threshold	% of Fairfield County OY promoted from an origin job to a gateway or target job	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • # of gateway and target jobs available • % of gateway and target jobs filled with external vs. internal hires • % of Fairfield County employers with internal upskilling programs • OY job satisfaction scores in origin jobs • OY employer satisfaction scores

Additionally, it is of utmost importance that the above metrics are disaggregated by race, ethnicity, and gender as well as educational levels (high school degree versus nondegree). This is the only way to identify whether the initiatives implemented are advancing racial and gender equity.

By tracking these key metrics, policymakers, educators, workforce development agencies, and employers can assess the effectiveness of the implemented initiatives, identify areas for improvement, and provide targeted support to OY who succeed in the job market. Beyond just tracking outcomes, stakeholders should set goals for each metric and assign a leader/set of leaders to be accountable for each goal.

Successful implementation of this approach could move the needle on this issue and serve as a proof point at the state and national levels. Just within Fairfield County, this could mean lifting almost 9,600 OY out of poverty; saving up to almost \$3 billion in taxpayer dollars and almost \$9 billion in social costs over the course of OY’s lives; and boosting economic productivity by allowing employers to fill roles they were previously unable to fill.

Improving outcomes for OY is within reach in Norwalk. The Opportunity Works Initiative, for example, uplifted OY in seven sites in seven different major cities from 2015 to 2018.²¹ In just three years, the program supported 800+ individuals in earning a high school credential, allowed almost 1,000 participants to enroll in postsecondary education or training, and served a cohort that was more than 50% young men of color.^{xxxii} Fairfield County is well positioned to become another success story considering the wealth of job opportunities available.

²¹ The Opportunity Works initiative was funded by a Social Innovation Award from the Corporation for National and Community Service and run by Jobs for the Future and the Aspen Forum for Community Solutions.

Acknowledgments

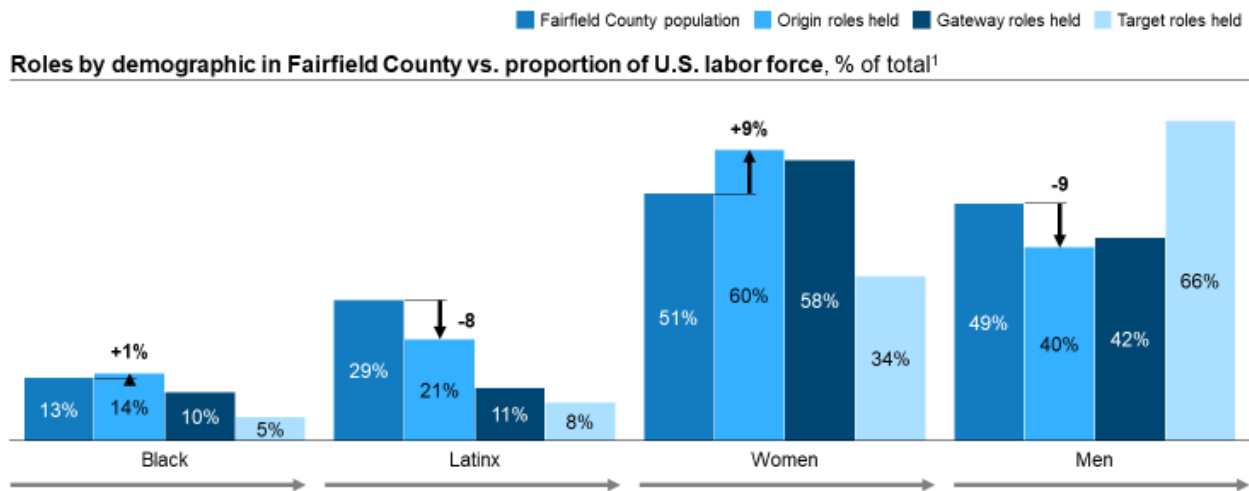
The approach and analyses in this paper have been made possible by the invaluable inputs received from Fairfield County’s Community Foundation, Norwalk Acts, its membership, and other key Norwalk NPOs, educational institutions, stakeholders in the community including the 40 interviews conducted for this study, Philliber Research, members of the Fairfield County Business Collaborative for Education Equity, and McKinsey & Company.

Appendix

- I. Additional Exhibits
- II. Additional Analysis
 - a. Overarching measures of success for workforce development
- III. References

I. Additional exhibits

Exhibit 16 | Workers employed in ‘origin’ jobs in Fairfield County disproportionately identify as Black or women



1. Fairfield County figures based on 2022 data; U.S. population figures based on 2021 data.
Source: Lightcast; U.S. Bureau of Labor and Statistics

Exhibit 17.1 | In addition to top 15 occupations, there are 88 other accessible occupations driving ‘good, viable’ job openings (1/2)

