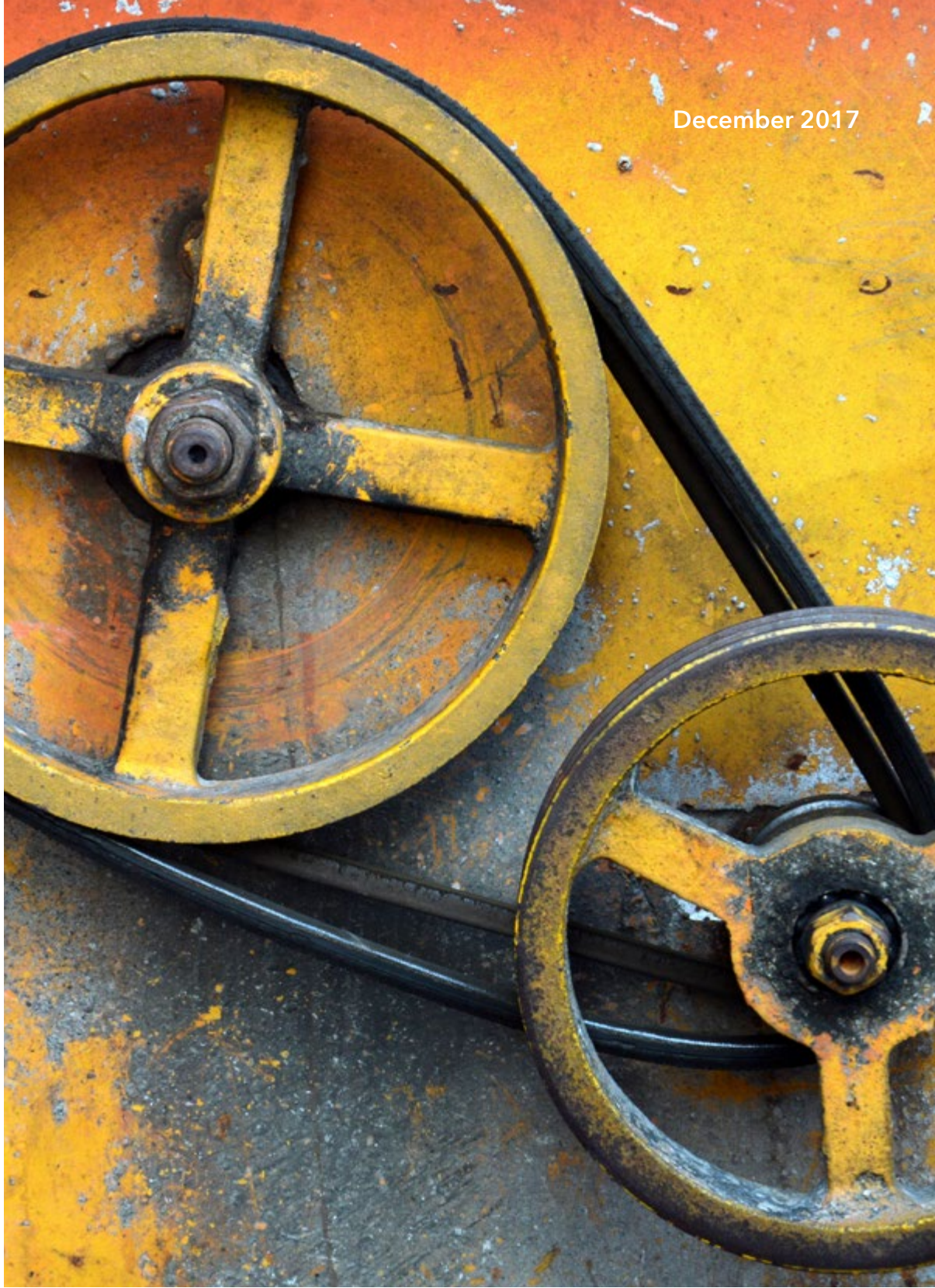


# SHIFT HAPPENS

The Aspen Institute Opportunity Youth Incentive Fund accelerates systems change

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**T**he Aspen Forum for Community Solutions' Opportunity Youth Incentive Fund (OYIF) seeks to support existing collaboratives and backbone organizations focused on building and deepening education and employment pathways for young people between the ages of 16 and 24 who are out of school and work. Using a collective impact or community collaboration approach, the 24 OYIF collaboratives are bringing together multiple stakeholders to remove barriers and improve the systems that serve "opportunity youth," with a focus on creating education and career pathways to help these young people get back on track to education, employment, and, ultimately, successful adulthood.

The OYIF has accelerated progress in OYIF communities through an investment strategy that has helped communities focus on both programming for current opportunity youth and systems change. The OYIF has emphasized systems change in order to help communities improve outcomes for opportunity youth and expand their efforts to scale. In particular, the Aspen Forum has focused on three fundamental systemic shifts: 1) building and strengthening collaborative infrastructure, 2) building diverse stakeholder commitment, and 3) implementing and sustaining collective action among stakeholders. Together, these shifts are improving the ways opportunity youth are supported to reach better outcomes in OYIF communities.

