

A (NET)WORK IN PROGRESS

the first two years



A JOINT INITIATIVE OF

Acknowledgements

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Without their commitment and support, youthCONNECT's hopeful progress to date would not be possible.

A (NET)WORK IN PROGRESS

A Case Study of the First Two Years of this Pioneering Initiative

May 2014



A JOINT INITIATIVE OF



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Overview

“youthCONNECT is different. We’re finding out whether high-performing groups working together against a common set of outcome goals can get better outcomes for a community of young people. That’s pretty exciting.”

— LAYC Executive Director Lori Kaplan



Since its founding in 2000, Venture Philanthropy Partners (VPP) has raised more than \$90 million to help low-income children and youth throughout the National Capital Region (Washington, D.C., and surrounding suburbs) gain access to quality education, health care, career training and a better chance for a brighter future. These investments are yielding healthier families, improved academic achievement and higher graduation rates for more than 15,000 children each year.

Many nonprofit organizations in the National Capital Region (NCR) are making a big impact on young people's lives, yet inefficiencies exist. Most organizations focus on specific challenges, such as education, workforce and health. However, the reality is that the challenges young people face are often complex, interrelated and evolving.

In 2010, VPP recognized an opportunity. What if high-performing nonprofits could collaborate to more effectively address the complex issues impacting the young people they serve? If VPP could establish the proper incentives and convene the right players, could a networked group of area nonprofits have a collective impact greater than the sum of their individual efforts?

That year, VPP launched youthCONNECT—a game-changing initiative to create a network of high-performing nonprofits working collectively to improve education, employment and healthy behaviors for 20,000 local low-income and at-risk youth.

After two years in operation, youthCONNECT's early achievements are encouraging. In that time, six unique organizations came together, developed a commitment to collaborate to better serve youth, constructed a framework in which to do it and prepared to pilot that work. Between 2010 and 2012, youthCONNECT network partners served more than 10,000 at-risk young people, ages 14 to 24, across the region through education, healthy behaviors and career readiness programs.

For VPP and the nonprofits involved in this initiative, what is *truly* exciting about youthCONNECT is its potential to serve as a model for creating meaningful, systemic change for youth throughout the region over the long term.

There is a great deal of research about the value of collaboration, but not as much about what it takes to build a healthy network. The purpose of this report is to capture the first stages of that work—the experience of funding, launching and supporting youthCONNECT, while chronicling best practices and lessons learned that might help others seeking to pursue similar initiatives.

The goals of youthCONNECT are to:

- **CATALYZE** a network of nonprofits in the National Capital Region;
- **DEMONSTRATE** and scale innovations of individual nonprofits in the youthCONNECT network;
- **EVALUATE** the efforts of youthCONNECT organizations to increase the body of knowledge and evidence about what works;
- **SHARE** knowledge among youthCONNECT organizations and funders, public agencies, and nonprofits regionally and nationally;
- **PROVIDE** demonstrated, proven models for others to replicate and adapt, creating the potential to affect the lives of thousands more young people around the country; and
- **BUILD** and expand a community of investors dedicated to this innovative network that will transform the lives of youth in this region and beyond.

Introduction

“There’s an African proverb that says if you want to go fast, go alone; if you want to go far, go together. That pretty well sums up the idea behind VPP’s youthCONNECT initiative.

“youthCONNECT represents the next level of social sector innovation. It’s all about collaboration, finding innovative solutions and putting them into practice, measuring outcomes in a transparent way and then creating a ripple effect by scaling and replicating what works.”

— Social Innovation Fund Director
Michael Smith



I first learned about youthCONNECT when I led social innovation at the Case Foundation and was asked to be on the selection team to help identify local nonprofits to become part of an exciting new collaboration instigated by the Social Innovation Fund (SIF).

