



LINKING YOUTH WITH THE WORKPLACE:

What Employers, Youth and Youth-Serving Organizations Think

*A Report from the Youth Council of the
Montgomery County Workforce Investment Board*



For more information about the Youth Council or Workforce Investment Board contact:

Montgomery County Department of Economic Development
Division of Workforce Services
111 Rockville Pike, Suite 800
Rockville, Maryland 20850
240-777-2007

Douglas M. Duncan, Montgomery County Executive

www.montgomerycountymd.gov





DEPARTMENT OF ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT

Douglas M. Duncan
County Executive

David W. Edgerley
Director

Message from the Workforce Investment Board:

Thank you for taking the time to review this important report on youth workforce activities in Montgomery County. "Linking Youth With The Workplace: What Employers, Youth, And Youth-Serving Organizations Think" was prepared on behalf of the Montgomery County Workforce Investment Board's Youth Council.

The mission of the Montgomery County Workforce Investment Board (WIB) is to ensure that Montgomery County has a well-prepared, educated, trained, and adaptable workforce to meet the current and future needs of business, and that the county's workforce has the tools and resources to successfully compete in a competitive global economy. The WIB is a 30-member business driven workforce advisory board, composed of business representatives, community leaders and public officials. Members are appointed by the County Executive in accordance with the federal Workforce Investment Act (WIA) of 1998.

Central to implementing local workforce development services in Montgomery County is the Youth Council, an integral part of the local Workforce Investment Board. Established under the Workforce Investment Act of 1998, Youth Council members are called upon to serve as advocates for local youth and to ensure the provision and coordination of workforce training activities available to youth in our community. The Youth Council brings together individuals from a range of local program and policy areas who can affect the success of young people in the labor market and beyond.

The Youth Council prepared this report to provide practical information to policy makers and practitioners and to guide the work of the Youth Council on future youth development activities in Montgomery County. This report provides practical information about the youth workforce system and identifies potential gaps in service and common problems identified by those most involved with youth workforce activities. In addition, the report provides useful recommendations for future action in strengthening workforce development activities for one of our county's most important resources – our youth.

We hope you find "Linking Youth With The Workplace: What Employers, Youth, And Youth-Serving Organizations Think" useful in your understanding of the youth workforce system and in addressing the needs of our young workers. We welcome your comments, input and support in developing our future workforce in Montgomery County.

Lester Coffey
President, Coffey Communications, LLC
Chair, Montgomery County
Workforce Investment Board



Workforce Investment Services

2005 Montgomery County Workforce Investment Board

Lester Coffey, Chairperson
Coffey Communications, LLC

Louis S. Jacobson, Ph.D.
The CNA Corporation

Jeff D. Donohoe
Donohoe Construction Company

Shelley A. Johnson
Montgomery County Public Schools

Dewey Thomas, Jr., Past Chair
ENCORE Management Corporation

Sharon Julius
MSDE, Div. of Rehabilitation Services

Nhora Barrera-Murphy, Secretary
The Media Network, Inc.

Kazem Kazempour, Ph.D.
Amarex Clinical Research

Donald C. Moragne
The Success Zone

Andrew B. Larson
IUPAT, Job Corps Program

Patrick Baker
Maryland Department of Labor,
Licensing and Regulation

Karen Lee
SEEC

Sheryl Brissett-Chapman, Ed.D., ACSW
The National Center for Children & Families

Kathryn Jo Mannes
National Retail Federation

Armando J. Camacho
Bud Miller Associates, Inc.

D. Scott Minton
Housing Opportunities Commission

Stewart L. Edelstein, Ph.D.
USMSG/Universities at Shady Grove

Carmen Ortiz-Larsen
Aguas, Inc.

David W. Edgerley
Montgomery County Department of
Economic Development

Corinne Stevens
Montgomery County Department
of Health and Human Services

Michael T. Flynn
Eagle Bank

Robert A. Stewart
MCGEO

Robert T. Hastings, APR
BAE Systems North America

Toby C. Studley
SPS Consulting, LLC /
Studley Professional Staffing

Edmund F. Hodge
Adventist HealthCare

Patrick F. Valentine, Ph.D.
Montgomery College, WD&CE

Acknowledgements

We gratefully acknowledge the following focus-group participants for providing their expertise, viewpoints and generous contribution of time for the development of this report. We especially thank the 14 - 21 year old participants for their candid views and useful observations on a matter of great importance to their futures.

Youth Focus Group Members

Akosua Bamfoah	Orin Hartley	Jimmy Leiva
Sherrice Blake	Yasmin Hawkins	Charles Outlaw
Jerrold Crim	Heather Howard	Jordan Tabor
Kenneth Gray, Jr.	Calvin Jones	Charles Thomas, Jr.
Cyrus Hadavi	Timothy Koleszar	

Practitioner Focus Group Members

Pierre Castor, *Our House, Inc.*
Walter Wolfe, *Montgomery County Department of Health and Human Services*
Angila Gordon, *National Center for Children and Families*
Anna Hargrave, *Montgomery Youth Works*
Andrea Carter, *Montgomery County Public Schools*
Emi Canahuati, *Identity, Inc.*
Colin Roberts, *Maryland Division of Rehabilitation Services*
Lawrence Graham, *People's Community Baptist Church*

Business Focus Group Members

Nicholas Brown, *Affinity-Networks*
Olivia Biggs, *CVS/ Pharmacy*
Caroline Lunenfeld, *Adventist Healthcare*
Myles Gladstone, *Miller & Long*
Kevin Turner, *Suburban Hospital*
Lisa McDonald, *The Institute for Genomic Research (TIGR)*

Facilitators

Edward DeJesus, *Youth Development and Research Fund, Inc.*
Richard Luecking, *TransCen, Inc.*

Special Appreciation

Ellen Wernick

This report was prepared on behalf of the Montgomery County Workforce Investment Board's Youth Council in cooperation with the Department of Economic Development, Division of Workforce Services.

