

Aspen OYIF Theory of Change

This Theory of Change (TOC) provides an overarching conceptual framework (essentially a series of hypotheses) about how the Opportunity Youth Incentive Fund (OYIF) is expected to improve outcomes for Opportunity Youth (OY).

This TOC will serve as the foundation for Equal Measure’s (formerly the OMG Center) evaluation, helping to focus our lines of inquiry and data collection as we seek to answer our core evaluation question:

- How does implementing a collective impact approach contribute to systemic shifts in communities that improve educational, work, and life outcomes for Opportunity Youth?

Importantly, we want to stress that this is not a site-level TOC, but rather presents a conceptual framework for *how* we expect the OYIF work to unfold *across* the 21 communities, recognizing that each community has a unique set of assets and challenges, and that the work will be highly contextualized to these realities.

We expect this “theory of change” to evolve over time into a “reality of change” as we learn more from our partners in the 21 communities about how they are contributing to systemic shifts and the extent that these are improving the educational, work, and life outcomes for OY.

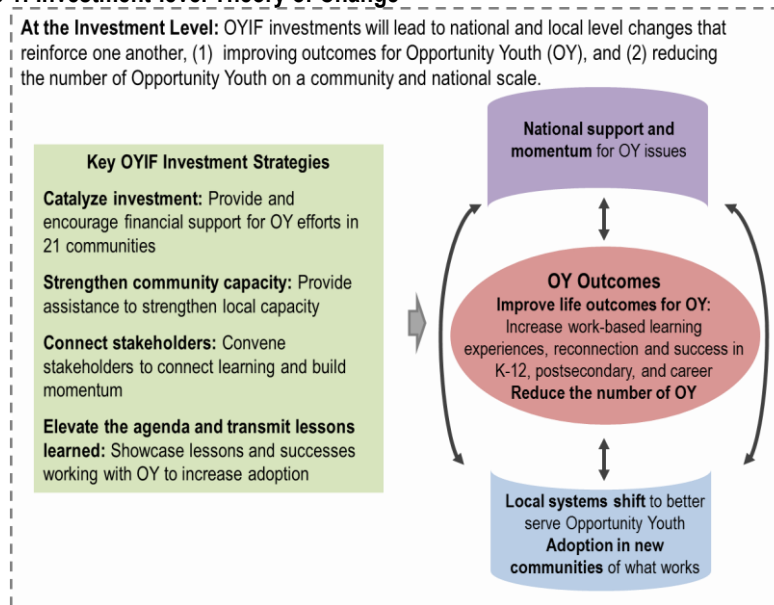
Due to the complexity and breadth of the Fund, the OYIF Theory of Change highlights the work at two levels:

- 1) The *Investment-level Theory of Change* reflects strategies employed by the Aspen Forum for Community Solutions and its partners to support and accelerate the work of the 21 OYIF communities while building national support and momentum for OY.
- 2) The *Community-level Theory of Change* reflects strategies employed among the 21 OYIF sites to improve and align local systems that lead to community-wide systemic shifts that improve outcomes for OY.

Investment-level Theory of Change

Figure 1 below provides an overview of the Investment-level TOC. This TOC reflects the key components of the OYIF support for 21 communities, articulating those key strategies and their expected impacts among OYIF communities, the national landscape, and OY.

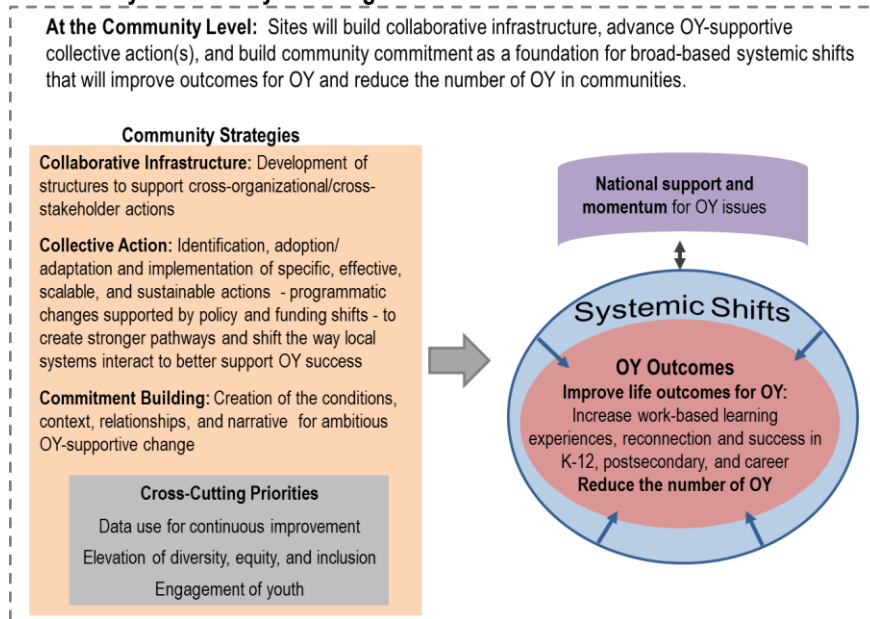
Figure 1: Investment-level Theory of Change



Community-level Theory of Change

At the community level, our evaluation will seek to understand the systemic shifts that take place, as well as how these shifts result in better support and improved outcomes for OY. Figure 2 below provides an overview of how we expect sites' strategies focused on collaborative infrastructure, collective action, and commitment building to drive outcomes for OY.

