



## Partners for Impact, LLC

Beth Bordeaux, MSW  
Principal and Founder

Stan Holt, PhD  
Senior Advisor

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# NextGen Career Center Redesign: Final report with recommendations and development plan

## BACKGROUND

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The Capital Area Workforce Development Board (CAWDB) hired Partners for Impact, LLC to contract services to improve the hub of career readiness services available to youth throughout Wake and Johnston County. The CAWDB has successfully been reaching a number of young people across both of these counties and providing them with job readiness skills and connections to employment opportunities. Yet there are still eligible young people not being served and there are gaps in the current services.

This document outlines the results of continued conversations around the activities that are being considered in both Wake and Johnston County around the redesign of their NextGen Centers. As a result of previous elements of this assessment it was agreed that each county had enough unique aspects to their workforce development systems and county structures that they would be treated separately. As a result, Partners for Impact held planning meetings in both Johnston and Wake County as opposed to one regional summit that had been proposed in the original scope of work. This report describes significant activities, findings, next steps and development strategies for each county.

We started this process with the hypothesis that space plays a major impact in the engagement of young people. What we discovered is that space is important, and the relationships between staff and young people are likely to be more crucial in the long-term engagement and success of youth seeking services. Nevertheless, we have provided a section of space design recommendations as a final element in this report.

This report serves as the fourth and fifth deliverable of the contract between Partners for Impact and the Capital Area Workforce Development Board.

## JOHNSTON COUNTY

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As a result of the stakeholders meetings in Johnston County, Partners for Impact convened two different planning sessions. The first session included providers who examined the system. Through the use of journey maps and simple system assessments, the providers were able to find some key

leverage points to consider in the future. The second session began discussions about space and how the NextGen Center can be more youth centric.

### Systems Assessment and Leverage Points

The first session was made up of staff from the primary service providers for those seeking workforce development services. Participants were asked to think of a young person that they have worked with and complete a journey map for that young person. The journey map asked them to say how they met the young person, how did the young people come into the agency for services, what assessments were done, when and what referrals were made, where are they now? Because the participants were service providers, the goal was to see where and when the providers overlapped and what gaps might appear. Each one of the participants shared a story of a young person.

At the end of the session, the Partners for Impact consultant asked about why there was only one young man as the typical client. The majority were young women with at least one child., There followed a bit of discussion acknowledging that there are fewer services in general for young men. There is a greater expectation of self-sufficiency among these young men. The providers also shared a concern that many of these young men resorted to criminal activity in order to get their needs met.

As the group talked about the strategies for keeping all of these young people engaged in services, they all agreed that **staff relationships and relationships with peers were critical**. The participants talked about the importance of building the young person's **sense of pride**. Ensuring they were acknowledged for accomplishments and received positive rewards for their successes. They talked about the participation and how to move beyond "money as a motivator." Providers shared their sense of disappointment when young people were motivated to participate so that their name would be on the "angel tree at Christmas time for presents."

The providers talked about the **self-interest** that many of the young people have. These young people seem to want to **help others and work with others** only when **they get something out of it** or it makes them **feel valued**. There was a sense that if providers could understand what the underlying motivation is for young people to participate in programming that they could better meet a young person's needs. This led to the quick mention of **motivational interviewing** as an important technique that helps assess the motivation of young people.

One of the big issues that emerged was Medicaid transformation in the State of NC. The changes in Medicaid will create a **standard and tailored care pool of insurance benefits**. The standard benefits will go through big, traditional insurance providers. All of the young people will likely be in the standard pool with the exception of the young people who have some of the most severe physical and behavioral health needs. The concern is that some of the care that is really needed may not be available in the standard pool of services. It was the groups understanding that the insurance providers will have community relations staff who are supposed to relate with the local communities and discuss differences between standard and tailored services. The agreement was to think about how to prepare for these changes and advocate for the best outcome so that young people have the resources they need for success.