**The Aspen Forum investment strategy is accelerating progress in a network of communities seeking to improve outcomes for opportunity youth.** The OYIF has aimed to implement strategies that improve outcomes for opportunity youth on a community and national scale by providing (and generating) financial support for communities' efforts, offering technical assistance to increase local capacity, convening stakeholders to encourage and facilitate cross-site learning and build momentum for the initiative, field and movement

by featuring successful practices and lessons learned through the initiative. Despite the modest size of the initial OYIF investment in each of the original 21 sites, the Aspen Forum has operated with a funding strategy that has accelerated progress in the OYIF communities through:

### **Encouraging communities to focus on both youth outcomes and systems change**

The OYIF has emphasized tracking youth outcomes and as a result, collaboratives are working to implement strategies to meet the immediate needs of opportunity youth. At the same time, emphasis on systems change has meant these strategies are implemented in a context of collaboration, in which effective policy and practice changes can be identified, scaled and sustained.

### **Providing an initiative backbone with multi-year support**

Across all of the collaboratives that received an OYIF investment, a backbone organization—or partnership between more than one organization—has provided critical infrastructure and capacity to drive the community-wide opportunity youth agenda. Multi-year backbone support has been crucial to the OYIF because it has supported place-based investment aimed at designing a community-wide opportunity youth reconnection strategy, while also providing community collaboratives with a high level of flexibility in implementation.

### **Intentionally involving young people as partners in the work**

As a condition of funding, OYIF collaboratives have agreed to include youth in decision-making processes. Youth voice permeates the collaboratives' approaches and the OYIF learning community's overall work. The OYIF approach has lifted up youth voice locally and nationally and has ensured systemic changes informed by those who are most impacted by the challenges

and are best poised to benefit from the resolutions, are partners in problem identification and solution design.

### **Offering a clear framework, along with flexibility for local context**

Communities in the OYIF network are connected by a 5-part framework. The framework includes collaborating for impact; building effective pathways; using data to guide decisions and assess impact; leveraging funding to support and sustain innovation; and developing supportive policies. At the same time, OYIF collaboratives have had significant flexibility in initiative design and implementation in their communities, allowing for tailored approaches that are designed to benefit from and leverage the unique context, assets and conditions in each community. The OYIF framework informs the national learning agenda of the network and connects effective implementation strategies across communities.

### **Layering investment in the community for local buy-in and sustainability**

The OYIF granted initial funding to 21 community collaboratives with amounts of up to \$600,000 in total over four years, with a requirement of a minimum one-to-one local match. The Aspen Forum has also layered on new and innovative investments for various subsets of OYIF grantees (e.g., Opportunity Works, 100,000 Opportunities Demonstration Cities Pathways to Careers Fund) all aimed at deepening impact in OYIF communities.

### **Facilitating learning to meet collaboratives' needs in real-time**

The Aspen Forum hosts a national learning community designed to allow OYIF sites to exchange best practices and lessons learned. The convenings have accelerated the adoption of effective solutions at the local level while raising the profile of the work nationally. In addition to the bi-annual convenings, the OYIF operates multiple community of practice circles within the broader network of community

grantee partners, including OYIF Learning Circles, 100K Demonstration Cities Practice Exchanges and Pathway to Career Fund Partner Meetings.

**The Aspen Forum for Community Solutions is encouraging three key systemic shifts to impact, deepen and institutionalize structural change through the OYIF.** In their effort to better meet the needs of opportunity youth, collaboratives are focusing on three areas of systems change key to improving outcomes for opportunity youth:

1. Building a collaborative infrastructure.
2. Building diverse stakeholder commitment.
3. Implementing and sustaining collective action among stakeholders.

Together, these changes comprise the systemic shifts necessary to get to better education and employment outcomes for opportunity youth. These systemic shifts are evidenced in OYIF communities and includes some of the following examples:

**The Austin Opportunity Youth Collaborative has quickly aligned partners around a goal of improving education and employment outcomes for opportunity youth.** The development of a collaborative where previously there was little structure, attracting a diverse group

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of stakeholders, making a compelling case for a focus on opportunity youth, and brokering incremental but significant systems change, has led to increased private and government resources, increased focus on youth leadership development, increased access to postsecondary education, and increased attention to employment training for opportunity youth.

**The Boston Opportunity Youth Collaborative has built on existing programming to move closer to an integrated system for all opportunity youth.** In Boston the opportunity youth collaborative work has been done with multiple partners – youth and young adults chief among them – and has served to amplify and impact important issues, such as the school-to-prison pipeline, the need for education and employment pathways for older youth and young adults, and the need for employer engagement as a long-term strategy to reducing the number of opportunity youth across the city of Boston.

**The South King County Opportunity Youth Advisory Group has developed a vision for a system to serve opportunity youth and is moving toward that goal with active partnerships among a wide range of community stakeholders.** With a shared vision and focus, The Advisory Group has been able to leverage significant new resources – \$4 million in private funding and \$12 million in public funding annually – devoted to the opportunity youth population of youth and young adults in Seattle/South King County.

The Aspen Forum for Community Solution’s investment strategy, particularly its focus on key

systemic shifts in OYIF communities, has encouraged rapid systems change and has also spurred more effective programming and policies to support improved outcomes for opportunity youth.

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**“The OYIF has accelerated progress in OYIF communities through an investment strategy that has helped communities focus on both programming for current opportunity youth and systems change.”**

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For digital copies of this executive summary, or to download the full report, please visit:  
<http://aspencommunitysolutions.org/resources/>

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