Most of us instinctively understand the power of collaboration to achieve big things, but precious few are actually doing it, in part because the incentives for nonprofits to work together aren't clear and often not compelling. The philanthropy community in D.C. in particular is relatively small, and like communities nationwide, we've created a version of the Hunger Games—pitting our nonprofits against each other in the battle for scarce resources. It's often about making yourself look better instead of working together to find ways to serve those in need efficiently and effectively.

Efforts like youthCONNECT are critically important in changing the game and altering this unhealthy dynamic. youthCONNECT asks all grantees to consider "What can we tackle together? What can our resources achieve together that they couldn't apart?"

Creating effective partnerships is certainly not easy, which is why I have been so impressed watching as youthCONNECT has evolved from a concept into the cohesive network that today is helping young people meet and overcome some of the toughest challenges imaginable. With youthCONNECT, VPP is making a big bet about what this community can do together and providing a model for how philanthropy can form partnerships to achieve big things.

VPP, along with the other SIF grantmakers, is really blazing a trail not only in building this collaboration but also by putting enough rigor around the process so, in the end, we'll not only know what worked and why, but we'll also be able to replicate it elsewhere. That is the power of the SIF as embodied in the innovation that is youthCONNECT.

As President John F. Kennedy once said, "We choose to go to the moon in this decade and do the other things, not because they are easy, but because they are hard, because that goal will serve to organize and measure the best of our energies and skills, because that challenge is one that we are willing to accept, one we are unwilling to postpone, and one which we intend to win."

It is that spirit that drives the best of America, the best of philanthropy and the type of innovative thinking that we at the SIF see in youthCONNECT. This case study documents the road taken to get the initiative launched. Like many others, I look forward to seeing where the journey goes from here.

Regards,

Michael Smith
Social Innovation Fund Director

PART ONE

Setting the Stage

"Solutions to America's challenges are being developed every day at the grass roots—and government shouldn't be supplanting those efforts, it should be supporting those efforts."

— President Barack Obama



Since its founding, Venture Philanthropy Partners has raised funds from high net worth individuals, foundations and corporations. VPP has made investments in many of the region's top-performing nonprofits with overwhelmingly positive results. Key achievements include:

- The expansion of important educational, health and job preparedness services to 31 new sites—reaching children and families in 51 local neighborhoods that were previously not served.
- More than \$13 million in funding and support that provided DC's charter school movement with significant momentum.
- The creation and funding of more than 85 new leadership positions in areas like finance, development, evaluation, performance measurement, communications and marketing that enable local nonprofits to scale up and become more sustainable. The organizations in VPP's first portfolio saw operating revenues increase by an average of 77 percent.

Despite tremendous success, VPP recognized that the challenges many young people and their families face are so deep and so intractable that a solution must come from more than individual investments to really pierce through and make progress.

To create real and sustainable change, VPP believed it would need to find ways to align and leverage the collective power of the public, business, nonprofit and philanthropic sectors to address a common set of outcomes.

"I knew from my own experience that if we didn't have business and government working together on these problems we'd never solve them," said Carol Thompson Cole, president and CEO of VPP.

Steadily growing interest in the concept of collective impact among philanthropies and nonprofits reinforced VPP's initial thinking. The concept centers on shared measurement, aligned outcomes and driving collaboration forward through data. VPP was interested in how the collective impact approach could be adapted and used to address challenges that youth face across the National Capital Region.

Against this backdrop, the federal government announced the launch of the Social Innovation Fund, a program of the Corporation for National & Community Service that combines public and private resources to grow community-based solutions that have evidence of results in any of three priority areas: economic opportunity, healthy futures and youth development.

In many ways, VPP was uniquely positioned to take advantage of the opportunity presented by the SIF. VPP's investment approach had always been evidence-driven. And after nearly a decade of investing in local nonprofits, VPP possessed an unparalleled understanding of needs across the greater National Capital Region. The VPP model was designed to combine the best of both the philanthropic and business sectors to address these needs; SIF funding brought the federal government into the equation.

What Is the SIF?