Gateway	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Food service managers Property, real estate, and community association managers Training and development specialists Social and community service managers Dental hygienists Compliance officers Loan officers Directors Interior designers Radiologic technologists and technicians Logisticians Claims adjusters, examiners and investigators Advertising sales agents Public safety telecommunicators First-line supervisors of police and detectives Designers, all other Respiratory therapists Surgical technologists Special effects artists and animators Insurance underwriters 	Adjacencies	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Compensation, benefits and job analysis specialists Credit analysts Film video editors Diagnostic medical sonographers Medical equipment repairers Credit counselors Fashion designers Computer numerically controlled tool programmers Tailors, dressmakers and custom sewers Cardiovascular technologists and technicians First-line supervisors of transportation and material moving workers First-line supervisors of construction trades and extraction workers Insurance sales agents Middle school teachers Plumbers, pipefitters and steamfitters First-line supervisors of mechanics, installers and repairers Heating, air conditioning and refrigeration mechanics and installers First-line supervisors of non-retail sales workers Postal service mail carriers Industrial machinery mechanics
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Source: Lightcast, BLS OES, BEA, Moody's, McKinsey analysis, in partnership with Oxford Economics

Exhibit 17.2 | In addition to top 15 occupations, there are 88 other accessible occupations driving ‘good, viable’ job openings (2/2)

Adjacencies	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Physical therapist assistants Tool and die makers Occupational therapy assistants Career/Technical education teachers, secondary school Cargo and freight agents Water and wastewater treatment plant and system operators Telecommunications line installers and repairers Mobile heavy equipment mechanics, except engines Electrical power-line installers and repairers 	Midway origins	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Machinists Chefs and head cooks Substitute teachers, short-term Production, planning and expediting clerks First-line supervisors of landscaping, lawn service and groundskeeping workers Graphic designers Massage therapists Operating engineers and other construction equipment operators Telecommunications equipment installers and repairers, except line installers Payroll and timekeeping clerks Bus and truck mechanics and diesel engine specialists Correctional officers and jailers Biological technicians 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Brickmasons & blockmasons Computer occupations, A1 other Meeting, convention and event planners Automotive body and related repairers Healthcare support workers, A1 other Directors, religious activities and education Interpreters and translators Fine artists, including painters, sculptors, and illustrators Human resources assistants, except payroll and Court, municipal, and license clerks Chemical technicians Aircraft structure, surfaces, rigging, and systems assemblers Sheet metal workers Industrial engineering technologists and technicians Postal service mail sorters, processors, and processing Machine operators Audio and video technicians Postal clerks Hazardous materials removal workers Security and fire alarm systems installers Life, physical and social science technicians, A1 other Community and social service specialists, A1 other Eligibility interviewers, government programs Chemical equipment operators and tenders Ophthalmic technicians Cement masons & concrete finishers Glaziers
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Source: Lightcast, BLS OES, BEA, Moody's, McKinsey analysis, in partnership with Oxford Economics

II. Additional analysis

a. Overarching measures of success for workforce development

1. **Employment Rate:** This metric measures the percentage of OY employed in Fairfield County and Norwalk. It reflects their ability to secure job opportunities and enter the workforce successfully.
2. **Job Placement Rate:** This metric specifically tracks the percentage of OY who find employment within a certain period after completing their education or vocational training programs. It indicates the effectiveness of these programs in preparing individuals for the job market.
3. **Earnings:** Tracking the average wages or salaries of employed OY provides insight into their financial stability and the value of their skills in the job market. It helps assess their economic well-being and the impact of career choices.
4. **Job Satisfaction:** This metric measures the level of satisfaction and contentment OY experience in their jobs. It reflects the alignment between their chosen career paths and their personal interests, values, and aspirations. It can also be an indicator of effective wraparound services for the job.
5. **Skills Development:** Assessing the acquisition and development of relevant job skills, such as technical skills, soft skills, and industry-specific competencies, helps determine the effectiveness of vocational training programs and the ability of OY to meet the demands of their chosen fields.
6. **Entrepreneurship and Self-Employment Rates:** Tracking the percentage of OY who start their own businesses or become self-employed provides insights into their entrepreneurial spirit and ability to create job opportunities for themselves and others.
7. **Continuing Education and Training:** Although OY may have yet to pursue a college education, tracking their participation in continuing education programs, vocational courses, or professional development opportunities gives an indication of their commitment to ongoing learning and upskilling.
8. **Career Advancement:** Monitoring the progression and growth of OY in their chosen careers, including promotions, salary increases, and access to higher-level positions, tracks the effectiveness of initial job placements and potential for long-term career success.
9. **Job Retention Rate:** This metric measures the percentage of OY who remain employed with the same employer over a specified period. It reflects their ability to adapt to work environments, build professional relationships, and meet job expectations.
10. **Employer Two-Way Feedback:** Collecting feedback from employers regarding OY's skills, provides valuable insights into their performance and areas for improvement. Feedback from OY on the culture and support of companies can help companies change and evolve and become better. This feedback can be gathered through surveys or performance evaluations.

Additionally, it is of utmost importance that measurement of the metrics mentioned above is segmented into categories such as race and gender. Only then can the program identify whether the implemented initiatives advance racial and gender equity.

By tracking these key metrics, policymakers, educators, workforce development agencies, and employers can assess the effectiveness of the implemented initiatives, identify areas for improvement, and provide targeted support for OY who desire success in the job market.

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