Urban Alliance: Improving Workforce Readiness and Preventing Youth Disconnection across the Washington, D.C. Region

OVERVIEW

Program Basics

- Urban Alliance provides high school seniors with work readiness training, a paid 10-month internship in an office setting, individualized mentorship, and other personalized supports.
- The program focuses on "middle-of-the-road" students who may be at risk of disconnecting from school and employment.

How Does Urban Alliance Improve Economic Mobility?

- Urban Alliance helps prevent youth disconnection. Compared to adults who experienced disconnection at some point in their lives, adults who never experienced disconnection earn higher wages, are more likely to own a home, are more likely to be employed, and are more likely to be in good health.
- Urban Alliance provides participants with work readiness and soft skills training, which are associated with higher lifetime earnings and a range of other positive outcomes in adulthood.
- Urban Alliance improves the likelihood of participants graduating from high school and enrolling in college. Individuals who graduate from high school and complete post-secondary education earn significantly more over their lives and are more likely to attain high-quality employment.

EVIDENCE LEVEL: STRONG (SECOND-HIGHEST TIER)

Urban Alliance demonstrated positive results in a randomized control trial completed by the Urban Institute in 2017.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Target population</th>
<th>Program cost</th>
<th>Implementation locations</th>
<th>Dates active</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>High school seniors</td>
<td>$10,000–12,500 per participant</td>
<td>Baltimore, Chicago, Detroit, Northern Virginia, and Washington D.C.</td>
<td>1996–present</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Over the past several years, civic leaders across the Washington, D.C. metropolitan region have collectively recognized the growing need for programs that help lower-income students gain early exposure to the labor market, create positive employment trajectories after high school, and prevent youth disconnection.

Urban Alliance was founded in Washington, D.C. in 1996. Its flagship program provides high school seniors with an intensive work readiness and skills development curriculum, a paid, nine-month internship in a professional setting, and one-on-one coaching and mentoring from program staff and internship mentors.

Washington, D.C. had long experienced high rates of youth disconnection and low levels of youth employment. A 2011 analysis demonstrated that at least 6,720 of the city’s 16–24 year olds were not in school or in work and that only 68% of 20–24 year olds were in school, working or actively seeking work.

Youth disconnection is particularly pervasive in neighborhoods east of the Anacostia River, which have suffered from decades of disinvestment and neglect. In 2013, 33 percent of young people aged 16–24 in D.C.’s Southeast quadrant were out of school and unemployed.

Over the past two decades, the cost of living in Washington, D.C. has risen dramatically, pushing many low-income families into the surrounding suburbs of Maryland and Virginia. This displacement has fueled the growth of hidden pockets of poverty in relatively wealthy areas. In several school districts across the region, over half of students now qualify for free or reduced-price meals.

Many of these suburban schools did not have resources or programming focused on the needs of lower-income students and lacked services that helped under-resourced students develop post-graduation plans.

The Solution
- Over the past several years, civic leaders across the Washington, D.C. metropolitan region have collectively recognized the growing need for programs that help lower-income students gain early exposure to the labor market, create positive employment trajectories after high school, and prevent youth disconnection.
- Urban Alliance was founded in Washington, D.C. in 1996. Its flagship program provides high school seniors with an intensive work readiness and skills development curriculum, a paid, nine-month internship in a professional setting, and one-on-one coaching and mentoring from program staff and internship mentors.
- In recent years, Urban Alliance has expanded programming to provide more rigorous workforce readiness training to students before their senior year of high school.
- After a successful expansion to Baltimore in 2008, Urban Alliance began expanding throughout the Washington, D.C. region.
- The program’s Northern Virginia replication launched in 2013, and its Maryland operations began in 2017.
URBAN ALLIANCE'S IMPLEMENTATION THROUGHOUT THE D.C. METROPOLITAN AREA

Major Accomplishments

- Urban Alliance has grown within and beyond Washington, D.C., now providing internships to around 250 under-resourced youth per year across the metropolitan region. The program offers internships to over 150 students per year in the District; around 80 students per year in Alexandria, Arlington County and Fairfax County in Virginia; and around 40 students per year in Montgomery and Prince George’s County in Maryland.