LINKING YOUTH WITH THE WORKPLACE:

What Employers, Youth and Youth-Serving Organizations Think



A Report from the Youth Council of the Montgomery County Workforce Investment Board

July 2005

VI. Conclusions

The five focus groups provided the Youth Council with a wealth of information and recommendations as well as a variety of perceptions regarding youth employment programming. After analyzing the proceedings, we reached several conclusions. Most significant among these are:

- Efforts to connect county youth with employment opportunities appear to be fragmented, unorganized, and poorly publicized.
- Youth do not know where to turn or what to do when they want to get jobs or learn about the world of work.
- Although lack of work experience is a major employment barrier for many youth, young people face a variety of other obstacles that must be addressed as well.
- Employers and youth both see an unmet need for young people to learn about the world of work, to develop basic work readiness skills, and to begin planning and working towards their long-term career goals.
- The school system's career centers offer an apparent resource that could be utilized more effectively.
- Families need to be involved.

Youth Council Recommendations for a County-Wide Strategy for Promoting Youth Employability

Based on our research of county needs and concerns, the Youth Council has determined there needs to be a county-wide approach to youth employability efforts. The action called for in our recommendations should be viewed as a multi-year effort to accomplish this.

The conclusions listed above have implications for public policy in the county, for the structure of youth programming, and for the types of services offered youth. We have organized our recommendations around these three areas. Following each recommendation we note which challenges posed by the focus groups the recommendation addresses. All focus group challenges are addressed.

In addition, we have endorsed a set of guiding principles that underlie our recommendations and provide a foundation for future efforts to help our youth link to the workplace and college and careers.

VII. Guiding Principles

- Most youth in the county need some help to successfully transition to work and adulthood. Although providers often serve specific youth populations, an overall effort should be county-wide and serve all county youth.
- Collaboration is a primary means for leveraging resources and services for youth. The Youth Council is a vehicle for encouraging and creating partnerships.
- Access to the youth employability system must be as simple and user-friendly as feasible—for all stakeholders.

I. Introduction

During the summer of 2004, the Montgomery County Youth Council conducted a series of focus groups with youth, employers, and practitioners from youth-serving organizations to identify strategies and collect recommendations to provide appropriate and comprehensive youth employment services in the County. This report presents 1) brief context on the demand (employer) and supply (youth) sides of the economy of Montgomery County; 2) a summary of each of the focus groups, 3) the major challenges identified by each group and the group's recommended solutions, 4) the conclusions drawn by the Youth Council from the proceedings, and 5) recommendations by the Youth Council in the areas of policy, program structure, and services.

II. Context: The Need for Action

The Demand Side: Industries Needing Employees

Montgomery County is a dynamic and growing area. Businesses in the county require an educated and work-ready population to provide their services and products, and depend on customers with adequate income to buy these services and products. In 2004, the Montgomery County Workforce Investment Board, which assists the County Executive in setting and guiding policy in the area of workforce development, examined county workforce needs and identified four high growth industries that are important to the county's economy and workforce.

Healthcare. Five of the 25 largest employers in the county are healthcare providers and healthcare accounts for 8 percent of the county's total employment. Projections indicate county employers will add a total of 15,128 healthcare workers between 2000-2010, which is 36.86 percent growth. Healthcare workers in the county earn \$824 per week, on average. Healthcare occupations require a wide range of post-secondary education and training, ranging from advanced degrees to post-secondary technical training to on-the-job training.¹

Retail. This industry includes retail trade, sales and related occupations, and positions in consumer service, hospitality and tourism. As in the healthcare industry, post-secondary education requirements for retail occupations range from short-term on-the-job training to college and technical degrees. The industry is becoming increasingly high tech, employers are recruiting candidates from community colleges and universities and are investing in work training to upgrade employee skills for career advancement.

In Montgomery County, retail trade employment is projected to grow by 9.84 percent between 2000-2010, adding 48,283 new jobs and filling 137,251 jobs due to turnover. The vast majority of these jobs are with small and medium-sized businesses.

Employment in sales and related occupations are projected to grow by 10 percent during the decade, or 4,675 jobs. Adding replacement needs, this occupational group has over 1700 total openings each year. Although sales and service positions have lower skill and educational requirements than those in other high-growth industries, they do require customer service skills, reading and basic math, as well as on-the-job training.