The Social Innovation Fund (SIF) was established in 2009 as part of the Edward M. Kennedy Serve America Act, as a way to mobilize community-based nonprofits that are developing solutions to many of our nation's most pressing challenges. A signature program of the Obama Administration, the SIF uses federal dollars as a catalyst to grow nonprofits that are demonstrating strong results.

As President Obama said in announcing the program, "Solutions to America's challenges are being developed every day at the grass roots—and government shouldn't be supplanting those efforts, it should be supporting those efforts."

The SIF makes annual grants ranging from \$1 million to \$10 million for up to five years to grant-making intermediaries that are well positioned to identify promising nonprofits working in the areas of economic opportunity, health and youth development. Intermediaries match the federal funds dollar-for-dollar, as do the nonprofits they identify. Once selected, intermediaries invest in expanding the direct services of the nonprofits and support the nonprofits in rigorous evaluations of the impact of their programs.

Venture Philanthropy Partners was selected as one of 11 initial grantees from among 69 total applicants. These 2010 grantees have made awards to more than 150 subgrantees across the country.

"There was skepticism. Our board and investors believed in what we were doing but were concerned about the impact it would have on our traditional work," said Thompson Cole. "Luckily, we were able to make the case to the board that the SIF grant would provide capital to continue our current efforts and do more to enhance our mission."

The SIF funding opportunity did not come without challenges. Receipt of federal grant funds required extensive compliance requirements and changes to VPP's standard operations that included everything from new hiring procedures to implementing detailed timesheets for daily activities. Not only would VPP have to adapt to federal protocol, so would its prospective subgrantees.

After significant discussion and debate, the board authorized VPP to apply for SIF funding in the amount of \$10 million over five years. As VPP would have to provide match-funding of \$10 million, youthCONNECT would be the organization's single largest investment to date.

Developing the Proposal

VPP invested significant resources in developing a successful proposal. Given the complexity of the SIF application and VPP's limited experience with securing federal funding, it assembled a proposal team that included external expertise. VPP first reached out to Endeavor Group, a consultancy that offered strategic, legal and communication solutions and had particular expertise in writing government proposals. Accounting firm Rubino & McGeehin was also brought in to assist with SIF compliance requirements.

VPP also secured a long-term partnership with evaluation expert, Child Trends. This relationship was established in the proposal phase and developed into a strong program evaluation partnership for youthCONNECT's work.

The grant-writing team developed a proposal that clearly outlined the challenge VPP sought to address and defined the innovative vision for a networked approach to improving the futures of thousands of youth across the National Capital Region.

“Returning to make a difference”

Tyreesha is part of one of the first KIPP DC classes to graduate from college. She, like many of her former classmates, is now working to make a difference in her own community. She is working in the classroom as a part of the Capital Teachers’ Residency Program, honing a passion for teaching that first began when she was a student at KIPP. Now, her own determination inspires her work with students from similar disadvantaged backgrounds at Grow Academy.

Identifying Initial Subgrantees

VPP’s proposal called for funding between six to eight subgrantees. VPP strengthened its proposal by including several preselected subgrantees. The final subgrantees would be chosen later through an open competition process, as required by the SIF.

VPP was committed to creating an initiative that was based on collaboration. After careful analysis and thoughtful deliberation, VPP selected four organizations that it knew well through prior investments: **Latin American Youth Center (LAYC),**

Year Up National Capital Region (Year Up NCR), College Summit of the National Capital Region, and KIPP DC. Each was chosen for its evidence of youth development outcomes, organizational capacity, leadership strength and proven willingness to collaborate.

“Our SIF innovation was all about creating a network. So we felt it was important to show that we would be going into the process with a group of four organizations that we already knew and could work effectively with,” said Eleanor L. Rutland, COO/CFO at VPP.