- In recent years, Urban Alliance has begun providing robust workforce readiness programming to students across the region before their senior year. This has allowed the program to reach more students than is possible with the internship program alone, serving over 500 students in Washington, D.C., Virginia, and southern Maryland per year.

- In every county and school district it operates in, the program has helped galvanize networks of public sector leaders, schools, businesses, non-profits, and philanthropies focused on preventing youth disconnection and improving outcomes for youth following high school graduation.

- Program participants are paid, earning approximately $7–8,000 over the course of their internship. 80% of students use at least a portion of their income to help cover household expenses.

Keys to Success

- Several large employers have supported many interns per year and have served as vocal champions in encouraging other businesses across the region to host interns of their own.

- Public and civic sector champions are critical conveners for the sorts of partnerships with schools and businesses that Urban Alliance relies on. In many instances across the region, Mayors and County Executives have helped bring school leadership, local nonprofits, and local employers to the table.

- Support from school leadership is critical for recruiting students, managing the logistics of getting students to their internships, and enabling work readiness programming for non-seniors.

- Meticulous data collection and a successful randomized controlled trial (completed by the Urban Institute in 2017) helped attract significant funding from the public sector and philanthropy, fueling the Urban Alliance’s growth across the region and beyond.

TIMELINE

URBAN ALLIANCE IS FOUNDED IN WASHINGTON, D.C.
1996
Andrew Plepler, then an attorney for the U.S. Department of Justice, co-creates Urban Alliance with Jeffrey Zients. The program begins by providing internships to six seniors in one school, Anacostia Senior High School in Southeast Washington, D.C.

PROGRAM EXPANDS RECRUITING ACROSS WASHINGTON, D.C.
2002–2005
A change in District-wide policy formalizes a process for high school seniors to attend classes for only half a day. Urban Alliance moves to recruit half-day students from several high schools. By 2005, the program operates across the city.

FIRST RANDOMIZED CONTROLLED TRIAL BEGINS
2011
Urban Alliance partners with the Urban Institute to evaluate the program’s impact. The evaluation tracks the progress of over 1,000 participants in Washington, D.C. and Baltimore over several years.
**TIMELINE, CONTINUED**

- **GRANT ENABLES EXPANSION TO NORTHERN VIRGINIA**
  November 2012
  Urban Alliance receives $1.7 million from Venture Philanthropy Partners to expand into Northern Virginia and prepare for an expansion into Maryland. Programming begins in Alexandria in Fall 2013.

- **URBAN ALLIANCE WINS FIVE-YEAR GRANT FROM FEDERAL GOVERNMENT**
  2015
  The U.S. Department of Education awards Urban Alliance a $9.6 million grant from the Investing in Innovation Fund, allowing the program to serve more youth in its existing locations, expand to a new region, streamline and strengthen its national operations, and further evaluate its results.

- **URBAN ALLIANCE RECEIVES FUNDING TO LAUNCH IN MONTGOMERY COUNTY, MD**
  October 2015
  The Greater Washington Community Foundation (formerly the Community Foundation of the National Capital Region) publishes a report urging county leaders to seek solutions to improve outcomes for Opportunity Youth. Urban Alliance is identified as a promising strategy; the Foundation soon funds Urban Alliance to expand to Montgomery County. Programming begins in Fall 2017.

- **LAUNCH OF FIRST PRE-SENIOR YEAR WORKFORCE READINESS TRAINING PROGRAMMING**
  Fall 2016
  With $750,000 funding from AT&T, Urban Alliance begins offering work skills training to 11th graders in Fairfax County. Around 30 students receive services per year.

- **WORKFORCE READINESS TRAINING EXPANDS IN WASHINGTON, D.C**
  Fall 2018
  Urban Alliance partners with Martha’s Table, an anti-poverty non-profit, to deliver work readiness training to 9th, 10th, and 11th grade students in Southeast D.C. The program now serves over 250 students per year.
THE PROCESS

Confronting the Problem

- Growing evidence across the Washington, D.C. metropolitan region demonstrates high rates of youth disconnection and low rates of youth employment.
- Increasing cost of living in Washington, D.C. pushes many lower-income families into surrounding suburbs. Suburban school districts are underequipped to serve increasing numbers of low-income students.
- Urban Alliance had developed a strong track record of success in Washington, D.C since the mid-1990s. With support from Venture Philanthropy Partners and the Greater Washington Community Foundation, Urban Alliance begins conversations with civic leaders in Northern Virginia and Maryland to assess feasibility of expansion.
- Public, private, and civic sector champions in Northern Virginia and Maryland convene networks of school leaders, employers, local nonprofits, and philanthropy to lay groundwork for Urban Alliance’s operations.