¹ Montgomery County Workforce Investment Services, "Healthcare Industry Overview, Montgomery County, Maryland." 2004

The hospitality and tourism industry accounts for 11 percent of total employment in Montgomery County, with workers earning \$460 per week on average. The sector is expected to add 21,093 jobs between 2000 and 2010.²

Construction.

Construction accounts for 6 percent of the county's total employment. Employment is projected to grow by 25 percent between 2000 and 2010, creating 8,066 new construction jobs. Wages for construction positions range from \$8.60-\$11.35 per hour for lesser skills positions to \$14-\$17 per hour for skilled positions requiring apprenticeship, e.g., carpenters, plumbers, electricians.³



“Youth need better understanding of the importance of basic skills, such as reading, writing, and getting to work on time.”

Biotechnology. Jobs in biotechnology are diverse. In addition to scientific jobs such as biochemists and biophysicists, requiring advanced degrees, there are many jobs that do not require training in biology, including writers, marketing specialists, and genetic counselors. For graduates of technical institutes and community colleges or for those with college courses in chemistry, biology, mathematics, or engineering, there are also science technician positions in pharmaceutical and medicine manufacturing. Because there is no standard definition for the industry, employment numbers and projections vary. County reports indicate between 8,500 and 15,000 people were employed in the industry between 2000 and 2003, with an annual job growth those years between 4.5% and 5%.⁴

The Supply Side: The Future Workforce

Except for construction, more than half the workers in each of these industries come from Montgomery County. In planning for their future workforce, companies have several things to consider. First, by 2000, over a quarter of the county's household population was under age 18. Between 1990 and 2000, the number of youth ages 15-19 increased by over 20 percent and now represent more than 6 percent of the county's population. The number of youth ages 10-14 increased by over 43 percent, and now represent over 7 percent of the county's population.⁵ The county is also becoming more diverse. Minorities accounted for 125 percent of county population growth between 1990-2000, and were 40 percent of the population in 2000.⁶ These figures have significant implications for workforce development efforts in the county.

² Montgomery County Workforce Investment Services, "Retail Industry Overview, Montgomery County, Maryland." 2004

³ Montgomery County Workforce Investment Services, "Construction Industry Overview, Montgomery County, Maryland." 2004

⁴ Montgomery County Workforce Investment Services, "Biotechnology Industry Overview, Montgomery County, Maryland." 2004

⁵ Maryland-National Capital Park & Planning Commission, Research and Technology Center, "Montgomery County Age Distribution, 1990 and 2000."

⁶ Maryland-National Capital Park & Planning Commission, Research and Technology Center, "Montgomery County, Maryland Population, Race and Age," (Summary of Census 2000 Data) mc-mncppc.org/research/data_library/census2000/countywide/section1.shtml

V. Focus Group Challenges and Solutions

The following chart lists the major challenges identified by each focus group and the solutions suggested by the individual focus groups.

Focus Group	Major Challenge	Solution(s) Suggested by Focus Group Participants
Employers	Finding youth who meet basic requirements, can communicate, have a positive attitude, are accountable, and have been screened for documentation	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Hire relatives of current employees. Youth-serving organizations can serve as intermediaries and select, prepare, and refer youth. Practitioners focus on preparing youth for work, particularly on improving work readiness skills.
	Keeping youth-serving organizations up-to-date about work/internship/volunteer opportunities.	
	Dealing with non-English speaking employees.	
	Retaining promising youth	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Create some type of tracking system to follow youth after HS graduation. Eliminate workday interruptions by agencies
Practitioners	Planning for future workforce help	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Practitioners provide more mentoring and career guidance to youth plan for employment now and in 2010.
	Establishing new relationships with employers	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Youth Council could help providers meet and connect with employers.
	Receiving current and accurate information about youth to provide appropriate service and support and to inform employers.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Coordinating and sharing information flow between agencies, particularly in terms of confidential material.
	Identifying career interests and aptitude.	
	Assessing youth for employment	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Development of a comprehensive tool vetted by employers.
	Arranging well-structured work experience opportunities.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Create a contract between youth and employer with expectations, duties, and scheduled opportunities for feedback.
Youth	Helping youth address a series of barriers to employment, e.g., transportation, childcare, immigration, GED attainment, lack of family support.	
	Providing mentors for youth workplace.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Look to participating employers to identify individuals at the
	Learning what workforce programs and related opportunities are available.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Programs develop better communications/public relations activities that involve young people who have benefited from the programs.
	Learning about career options and gaining work experience.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Youth-serving programs should help young people get that experience Start career exploration and work readiness programs in elementary and middle schools. Hold job fairs in low income neighborhoods Develop short internships with minority businesses.
	Proving to employers that they have the basic skills required.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Programs should include an evaluation, preferably hands-on, to demonstrate competencies gained.
	Getting "lost" in the program (younger youth)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Create case management system with regular, 2-month, contacts.
	Lack of family support for chosen job or career.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Programs explain to parents the advancement opportunities in the job.
	Dealing with various barriers to employment and training.	

Parents and other family members helped the majority of the seniors decide on a field of study (52.6 percent). High school personnel were influential, though for a smaller group: teachers (16.9 percent); counselor (4.6 percent); and career information coordinator (3.4 percent).