Lessons Learned

- **Stay true to the vision:** VPP dedicated significant time to consider whether pursuing a SIF grant would align with its overall strategic vision. VPP held planning meetings with the staff, board and close stakeholders to refine the vision for this initiative and assess the role that this specific funding opportunity could play in realizing that vision. VPP only decided to apply for the grant once it determined that this opportunity could support its organizational vision.
- **Engage the board:** VPP identified board members who could champion the effort. Early champions helped VPP make the case to the entire board, and ultimately led to sign-off to apply for the SIF grant.
- **Seek expertise as needed:** VPP lacked the expertise and capacity to complete the SIF proposal in-house. Hiring outside consultants was an important and worthwhile investment in winning the SIF grant.
- **Federal grants add complexity, bureaucracy:** VPP understood that accepting federal dollars would be complex and may require it to change how it operates on a daily basis.
- **A robust evaluation process is key:** Bringing in Child Trends as a strong evaluation partner from the very beginning was critical to developing a compelling proposal that VPP knew could deliver on the government’s evaluation and performance management requirements.
- **High-performing, collaborative nonprofits are needed:** VPP realized that for nonprofits to effectively deliver, consistent with the SIF requirements and VPP investment process, subgrantees needed to demonstrate an established level of outcomes, program capacity, and commitment to collaboration.

PART TWO

VPP Wins the Grant ...Now What?

"There are many groups that are collaborating in an informal way, and I thought here's an opportunity to test whether a more formal collaboration could move the needle."

— Vice President of Philanthropic Services at the Community Foundation NCR Angela Jones Hackley



In July 2010, VPP learned that it had received the SIF grant and a commitment for the full \$10 million in funding. With the funding in place, VPP staff had two immediate priorities. First, they needed to find an experienced leader to manage the initiative on a day-to-day basis. VPP also needed to launch the open competition required by SIF rules to select the final cohort of subgrantees.

Finding a Leader

“VPP has always had a lot of smart people, but no single individual on the team had real experience in building networks or collaborations,” said Thompson Cole. “That was a skill-set that we needed to bring on to the team.”

VPP expedited its normal hiring process to find the best candidate to manage the initiative. Among many candidates considered for the role was Marc Schindler, then general counsel, chief of staff and interim director for the Department of Youth Rehabilitation Services in Washington, D.C. Schindler had experience in government and nonprofit sector, had headed up a large coalition and possessed a keen understanding of how to get highly disparate groups to work together in a cooperative and effective manner. Schindler joined VPP to lead youthCONNECT in November 2010.

“When you sit smart people around a table, you can actually come up with some great ideas and do innovative things. We loved being at those tables.”

**— Metro TeenAIDS Executive Director
Adam Tenner**

VPP held off on convening the four preselected subgrantees until it completed the open competition process to select the final group of subgrantees. While the preselected grantees were anxious to begin work, it was important for everybody to start at the same time, with a common perspective and understanding.

Identifying the Final Subgrantees: Open Competition Process

The open competition process to select the final subgrantees began in late September of 2010 and concluded in February of 2011.

VPP sought experienced help to develop and manage the open competition, and reached out to other organizations more familiar with the process to help complete the competition quickly and effectively. Finding the right mix of people to serve as reviewers in the open competition process was critical to the success, credibility and independence of the youthCONNECT initiative. The review team ultimately consisted of 10 members, including external thought leaders, local funders, VPP and evaluation partner Child Trends. The reviewers possessed a variety of skill sets, including backgrounds in youth development, regional nonprofit knowledge or experience with the open competition process.

“Phenomenally well”

Wendy didn't know if she was going to college because she was not sure if she could afford it. In her senior year of high school, she joined the Urban Alliance internship program and was placed at United BioSource, where she did phenomenally well, receiving top scores on all her assessments and winning the “Intern Excellence Award,” which came with a \$4,000 scholarship. Wendy is now completing her first year at Montgomery College.