Designing the Strategy

- Since its founding in 1996, Urban Alliance’s core service has been connecting students to paid, nine-month internships with local employers and providing a variety of professional and personal supports to each student.
- Students work approximately 12 hours per week during the school year and close to full time during the summer. They are supported by a one-on-one mentor at their workplace along with ongoing support from Urban Alliance staff.
- Each participants receives six weeks of pre-employment skills training before starting their internship. Once participants have started their internship, one day per week is spent in workshops focused on post-high school planning, college and career application assistance, and life skills development.

Allocating the Funding

- While the bulk of Urban Alliance’s funding comes from employer partners’ direct support of interns, the program seeks philanthropic and public sector support for its launch in both Northern Virginia and Maryland. This allows the organization to build its base of employer partners while still serving cohorts of 30 students in its first year.
- Initial expansion funding comes from a $1.7 million grant from Venture Philanthropy Partners over five years. Program operations in Northern Virginia are also supported by local CDBG dollars via the Alexandria Fund for Human Services.
- In Montgomery County, operations receive $187,500 of public funding via the Greater Washington Community Foundation’s Children’s Opportunity Fund.
Implementing the Plan

- For both Northern Virginia and Maryland, once funding is secured and a critical mass of employer partners confirmed, Urban Alliance begins logistical work with school districts, creating plans for early release for participants, finding spaces that could be used for skills training workshops, arranging transportation from schools to internships, etc.
- Recruitment occurs largely at schools through information sessions, classroom visits, and partnerships with teachers and guidance counselors, who serve as major referral sources.
- Program visibility among employers increases through a series of high-profile events with the U.S. Chamber of Commerce, Maryland Congressman Jamie Raskin, Montgomery County Executive Marc Elrich, then-Vice President Joe Biden, and Virginia State Sen. Adam Ebbin.

Measuring & Refining the Approach

- In 2011, Urban Alliance partners with the Urban Institute to conduct a multi-year evaluation of the high school internship program in Washington, D.C. and Baltimore, MD. The findings are published in 2017 and demonstrate the positive effects the program has on college enrollment and workforce readiness skills. A second randomized controlled trial is currently underway to deepen the organization’s learnings.
- In 2016, recognizing the major barrier to serving more youth is the number of employers willing to sponsor student interns, Urban Alliance begins offering workforce readiness training to 30 11th graders per year in Fairfax County.
- In 2018, this more robust workforce readiness programming expands to serve 150–300 9th-11th graders in southeast Washington via a partnership with Martha’s Table, a local anti-poverty nonprofit.
- In Prince George’s County, Maryland, the pre-senior year workforce training curriculum is delivered in-school to career and technical education students. Urban Alliance also supplements school efforts to find work placements for these students.
ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

Results for America would like to thank the following individuals for their help in completing this case study: Eshauna Smith, Emily Rogers, and Julie Farkas of the Urban Alliance; and Alessandra Hashemi.

THE ECONOMIC MOBILITY CATALOG

This case study is part of Results for America’s Economic Mobility Catalog, a tool designed to help local government leaders identify and implement evidence-based strategies to improve economic mobility outcomes for their residents. The Economic Mobility Catalog is supported by a grant from the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation. The findings and conclusions contained within are those of the authors and do not necessarily reflect positions or policies of the foundation.

RESULTS FOR AMERICA

Results for America helps decision-makers at all levels of government harness the power of evidence and data to solve our world’s greatest challenges. Our mission is to make investing in what works the “new normal,” so that when policymakers make decisions, they start by seeking the best evidence and data available, then use what they find to get better results.

RESOURCES

- Urban Alliance website
- 2017 Urban Institute randomized controlled trial of Urban Alliance
- Greater Washington Community Foundation report on Opportunity Youth