III. Montgomery County Youth Council

The Montgomery County Workforce Investment Board established the Youth Council in 2002 as part of the federal Workforce Investment Act, (WIA), the primary federal program addressing youth employment. The Youth Council is charged with overseeing the WIA youth programs, and also has the



“Most youth in the county need help to successfully transition into adulthood and the workforce.”

broader goal of ensuring that youth in Montgomery County have the opportunities and supports they need to be prepared to enter the workforce, including raising additional sources of funding, if needed.

This year, Montgomery County received just over \$200,000 for youth programs under WIA; WIA funds, by law, are targeted toward low-income youth. Montgomery County also dedicated about \$90,000 in local resources to support youth employment activities this year.

IV. Local Focus Groups

As described above, a variety of industries in the county have significant current and future need for employees at the entry level and above. At the same time, the number of young people in the county is growing and becoming more diverse. The Youth Council wanted to discover 1) how, and how well, county youth were being prepared for the workplace, including for employment with county employers in these high growth industries and 2) what, if any, additional opportunities and supports were needed to make that connection.

To answer those questions, the Youth Council sought input from three primary stakeholder groups: employers, practitioners of youth-serving organizations, and youth themselves. Between May and August 2004, county workforce investment services staff convened five meetings of these stakeholders: one group of employers, one group of practitioners, and three groups of young people. At each meeting, participants discussed what opportunities currently existed, what strategies worked, and what needs existed.

1. Employers

Employers participating in the focus group represented the four industries identified above – Health Care, Retail, Construction, and Biotechnology – and one other key county industry – Information Technology.



“When discussing youth programs, these young teens wanted “interviews, lots and lots of interviews” and help with their presentation and communication skills.”

Of all the focus groups, the youth groups seemed most clear about what they thought they needed and most in agreement with one another regardless of ethnicity, social class, and ability. The primary request from all three groups was: “Establish a link between us and the business world.”

During their focus groups, youth were specifically asked what would fit their needs in terms of youth employment programs. The groups all thought helping youth learn about careers, become employable, and find jobs were important county functions. They said they would like to have the county provide a structure for youth employability and access to resources (“Make sure you have resources open to you [so] that you can learn what you need to learn.”) The structure should include case management, they believed, as well as a second chance program for young people who have been in trouble. They suggested that efforts to involve minority-owned businesses be increased, and that there be consideration given to offering incentives.

Youth also believed that there should be multiple sites around the county, and the sites should be youth-friendly, close to public transportation, and provide ways to channel creative energy (music, art, healthy food). One suggestion was to attract youth to the programs or “one stop” centers with recreational activities and then incorporate discussions and sessions about work/careers/skills into the time.

Because they saw the lack of information about youth program opportunities as one of the biggest barriers for young people, the three groups each made suggestions as to how to improve communications. These included spreading the word through commercials on radio and TV, distributing fliers at churches, putting posters in places youth gather, and making announcements on the schools’ morning PA program. They thought it critical that youth be involved in this outreach — passing out fliers, doing the ads, having teens talk to teens. They stressed it was important to show that the programs do help youth get work. “If you had somebody to say, ‘I did that and this is where I am now,’ then more people are going to say ‘I want to be where you are so let me go do what you did.’”

All three groups also agreed that it was hard to get a job without previous experience. As one participant explained, employers would say, “We’ll take a chance on you but, you have to show us that you’ve already worked two years in a company and then we’ll take that chance.” The youth suggested a range of ways to address this, including evaluation projects at the end of a program to physically demonstrate what a young person has learned; connecting work with education; providing youth with role plays and mock jobs while in school, and internships with minority business owners.

The issue of retention also was important to the participants, and an area they indicated youth programs could be of more help. Their concerns fell into two categories.

First, during the actual internship or jobs program, the employers said it was critical that practitioners are more sensitive and responsive to workplace realities. For example, scheduling parole meetings during the workday was disruptive to the work schedule. “If someone could work with parole officers so that meetings with working parolees could happen after work hours or on weekends or during lunch breaks at the work site, that would go a long way,” said one employer.

Secondly, there was significant interest in developing some mechanism for continuing connections with youth to maintain a relationship for potential employment. As one representative stated, “We want to be able to stay in

touch and make the youth feel welcomed to come back if they want to continue working in health-care. It would be great if someone could assist with tracking the young people after they graduate from high school.”



“Provide youth-friendly access to employment information, work readiness and work experience activities.”

2. Youth-Serving Practitioners

The organizations represented in the focus group included the public schools, non-profit organizations, and county agencies. They worked with youth in the following categories:

- Latino youth;
- Out-of-school youth;
- Youth with emotional disabilities in residential program;
- Low-income youth on public assistance;
- Youth with physical and developmental disabilities; and
- Youth from all socio-economic groups

The session began with an identification of the factors that make a work experience successful for youth. Responses included having a mentor on the job, (“This encouragement is very important.”); a support system outside the workplace that included the family; the growth and experience youth gain; and a structured experience with clear expectations and duties of the job and feedback from the employers and youth. According to one participant, “[Youth] should feel that they have a purpose. It should matter if they show up, and they should see that with this job they will be able to move onto something else where they would make more money or get into a field they are more interested in.”

