



**Innovating Under Pressure**  
**The Story of the 2009 ARRA-Funded Summer Youth Employment Program**  
**Center for Youth and Communities, Heller School for Social Policy and Management**  
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*"We don't think everybody is perfect, but we think there is a lot of good news coming from programs ... If there were mistakes made, we're happy to correct them because we want to make sure this program sticks around.... [We are focused on] "working out the kinks." Assistant Secretary Jane Oates*

### **Background**

In an effort to document the implementation and lessons learned from the ARRA-funded Summer Youth Employment Program, Brandeis University conducted interviews and site visits and developed case studies of the effort to "innovate under pressure" in four communities during the summer of 2009: Chicago, IL; Detroit, MI; Indianapolis and Marion County, IN; and Phoenix and Maricopa County, AZ. Those four communities received an infusion of more than \$37 million and provided an estimated 16,650 summer jobs for low income/disadvantaged youth. Major findings from the study include the following:

### **Key Findings**

#### **I. Good things did indeed happen in this re-learning year**

In all four communities, public agencies *established new operating structures; developed and strengthened public/private partnerships; involved youth in meaningful work and learning* experiences that incorporated best practice principles from youth development; and *demonstrated a commitment to continuous improvement* (using data, learning from mistakes, commitment to quality) on their way to providing thousands of young people with opportunities to work, earn, and learn.

- **New Operating Structures:** Chicago created a "Hub" and "Spokes" network of program providers and worksites that included private employers, public agencies, nonprofits, and the city's major cultural institutions. Detroit established a new collaborative approach using a strong city-intermediary collaborating with philanthropic leadership and investment. Phoenix and Maricopa County developed a coordinated regional strategy that provided consistency across the city, suburbs, and rural areas. Indianapolis and Marion County developed a network of contractors, including several schools, to create a program explicitly linking education and work.
- **Partnerships:** Detroit philanthropic organizations provided the spark to develop a comprehensive, city-wide approach. Chicago's summer programs built on an existing effort to create a comprehensive citywide youth development strategy involving the city's youth employment programs, public schools, housing and park district agencies, business groups, and the citywide after-school program. Indianapolis and Marion County expanded its network of partners with a commitment to workforce development, youth, and education.
- **Meaningful Work and Learning:** The concepts of meaningful work and learning were reflected in the policies and approach in all four communities, and all four communities had programs that provided rich work-based learning opportunities and reflected the elements of high quality youth employment and youth programs – meaningful work, connections to learning, involvement of caring adults, opportunities for leadership, etc.
- **Continuous Improvement:** Leadership and staff in all four communities were committed to "getting it right." Detroit was committed to total quality management and responded quickly to payroll system problems and other dilemmas; in Chicago, the city and its "Hubs" made constant adjustments to meet the challenges of documenting eligibility; Indianapolis and Marion County worked to design programs that met employer and local labor market needs. Staff across the board demonstrated resiliency, determination, and a willingness to work until the job was done in order to ensure that young people made it into jobs.

#### **II. Challenges: "Working out the Kinks"**

The biggest challenges were related to "nuts and bolts" issues like eligibility and finances, which were magnified by the issues of *timing and time*. The summer program was a fast moving train, with few systems in place to help it move smoothly down the track. As a result, all of the communities struggled to get large numbers of young people *certified as eligible and enrolled*; to ensure that *funds were available to pay them*; to *match youth to appropriate jobs*; to *assess and report* on their experiences and to create *new opportunities in "green" industries*.

- **Eligibility:** All of the communities struggled with the need to document WIA eligibility for thousands of young people in a short time-frame at the beginning of the summer. The process was made more challenging by the fact that eligibility for some common programs aimed at low income families (National Free/Reduced Price Lunch program) could not serve as proxies for WIA eligibility. Eligibility issues meant delays for youth ready to start summer jobs (and for their employers); less staff time devoted to program monitoring and technical assistance; and may have served as barriers to enrollment for those youth most in need and least able to provide documentation required by the program.
- **Funding/Cash Flow:** Nonprofit organizations in every community had to scramble to raise funds and create new or extend existing lines of credit in order to meet the 'up-front' costs of staffing and payroll for large numbers of summer workers while waiting for reimbursement. While some communities (notably Detroit) were able to create funding pools and provide short-term loans, the financial demand of the summer program limited the participation of smaller community-based organizations in the summer program.
- **Job Matching:** In all four communities, the quick start-up, short time-frame and the challenges of documenting eligibility also limited the opportunities for local programs to provide a careful match between participant interests and jobs. In some communities (Chicago, for example), a central application database provided some opportunities for matching, but in many cases eligible youth had to be simply pointed towards available jobs.
- **Assessment and Reporting:** The rapid start-up also meant that work assessment, data management, and reporting systems were not ready and often unable to handle to volume of data to be entered, the numbers of young people to be assessed, or the need to draw data out of existing reporting systems for summer reporting.
- **Green Jobs.** While all of the communities were able to establish some "Green" jobs, numbers were limited and the jobs often represented work in traditional rather than "new" green industries (agriculture and forestry vs. solar panel production, for example). Detroit offers the best example through a private sector partnership devoted to the "greening of Detroit."

### III. Lessons and Opportunities: Envisioning improvement

One underlying lesson stands out: to successfully innovate under pressure, leadership trumps all. Leaders in these four communities were strong, resilient risk takers who shared three core management qualities: mission focus, results orientation, and a commitment to monitoring for continuous improvement. The following lessons and opportunities could be considered in envisioning improvement:

- **Facilitate the creation of alternate pools of money/lines of credit.** Communities with such resources (particularly Chicago and Detroit) had a "fail-safe" and important flexibility with respect to moving quickly, paying youth, and cash flow.
- **Increase program lead time.** Community respondents said time and again that the one change that would help in the future would be more time to plan and ramp up.
- **Take advantage of education and outreach opportunities.** With so many youth involved in one nationwide program, an opportunity exists to educate youth on issues besides employment (e.g., financial literacy, health). This aligns well with broader youth development goals.
- **Increase flexibility in policies and regulations.** More flexible eligibility and certification policies would enable sites not only to serve youth better but also help them serve more of the youth who need these programs the most.
- **Build capacity.** Adaptive capacity helped the four communities to make the most of this opportunity. The federal government might consider helping participating communities to increase their capacity to build the local leadership and partners needed to respond effectively to new and demanding circumstances as they arise.
- **Think big.** Work and learning: this summer re-opens the door to broader links between employment and training and education – "year-round summer"

*Draft copies of in-depth case studies of all four communities and a Lessons Learned Summary Report are available from the Center for Youth and Communities at Brandeis University's Heller School for Social Policy and Management and from USDOL/ETA.*