Through the conversation participants began to fully understand all the parts of the Workforce Innovation and Opportunity Act (WIOA). The group discussed which agencies in the room are receiving funding and support from the various titles. Agencies receiving Title 1, 2, and 4 funding

were in the room. As an observer of the discussion, it was interesting to see that **not all participants understood some of the other elements of the WIOA.**

As the participants talked about the Workforce Development System, a leverage point emerged. Johnston County could **leverage more Title 2 funding** if the county can improve the **retention rate at Johnston County Community College** and/or demonstrate the measurable supportive gains. If young people enroll and then leave school they are required to be disenrolled in 90 days. The coming and going nature of the young people makes the success changes and numbers difficult to maintain. There are still some programs that “skim the cream” and only enroll students who are likely to succeed. However, all agreed that finding strategies to keep young people engaged is the ideal option in Johnston County.

As the conversation came to a close, the participants agreed that the only reason Johnston County NextGen does not serve more young people, is because they do not have the additional resources. This means that providers are uncomfortable promoting their services. They are concerned that if they promote services and do not have the capacity to deliver those services, young people would be more discouraged with the agencies providing services and be demotivated to seek help and improve their employment situation. When asked about what they would do with unrestricted funding, they were quick to brainstorm the following:

- Some sort of transportation system that enables ride sharing.
- Housing Specialist - who could help leverage a combination of transitional housing and community based living for young people
- Prepare the next generation of providers to understand the workforce development system and support them in developing new and innovative ideas
- Design and implement a MIS that would enable providers to communicate.

### Space Redesign

As part of the overall project, Partners for Impact proposed an experiment that brought together young people, providers and employers. The goal was to envision a redesigned space for Johnston County’s NextGen Center. The group was divided into three smaller groups, with all three stakeholder groups represented in each small group. Through a series of discussion questions the participants were guided through a conversation that eventually led to simple floor plan designs for an ideal space for young people to receive services. The guided questions were as follows:

1. Make notes of what would be good to have in a center designed for young people to achieve their education and employment goals?
2. Are there other services that really need to be considered besides what are currently found here at the NextGen center?
3. On a piece of flipchart paper and using post-it notes design the space. Please take the time to walk around the space and see what you would change.
4. Look at the drawing, are there spaces that enable young people to interact and work with each other?
5. Are there spaces for interaction both privately and in the larger community for youth to interact with staff?

6. What special things might be needed for employers?

Photos of the groups' work are found in Appendix 1.

As the groups reported out to each other the following common elements of a youth friendly space emerged:

- Child Care
- Meeting Rooms
- Space to secure stuff, ie., lockers
- Cafeteria/Food/Kitchen - for both training, meals and pantry
- Lounge
- Center office space
- Recreation area
- Signage inside/outside - employers as sponsors and acknowledgement
- Lighting and windows that make the space inviting instead of institutional
- Flexible technology-check out equipment
- WiFi
- Security
- Study/quiet space for counseling too
- Parking
- Designs and color on the floor instead of the concrete
- Classroom and computer lab
- Playgrounds for kids

*Recommendations (including next steps in funding)*

The Johnston County NextGen Center is poised for growth and change. The partners are engaged with each other and the young people. Employer engagement could be improved. Some employers seem to be more community oriented than others. They see the opportunities represented by this population and are willing to take risks. The challenge is to help more employers understand how these young people can benefit their workplace and community in the future.

Some specific next steps for Johnston County include:

1. Training local youth providers on trauma informed care and motivational interviewing.
2. Building a community of practice to sustain processes and lessons learned in the training.
3. Developing a system wide plan to address student retention at JCCC.
4. Continue exploring the workforce development system, educating program staff about the system and continue to uncover leverage points.
5. Identifying system-wide metrics and consider a shared management information system.
6. Developing a communication plan that educates policymakers and other stakeholders about the opportunities presented by these young people.

Johnston County NextGen Center could benefit from additional resources. Unrestricted funding that provides **backbone support** would enable the NextGen Center and its partners to develop systems that improve youth outcomes. A small investment between \$7,000-\$8,000 per year would likely yield

significant returns in the coming 2-3 years. As an initial step, Partners for Impact worked with CAWDB to submit an application to Z. Smith Reynolds Foundation (See Appendix 2) to support some of these backbone activities.