In discussing the structured experience, the practitioners agreed that the youth service providers could play a role in organizing the mechanisms for feedback while the employers set the actual tasks

and expectations. For students with disabilities, a provider suggested the employers be made aware of the youth’s needs. One organization used written contracts and found this benefited both students and employers.



“Work itself, can be a powerful developmental tool for young people.”

Participants explained that the youth they serve experience many barriers when it comes to employment and that their organizations tried to reduce these. The barriers included:

- *Transportation* – “Bus service may be available in the morning and in the evening maybe once or twice a day and never at night or on weekends. Jobs are dictated by how the kids get to work.”
- *Immigration status* – “Without legal documentation, jobs – even volunteer and unpaid work – are hard to get.”
- *Gang activity*
- *Language barriers*
- *Illiteracy* in both first language and English
- *Mental health issues* – “There are just not enough counselors and therapists to guide these young people through their mental health issues, such as autistic tendencies, LDE or ADD or both, bi-polar or depression.”
- *Health insurance* – “There are so many children without health insurance. This goes along with the issue of immigration and legal status in the country. They’re not eligible for the Maryland children’s health insurance program.”
- *Age* – “The employer will insist on only hiring an 18-year old because they are scared of the ‘teenage’ issues.”
- *Connections* – “Students with better connections get better internships. It is good if there are structured programs so there is an opportunity for all students to apply for high level internships.”
- *Academic skills* – “There seems to be only one place in the county to get a GED, and youth have to wait until the beginning of a session.”

The practitioners acknowledged that gathering adequate information to serve youth could be challenging. As one provider stated, “Youth sometimes do not disclose all the information, like a learning disability, or being a teen parent, and the lack of this information means they cannot take advantage of some services and programs they could be eligible for.”

The practitioners explained that each organization engaged in some type of assessment process to identify barriers and other issues that could negatively impact the ability of a young person to get employment. Strategies and approaches to address this included intake interviews with both the youth and with family members; trial or orientation periods during which staff could observe the youth to identify interests as well as services or supports the youth may need; and collaboration with other

service providers and the schools to exchange information, records, and work history. But even such collaboration was not always successful, with pages missing or old information.

Several practitioners indicated they have particular difficulty when it comes to identifying youth career interests. “We would not even know where to start to look for resources to test the aptitude, potential, and interest of youth for employment or college.”

They all felt that a comprehensive tool vetted by employers would be useful when assessing young people for employment. Currently, with different instruments being used, they acknowledged that some programs are not meeting business needs.

Regarding the issue of employer receptivity to hiring/supervising youth, the practitioners reported no problems with the employers with whom they had previous relationships. It was establishing new relationships that could be a challenge. One participant explained, “The employer needs to be convinced that the student is going to add something to the organization. Employers also need to be convinced that it is good for the community as well. Sometimes, one bad experience with a student can spoil the employer’s perceptions and he will not hire other students.”

The practitioners also have found that employers appear to prefer college students for internships. One participant stated that from her point of view, “Employers want to give opportunities only to those with experience.” There was some discussion about the availability of tax credits from the state for hiring people with disabilities as an incentive.

Finally, the practitioners discussed the elimination of federal funding for summer jobs programs and the apparent lack of support within schools for youth to spend part of the school day in employment.



“Although lack of work experience is a major employment barrier for many youth, young people face a variety of other obstacles that must be addressed as well.”

Both of these circumstances reduced opportunities for youth, particularly younger youth, to learn about work and gain work experience.

3. Youth

Because youth at different ages have different needs, and those who are out of school have different needs than those still attending school, the Youth Council held three youth focus groups. The two in-school focus groups were of younger youth (14-16) and older youth (17-19). The third youth focus group was for out-of-school youth ranging in age from 17-20. Youth from most cross sections of the community were represented in the focus groups.

All six of the employers at the focus group had experience working with young people through summer jobs programs, internship programs, volunteer opportunities, or direct employment. Several of those employers hired youth for permanent or part-time positions following their participation in an internship or volunteer program.

The employers indicated that they used a variety of methods to find employees, including advertising, internal and external job fairs, word of mouth, reputation, government agencies, and organizational partnerships. In recruiting youth for their programs, some companies worked with Montgomery County Public Schools while others depended on the relatives and friends of current employees.

This small cross section of employers shared a common sentiment that having youth involved at some level in the workplace adds value to their company, though their reasons differed. For example, two employers specifically noted that hiring youth was a deliberate corporate strategy to reduce turnover and cultivate leadership from within. As one employer stated, “Our goal is to get young people into the fold early and hope they will make a career out of it. Investing in young people is a major part of our strategy to build a long-term workforce with very little attrition.”¹⁴

The employers saw value in having youth-serving organizations serve as intermediaries between youth and employers. They acknowledged that few businesses have the capacity, expertise, or patience to sift through youth applications and confidently select youth who would “fit” in their respective organizations. One participant summed it up, saying, “Intermediaries can help youth stay better informed about deadlines of programs and other opportunities for work or volunteer positions.” In addition, employers want the intermediaries to be effective in preparing youth with basic work skills, engaging the family, and screening for documentation, including immigration status, social security cards, and drivers’ licenses.