Figure 2: Community-level Theory of Change



Key concepts in the community-level theory of change include:

- **‘Stronger pathways’:** “Pathways” refers to the continuum of supports for OY reengagement; educational momentum; connection to career; as well as youth development, and on-going supports to navigate life events. ‘Pathways’ and ‘pathways development’ is often associated with direct programming, but in the context of this collective action strategy, ‘pathways’ refers to developing new and/or shifting existing programs as well as individual and shared partner practices, that can be sustainable, scalable, and that are supported by shifts in both policy (institutional, political, etc.) and funding.
- **‘Shift local systems’:** Multiple local systems intersect with the lives of Opportunity Youth, including educational (K-12 and postsecondary), juvenile justice, child welfare, workforce, business, health, and human services. Representatives of these systems are critical partners in this work; greater connections/alignment across these systems to more effectively support OY is an objective of this work.
- **‘Systemic shifts’:** “Systemic shifts” refers not specifically to shifts in these local systems, but to the changes in how communities support OY as a *whole*. Taken together, changes in collaborative infrastructure, collective action, and commitment building indicate that the “system” has shifted; while local systems may change, broader systems change is unlikely without shifts in each of these three areas.

Linking Community Strategies to Systemic Shifts and Opportunity Youth Outcomes

The table below highlights the connection between strategies focused on collaborative infrastructure, collective action, and commitment building and the types of systemic shifts to which they lead. The table also links these systemic shifts to expected outcomes for OY. Although the 21 OYIF sites will approach this work differently given context, capacity, and areas of expertise, these strategies and outcomes represent the range of approaches across OYIF communities as a whole. Lastly, this figure highlights three cross-cutting priorities embedded in sites' work: 1) the collection and use of data; 2) elevation of diversity, equity, and inclusion; and 3) youth and employer engagement. The evaluation will seek to understand the integration of these priorities in site-level efforts.

Key strategies (If communities...)	Evidence of systemic shifts (then communities will demonstrate...)	Opportunity Youth outcomes (and OY will ...)
Collaborative Infrastructure: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Strengthen backbone capacity (<i>backbone support</i>) Develop new partnerships (e.g., with employers, education, child welfare, juvenile justice) Strengthen partnership capacity (<i>continuous communication, mutually reinforcing activities, shared measurement</i>) Support vision (<i>common agenda</i>) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Increased representativeness of the partnership vis-à-vis the community Commitment among partners to sustaining partnership activities and structures (and specifically the backbone role) Increased accountability among partners to implement collective, mutually reinforcing activities, and hold one another accountable for the shared OY agenda 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Experience Work-Based Learning: Complete internship or related work experiences Reconnect to K-12: Earn a secondary credential (i.e., high school diploma or high school equivalency)
Commitment Building: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Cultivate champions Reach targeted constituents Leverage existing resources (e.g., human and financial, local and national) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Increased visibility of the shared OY agenda in the community Increased investments in new opportunities and pathways for OY (e.g., new/reallocated funding, in-kind resources, joint leveraging of funding streams) Successful reframing of issues around OY and an asset-based, public OY narrative rebranding Advocacy and policy wins Ongoing evolution/continuation/ sustainability of commitment-building activities 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Connect to Postsecondary: Enroll in a postsecondary institution Achieve Postsecondary Success: Enroll, persist and earn postsecondary credentials (e.g., industry-recognized credentials, two- and four-year degrees)
Collective Action (<i>specific, effective, scalable, and sustainable programmatic changes supported by policy and funding shifts</i>): <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Adapt existing pathway opportunities and address emerging barriers Include partners at multiple pathway points (e.g. new and existing, educational, business, and workforce) Adopt evidence-based pathways strategies (from within community and external to community) Take targeted action to address programmatic, policy, and funding gaps in local OY systems and supports 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> System level policy and/or infrastructure shifts Increased number and type of effective OY opportunities and pathways Increased quality of supports for OY in community (through programmatic, policy, and funding changes) Increased scale of supports for OY in community (through programmatic, policy, and funding changes) More effective integration of programs and organizations in existing and new pathways serving OY (including incorporation of new partners/players) Demonstrated focus on multiple OY populations (including those of highest need) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Achieve Career Success: Gain family-sustaining employment in a career field (e.g. wages)