**Housing services** are sorely needed for youth in Johnston County. Partners for Impact suggests working with the [Region 7 Balance of State Continuum of Care](#) and local officials to leverage funding opportunities for housing. Both the Principal Consultant and Senior Advisor at Partners for Impact have extensive experience with this process.

Johnston County Industries, Inc (JCI) currently receives the contract from the Capital Area Workforce Development Board for the NextGen Career Center. They are a strong and effective agency in Johnston County. Currently, they have a facility that receives some support from the CAWDB. Because the funding is competitive, the CAWDB can not make commitments beyond the regular contracts that are signed. However, JCI is in a strong position to take the local lead on designing a space for services, including workforce development services, for opportunity youth in Johnston County.

## WAKE COUNTY

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As a result of the stakeholder meetings in Wake County, we brought together providers to discuss the availability of funding from the State of North Carolina for Enhancement Funding. These funds would begin to help us implement and pilot some specific activities identified in previous stages of this assessment. The stakeholders that met agreed that CAWDB should pilot the following activities:

1. Creating a Youth Advisory Council. This is a key principles of positive youth development and ensures that young people are helping make decisions for the program. The CAWDB would like to have this council meet regularly.
2. Providing staff training and professional development with youth providers in the community around trauma informed care.
3. Hiring, training and placing youth navigators in youth serving agencies. They would be responsible for helping their peers navigate the workforce development system.
4. Adding some small services to the existing space, especially a food pantry and child care of some sort.
5. Convening a systems alignment council. This would be a group of providers who meet regularly to begin figuring out how Wake County can be more aligned regarding the self-sufficiency of the young people in the county.

### *Strategic Alternatives for CAWDB*

Services for opportunity youth in Wake County are characterized by a large number of providers, no agreed upon goal for youth beyond program/agency goals, focused revenue streams that promote a siloed system, and limited coordinated activity between the providers. Below we have described two alternatives for the CAWDB given the local environment for youth services. First, the **CAWDB could take a lead role in developing a comprehensive master plan for opportunity youth across Wake**

**County.** The second alternative is for the **CAWDB to work with EDSI and prepare to find a new space that is more flexible, engages young people and adds some additional critical services.**

### ***Community Planning Alternative***

Youth Thrive is Wake County's collective impact initiative designed to improve the overall well being and success of children and youth. Their current Strategic Planning Blueprint outlines a number of strategies for the county. While there are 2-3 strategies that target the general success of young adults, the majority of their current efforts are focused on emotional and social well-being and educational success, especially early school-age children. In addition, there are a growing number of community collaboratives that target young children and early childhood education, but none that directly work with this at-risk population. There is **no real plan that targets specific outcomes for young adults** in Wake County who are not in school and/or not working.

**Agencies and programs focusing on young people obtaining work and a reliable income are natural leaders in creating this plan.** At the same time, a more comprehensive plan addressing multiple domains that lead to overall success may seem like it is outside the mission of most local agencies because it would go beyond just workforce and career development to cover things such as housing, health, food security, child care, etc. Based on previous reports for this project, it is vital to think about more than one domain for outcomes when it comes to ensuring the continued success of these opportunity youth. Partners for Impact recommends exploring what two other workforce development boards have done with regard to leading more comprehensive plans. Conversations with these two groups would be a key next step. Austin, TX and Hartford, CT have workforce development boards that have taken a lead in building plans for opportunity youth in their community.

An initial convening of 15-20 stakeholders could begin the process of **creating a common agenda** for this population. The group can spend time making agreements on the overall values that guide the group, discuss and define the common problem to be addressed, and creating a community level goal based on the common vision that emerges from the process. Once this is accomplished then the group of stakeholders including the CAWDB are able to define their role and respective strategies within the plan. As part of the planning process, it is important to discuss the role of space in working with these young people. It is possible that an option where agencies share space could emerge as a key strategy.