The employers considered the preparation of youth an important role for the youth-serving organizations. As one participant stated, “Youth need better understanding of the importance of basic skills, such as reading, writing, getting to work on time.” Another said, “Programs should help youth plan for employment now and in 2010 for future jobs and career planning.” And another suggested that programs “help youth focus on what interests them and figure out how to take the necessary steps to make that interest a career.”

To accomplish this, the employers suggested more mentoring and career guidance from schools and workforce practitioners. Several participants also thought it important to involve the families more. “To comprehensively meet the workforce needs of youth, you need a team approach with employer, family, and practitioner all working together,” said one participant. And lastly, the employers urged practitioners to be more strategic: to help youth get jobs based on business needs, and to learn how to work with businesses more effectively. As one participant stated, “It doesn’t help when an organization wants us to hire youth without regard to the nature of the jobs available.”

Participants generally agreed that they “hire for attitude, train for skill.” They did not expect youth-serving organizations to train the youth in specific technical skills. Rather, they were interested in hiring youth with a positive attitude, maturity, and communication skills, who were accountable for their own actions and met basic work requirements. Several commented that there was a need for assistance with language barriers. In industries with a majority of non-English speaking workers, language continued to be a challenge and raised concerns of safety and quality of customer service.

¹⁴ All quotes in this Focus Group section are from transcripts of the discussions.

The groups of older youth (both in- and out-of-school) strongly urged that there be activities for students in elementary and middle school to learn about career options and interests. (“Just getting those ideas in their heads early.”) Among their suggestions were job fairs in low-income neighborhoods: “There’s really no job fair coming to the ‘hood to show these kids the different types of avenues they can take as far as a career is concerned. The only thing they know is what’s on TV — you can be a lawyer, a doctor, an athlete. They don’t know that you can have an advertising career or be a graphic artist or a CPA.” As another young man explained, “You’ve got to know what you want to do first, and that’s the kind of self-motivation. And you can be helped once you know what you’re going to do.”

Older In-School Youth. When asked what they needed in their life to achieve their career objectives, this group of high school graduates and college students were concerned about finances and staying connected to the labor market.

- “You need to be dedicated. It’s what I have to do so I can make sure I don’t lose the job, and what I’m going to do to make sure that I’m able to show up on time for the jobs. I’ll have transportation to that job.”
- “You need to have in mind where you want to work. Know the correct people for the connections that you need. And you need finances, too, to get through college to also get a job.”
- “I know my learner’s is about to expire, so I need that \$250 to pay for those classes, and if I don’t get that I’m going to have to start all over. And financing day care. Finances play a big role.”

There was also concern about how families viewed the job or career a young person might be interested in. Participants voiced the desire for external support in making such decisions as they moved towards independence. One participant requested “a program that would let youth and families know certain jobs that are available that they’re not going to view you as a failure for taking them. Something that’s going to show that this job is going to achieve a positive life style.”

Out-of-School Youth. This group was very interested in programs related to entrepreneurship. Several of the participants planned to go into business for themselves and saw the need for youth to learn how to set up a business and get loans. “I think one of the problems is that the current school system basically presents only two options: you either go through school at a great university and get your degree or you just do nothing except fast food. But there are other ways to make it.”

That interest was reflected in recommendations about a “one stop” center for youth to learn about careers and jobs. In addition to classes on time management, communications, and people skills, participants suggested the center be set up so that young people are involved in the creative arts, doing their own movies, their own videos, and their own food. The Center should be available by public transportation, provide childcare, and should “be hip,” with murals and posters of youth working.

Younger In-School Youth. Except for one young man, this group of 14 and 15 year olds had career plans (doctor, teacher, nurse) but generally were not sure what they needed for their careers except college. They understood that they could volunteer in positions that would help them learn more about their choice (“I’m going to try to be a candy striper before I start working.”). Their biggest concerns were completing high school and paying for college.

When discussing youth programs, these young teens wanted “interviews, lots and lots of interviews” and help with their presentations and communication skills. They also suggested follow-up support every two months to see how they were doing with interviews and applications and a case manager: “You know you have that one person you can call.”

The Montgomery County Public School system (MCPS) is an important source for the county’s workforce. During the 2004 school year, over 62,000 White students, over 30,700 African American students, over 26,000 Hispanic students, nearly 20,000 Asian/Pacific Islanders, and 428 American Indians were enrolled in county public schools.⁷ Annually, some 9,000 seniors are enrolled in public high schools in the county. In 2004, 91.95 percent of these seniors graduated.⁸ The dropout rate in 2003-04 for all students in grades 9-12 was 1.78 percent.⁹ That rate was higher for Hispanics (3.74) and African Americans (2.22).¹⁰

For the some 200 seniors attending the county’s alternative programs and seven special schools, the graduation rates generally are much lower, 48.3 percent and 38 percent respectively in 2003.¹¹ In addition, young people outside the school system, in the juvenile justice system, for example, face significant barriers in developing skills needed to succeed in the workplace.

Each spring, seniors are asked to complete a survey that includes information about postsecondary plans. In 2004, over 8,300 seniors completed the questionnaire. The vast majority of these young people planned to attend college full time, at a 4-year school (60.6 percent) or a 2-year school (14.4 percent), with an additional .9 percent planning to receive specialized training.