The **first stage** of what would be a five-month process to identify the final subgrantees officially began on September 20, 2010, when VPP issued a Request for Preliminary Proposals (RFPP). VPP hosted a bidders' conference and held two webinars to help orient potential grantees to the process, with approximately 200 organizations expressing interest in applying to youthCONNECT.

The application developed during the first stage was deliberately kept short and simple to streamline the process for both applicants and reviewers. VPP and the review team used weighted selection criteria to narrow the initial application pool of 200 down to 38 organizations, all of whom were invited to submit preliminary proposals. In the **second stage** of the process, the selection committee narrowed the applicant pool to eight organizations that were invited to submit full proposals.

For the most part, the organizations that were not selected to continue in the process were eliminated due to their limited experience in collaboration. Recalls selection committee member Michael Smith, then at the Case Foundation; “We were really looking for them to tell us how they had collaborated with other organizations and how they thought they could expand the impact of their work through collaboration... No one was really talking about how they could connect their work in a way that would enable them to achieve more together than what they could as individual organizations.”

The selection team ultimately settled on a slate of four organizations to take part in the **third stage**, and most challenging part of the process, the VPP investment selection stage.

VPP used its regular investment selection process to identify the final organizations, a process that is laser-focused on whether an organization, and in particular its leadership, has a track record of demonstrated performance. The process includes interviews, program reviews and site visits. Each finalist is assessed for capacity, and legal and accounting resources are utilized to complete due diligence. VPP also obtained a written commitment from the four organizations to meet SIF match-funding requirements, and letters of support from elected officials and stakeholders throughout the region involved in the delivery of youth services.

In this instance, VPP also consulted with the preselected grantees to evaluate the likelihood that an organization would be an effective partner within the youthCONNECT network. VPP specifically explored each applicant's ability and desire to grow and make a meaningful difference for the children and youth it served.

Ultimately, two organizations stood out as being particularly strong candidates: **Urban Alliance**, and **Metro TeenAIDS**. In February 2011, the two organizations were invited to become youthCONNECT partners.



Lessons Learned

- **Have a diverse review team:** VPP worked to assemble a review team that had a deep knowledge of the local nonprofit landscape and was representative of all parts of the National Capital Region. Because of the team's diversity, VPP accessed firsthand knowledge of the quality and type of programming in the applicant organizations that would not otherwise have been available.
- **An experienced evaluation partner is key:** VPP's evaluation partner, Child Trends, provided key information on each applicant's evaluation capacity for the SIF. Child Trends was VPP's evaluation partner at the time of the application, and, because of their extensive knowledge of VPP's plans as a SIF intermediary, they could review the applications in the open competition in the context of VPP's future SIF plans and strategy.
- **Be flexible through the grant process:** The SIF guidelines and requirements for subgrantee applicants were different from VPP's standard criteria for grantmaking. To meet the requirements, VPP had to adapt its selection criteria for the youthCONNECT network partners. In doing so, VPP accessed a more diverse pool of applicants than it traditionally would have considered and became familiar with a new cohort of nonprofits that are now potential prospects for future investments.
- **Provide Feedback:** VPP provided feedback to applicants that did not reach the investment selection stage in the open competition. In doing so, VPP stayed connected to organizations serving low-income children and youth in the National Capital Region and cultivated relationships with the leadership of several organizations.
- **Data is a critical selection factor:** A number of promising applicant organizations were eliminated because they lacked sufficient data or did not have an adequate evaluation component at the organizational or program level. This gap was pervasive and shone a bright light on the need for area funders to consider expanding support and resources to build capacity.
- **Don't begin work until all subgrantees have been selected:** VPP anticipated that having everyone start work at the same time would enhance the cohesiveness of the network. It was important for the long-term success of the network to have the organizations start from the same place and develop their relationships—and ideas—together.

Partner Agency Overview

The six organizations that, along with VPP, make up youthCONNECT share a mission to provide greater opportunities and supports to low-income young people in the National Capital Region. Overall, they share a commitment to being results-driven organizations that focus on both the quality of the services they provide and the outcomes achieved by the young people they serve.