At this juncture, the **CAWDB can determine its own role in moving this plan forward.** It may be possible to serve as the lead agency/backbone for the implementation of the plan. It may be that the only role is to focus on the education and employment outcomes that emerge out of the plan. As the space discussions emerge the CAWDB could determine what role it might play. Whether or not CAWDB leads a new space initiative, it would have the relationships and partnerships necessary to colocate employment and education related services in ways that improve the diversity of services available to young people and increase their likelihood of success. Regardless of the choices around implementation, the CAWDB will have played a critical leadership role in the plan development and it will be positioned to play a lead role, a partnership role, or even a sole organization role in the mix of providers.

### ***Supporting EDSI and finding new space***

A second alternative is for the **CAWDB to work directly with their current contractor, EDSI**, focusing solely on improving the employment and education outcomes of these young people. Simultaneously, the **CAWDB can search for a more suitable space**. Ideally, a group of young people can be a part of this discussion. Having youth voices represented in the form of a Youth Advisory Council will add information about the space needs in Wake County. It is possible at this juncture to engage young people in helping find the new space and engage some of the key providers in co-locating some services. Child care and food pantry services have already been identified as key components that need to be incorporated and available. This is also the time to consider adding other types of services and youth engagement activities that we have seen in other communities, such as a virtual reality platform or a recording studio.

### ***Resource Development***

There are several things to begin considering with regard to fund development for Wake County. First, is to apply for the **Enhancement Grant** (see Appendix 3). Partners for Impact recommends that a portion of this grant, if received, be invested into a Systems Council that will function as the long term planning group identified in the first alternative.

Once stakeholders and partners are aligned with a collective vision, partners can leverage funding from the various other systems. For example, an agency that interacts with HUD may be in a position to apply for HUD funding for this population. An agency that interacts with mental health services may be able to leverage Medicaid or other health related funding. The important part is that the individual partners begin to align to the longer term and bigger picture outcome of youth success, and in doing so they promote the capacity for these young people in succeeding with long term education and employment goals. A comprehensive plan with more alignment would also enable a more deliberate approach to leveraging philanthropic dollars, private sector sponsorships and public sector support.

Another strategy is to consider corporate sponsors. These sponsorships would be a way to engage local corporations in creating a new and innovative service or skills development like the virtual reality platform being discussed by the CAWDB staff. This type of engagement could also improve the corporate sponsors participation in employing some of these young people. It also frees up any unrestricted funding to be used by CAWDB. It would be important to ensure that this type of sponsorship is possible given CAWDB's connection to the public sector.

## **SPACE DESIGN RECOMMENDATIONS**

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Based on all the data collected for this entire project, Partners for Impact has the following recommendations for CAWDB when considering space decisions moving forward.

1. The space should be large enough to accommodate all the staff, any colocated services and the predicted volume of young people seeking services.
2. Provide a food pantry or some other means of feeding young people who find themselves hungry and without food.

3. Create spaces that allow adult/professional modeling and experiential activities for youth. For example, a multi-use kitchen space may be appropriate for use by staff and young people. Not only could food be stored, but if staff are making spaghetti for lunch, youth can help and learn to cook.
4. Depending on the number of young people who are parents, ensure that there are child friendly spaces that allow for age appropriate activities to take place. When possible be able to provide child care for activities at the space.
5. Create some open spaces that allow staff to interact and work with youth. Some of the spaces may include tables with chairs, others may be couches and comfortable chairs. Staff who work in the open space can serve as a model for young people, and they can interact with them in casual and purposeful ways.
6. Ensure that there are private spaces for private/sensitive conversations in addition to private staff offices (these could be shared).
7. Design all spaces through the lens of trauma informed care. Such spaces will increase the feelings of safety and comfort from the young people receiving services and the staff providing services.
8. Depending on additional services or engagement activities, make sure the space can accommodate those. For example, if you want to create a recording studio, then you have to have a space that accommodates that activity.
9. Provide Wi-Fi and charging station access for young people to use.
10. Make sure signage and decor reflect the multicultural nature of the youth being served, including signs that the space is LGBTQ friendly.
11. Minimize any sort of institutional feel, ie, school and/or jail.
12. Have a alternatives that allow young people to secure valuables.
13. When possible engage a Youth Advisory Council in helping lead and design the space to support the services.