Yet 19 percent of the seniors (1,500 young people) indicated they would be working full or part-time after graduating, including 3.7 percent who were not planning to attend college. Another 3.6 percent of the graduates were uncertain about their postsecondary plans and 1.5 percent planned to enter the military.¹²

The questions become: 1) *What fields are youth planning to enter and 2) How well prepared are they to succeed in the workplace?* While we cannot determine what students have chosen which careers, according to the MCPS High School Senior Exit Survey Class of 2003,¹³ business (30.7 percent), communications (22.9 percent), engineering and scientific research (22.8 percent), and medicine and bioscience (21.3 percent) were the most popular fields of study or work among the Class of 2003.

The largest group in the Class of 2003 decided on their field of study or work in high school before reaching their senior year (46.8 percent). Less than one-quarter of the seniors (23 percent) decided during the senior year, while 12.4 percent decided during middle school and 8.6 percent during elementary school.

The survey found that the largest single factor that helped the seniors decide on their field was a school course (26.7 percent). However, over 45 percent of the respondents indicated that it was the opportunity to be exposed to and explore a career that helped them decide. These opportunities were a job outside school (16.6 percent), volunteer work (15.7 percent) and high school internship (13 percent).

7 2004 Maryland Report Card, Enrollment. <http://mdreportcard.org>

8 2004 Maryland Report Card, Graduation Rate, <http://mdreportcard.org/graduates.asp?k=15AAA>

9 2004 Maryland Report Card, Dropout Rate, <http://mdreportcard.org/drop.asp?K=15AAAA>

10 2004 Maryland Report Card, Dropout Rate by Race and Gender, http://mdreportcard.org/dropout_rg.asp?K=15AAA

11 Montgomery County Public Schools, “Schools At A Glance 2003-2004,” Alternative Programs - #239 and Summary: County Special Schools, www.mcps.k12.md.us/regulatoryaccountability/glance/fy2004

12 Students completing the High School Graduate Follow-Up Questionnaire within 30 days of anticipated graduation. 2004 Maryland Report Card, Grade 12 Documented Decisions. <http://mdreportcard.org/highcompslea.asp?K=15AAAA>

13 Office of Shared Accountability, Montgomery County Public Schools. <http://www.mcps.k12.md.us/departments/sharedaccountability/surveys.shtm>

Linking Youth With The



W O R K P L A C E

- Work itself, can be a powerful developmental tool for young people. All initiatives and programs in the youth employability system will incorporate youth development principles by engaging youth and encouraging positive growth and development.
- All programs and initiatives shall build on and incorporate practices that are known to be effective. Much is already known about quality youth programming; we do not need to reinvent the wheel.

VIII. Policy Recommendations

1. Improve collaboration and service coordination.

Foster connections between agencies and youth-serving providers through the Youth Council. Consider a number of strategies such as broadening the council membership; identifying and developing strategic partnerships with youth organizations, government agencies, schools, employers and others; hosting networking sessions; and creating centralized methods for sharing information.

Focus Group challenges addressed: Keeping providers up-to-date on work opportunities; Establishing new relationships with employers; Receiving current and accurate information about youth.

2. Keep community informed.

Let youth (and others) know what's available for them. Develop and implement a public relations/marketing plan for youth employability centers and opportunities. Use recommendations from youth focus groups.

Focus Group challenges addressed: Learning what programs and services are available.

IX. Structure Recommendations

Provide a single point of entry to youth employment information and assistance.

Brand youth employment in the county with a single entity. Have a consortium of service provider partners create a centralized resource that is easy to access, with a process that is governed by agreed-upon principles. Physically, there could be various access points, including youth centers within each of the existing One-Stop Centers, on the Internet, through youth-serving organizations, and at the schools.

For Youth

Provide youth-friendly access to employment information, work readiness and work experience activities, job placement and follow-up, and referrals to support services.

For Employers

- Centralize information about internships, volunteer opportunities, and jobs so that employers do not have to respond to schools and providers all calling them, and schools and providers don't have to do that calling.
- Conduct workshops for employers participating in WIA youth programs to address youth employment contracts, mentoring, strategies for working with youth with limited English proficiency; and support available during youths' employment. Eventually, workshops and support would be open to any county employer hiring youth.
- Explore means to track all participants, not just WIA.

For Practitioners

- Develop means of sharing information about the youth that respect confidentiality agreements and a high level of integrity in sharing.
- Increase ability to draw upon other resources, including those for youth supportive services and staff development opportunities.

Focus Group Challenges addressed: *Finding Youth who meet basic requirements; Keeping providers up-to-date; Working with non-English speakers; Retaining promising youth; Arranging well-structured work experience opportunities; Helping youth address a series of barriers to employment/Dealing with various barriers to employment; Learning what opportunities are available.*

X. Services Recommendations

Develop a continuum of employability services for county youth that incorporates youth development principles and practices.

- A. Expand knowledge of effective youth employment/development practices. Youth Council to investigate effective practices from other Workforce Investment Boards, Youth Councils, and quality youth employment/development programs around the country.
- B. Build capacity of providers. Conduct workshops and support professional development opportunities that enable staff of non-profits and agencies to gain better understanding of youth workforce development factors.
- C. Design services and activities that are age and stage appropriate
 - Start young, in middle school, emphasizing career awareness and exploration.
 - Offer different opportunities (from career awareness to simulated work environments to field trips to internships to speakers to college visits to application and interview skills to job placement) that are appropriate to the age and developmental stage of youth from middle school through high school and beyond.

Executive Summary

The Montgomery County Workforce Investment Board (WIB) advises the County Executive in setting and guiding policy in the area of workforce development. The WIB's Youth Council has the goal of ensuring that youth in Montgomery County have the opportunities and supports they need to be prepared to enter and succeed in the workforce.

Issue

Early work experience is an important part of a young person's transition to adulthood and a productive work life. In Montgomery County, companies in high growth industries are concerned about finding and recruiting qualified entry-level employees. In 2004, the Youth Council sponsored focus groups with employers, representatives of youth-serving organizations, and youth to discover 1) how, and how well, county youth were connecting to the workplace, including with county employers in high growth industries and 2) what, if any, additional opportunities and supports were needed to enhance that connection.

Conclusions

Analysis of the focus group proceedings led the Youth Council to several conclusions. Most significant among these are:

- All the groups thought helping youth learn about careers, become employable, and find jobs were important county functions.
- Efforts to connect county youth with employment opportunities appear to be fragmented, unorganized, and poorly publicized.
- Youth report they do not know where to turn or what to do to get jobs or learn about the world of work.
- Although lack of work experience is a major employment barrier for many youth, young people face a variety of other obstacles that must be addressed as well.
- Employers and youth both see an unmet need for young people to learn about the world of work, to develop basic work readiness skills, and to begin planning and working towards their long-term career goals.

Youth Council Recommendations

The Youth Council calls for a multi-year, countywide approach to youth employability efforts. The report's recommendations concern public policy in the county, the structure of youth programming, and the types of services offered youth. They address all the challenges identified by the focus groups.

- Through a variety of strategies, including networking sessions, strategic partnerships, and creating centralized methods of sharing information, improve collaboration and service coordination between county agencies and youth-serving organizations.
- Develop and implement a public relations/marketing plan for youth employability centers and opportunities.
- Have a consortium of service provider partners create a single point of entry to youth employment information and assistance that is easy for youth, employers, and providers to access.
- Increase capacity of youth service providers through workshops and professional development opportunities.
- Design services and activities that address career awareness and exploration and provide work experience in ways that are appropriate to the age and developmental stage of youth from middle school through high school and beyond.
- Create an individualized process to certify that youth have developed work readiness skills.
- Explore solutions to other barriers to employment, including transportation, childcare, and GED and English language programs.

The Youth Council is in the process of developing a long-term plan of action to address these recommendations. Initial efforts include broadening the membership of the Youth Council, prioritizing recommendations, and identifying needed and available resources.

Montgomery County Workforce Investment Board YOUTH COUNCIL - 2005

Jeff Donohoe

Donohoe Construction Company

Kathryn Jo Mannes

National Retail Federation

D. Scott Minton

Housing Opportunities Commission of Montgomery County

Richard G. Luecking

TransGen, Inc.

Barbara Ott

YMCA of Silver Spring

Cindy Price

YMCA - Youth and Family Services

Benita Scott

USDA, Graduate School, Parent Representative

Lisa Albury

National Center for Children and Families

Kate O'Sullivan

National Youth Employment Coalition

Richard Bienvenue

Our House Job Training Center for Youth

Carol S. Haig

MSDE, Division of Rehabilitative Services

Shelley A. Johnson

Montgomery County Public Schools

Toby Studley

SPS Consulting, LLC

Jane Wilde

Montgomery County Conservation Corps

Edward DeJesus

Youth Development and Research Fund, Inc.

- Explore mentoring options and encourage their implementation.
- Institute case management and follow-up system.
- Incorporate other age/stage related suggestions from youth focus groups

D. Create an individualized process for youth work readiness skills certification.

- Locate standardized assessment tool to use to determine each youth's work readiness skills at entry. This tool should be approved by local employers.
- Develop individual employability plan with each youth participant. Involve family, guardian, and/or other significant adult.
- Create methods for tracking and evaluating youths' progress and competencies attainment.
- Develop a means whereby youth have "evidence" to present to employers that they are work ready.

E. Explore transportation solutions to one-stop centers, providers, and jobs.

F. Explore GED and other alternative educational opportunities, as well as programs for youth with limited English proficiency.

G. Explore childcare solutions.

Focus Group Challenges addressed: *Finding youth who meet requirements; Working with non-English speakers; Planning for future workforce; Identifying career interests and aptitude; Assessing youth for employment; Arranging well-structured work experience opportunities; Providing mentors for youth; Learning about career options and gaining work experience; Providing to employers evidence youth have the basic skills required; Getting "lost" in the program; Lack of family support for chosen job or career; Dealing with various barriers to employment and training.*

XI. Summary

The Youth Council is in the process of developing a plan of action to address these recommendations. Initial efforts include broadening the membership of the Youth Council, prioritizing recommendations, and identifying needed and available resources.

We look forward to collaborating with other county agencies, the private sector, and the school system to address the workforce challenges confronting county employers and youth, using the suggestions and recommendations in this report as a base for growth critical to Montgomery County's economic strength.