They also differ in some important ways, serving different populations, using different service delivery models, and addressing outcomes ranging from education and employment to health. Three agencies are local affiliates of national efforts. The agencies also joined youthCONNECT in different ways. Four agencies were preselected for funding by VPP, and two submitted winning proposals in a competitive grant process.

College Summit, National Capital Region, part of a national organization, works to connect students to college and career by building capacity within schools and school districts to guide students through the college planning, preparation and application process. College Summit's realization that their efforts need to begin much earlier in some schools than the beginning of the senior year led staff to develop a new model, "Launch," to reach students in grades 9 through 11. The youthCONNECT investment allows the organization to further grow its core services to reach students earlier and evaluate and expand Launch in the National Capital Region.

KIPP DC, part of the national KIPP movement, operates a network of high-performing, college-preparatory public charter schools in Washington, D.C. All KIPP DC schools are tuition-free, open enrollment schools, and they actively recruit and serve students in the city's most under-resourced communities. Though KIPP DC has had tremendous academic success with its students, data showed that even high-performing students were struggling to transition to and complete college. With the support of youthCONNECT, KIPP DC's KIPP Through College program is working to ensure that every KIPP DC alumnus has the tools and supports needed to successfully attain a college degree and live a life filled with opportunity.

Latin American Youth Center, which operates exclusively in the National Capital Region, has provided a wide array of multilingual education and workforce services to some of the most disconnected youth for more than four decades. But its data revealed that a more comprehensive, relationship-building approach was needed to help youth facing multiple risk factors that were impeding their success. With support from youthCONNECT, LAYC developed its groundbreaking, evidence-based Promotores program, an intensive new model for "reconnecting" more than 250 disconnected youth, and saving local governments more than \$16 million over the coming decade.

Metro TeenAIDS, which operates in Washington, D.C., takes a comprehensive approach to improving adolescent health in the city by delivering effective evidence-based programming as well as improving policies and systems that should be serving youth. Through youthCONNECT, MTA will provide health education programs to 1,500 students per school year at D.C. public charter schools and will train 200 public charter school staff on health education.

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Partner Agency Overview *continued from page 16*

Urban Alliance, based in Washington, D.C., and now also operating in Baltimore, Chicago and Northern Virginia, empowers under-resourced youth to aspire, work and succeed through paid internships, mentoring and professional development training. Through youthCONNECT, Urban Alliance will serve over 1,000 youth by expanding the High School Internship Program, increasing student support after graduation through the innovative Alumni Services program and providing job skills training to youth through Curriculum Outreach. The combination of these programs assists youth in the transition from high school to college and careers that will ultimately lead to a life of self-sufficiency.

Year Up National Capital Region, part of a national organization, brings young adults from poverty to professional careers through an intensive year-long information technology program focusing on job skills, college credits from Northern Virginia Community College, educational stipends and internships at top companies and government entities in the region. Health care access and education services are vital to the students' well-being and their success in the program. With the support of youthCONNECT, Year Up NCR launched the Healthy Behaviors Initiative, a proactive healthy-behavior curriculum designed to increase program retention. The initiative features guidance in enrolling in affordable health insurance, offers life-skills courses and a wellness speaker series and provides referrals for urgent wellness needs. The program has the potential to become a replicable model utilized by similar workforce and youth development programs.



PART THREE

Year One—Kicking Off the Network

“Collaboration is time-intensive and messy. When you start bringing those different groups and sectors in a room, they speak different languages and they come at it in different ways. That means you have to have effective backbone support.”

— VPP Partner Marc Schindler



As youthCONNECT was not an organic group, but one hand-crafted by a funder, network partners approached the project with excitement mixed with trepidation. VPP knew that knitting a disparate group of nonprofits into a cohesive network would not happen naturally. “When VPP was first created, we thought by bringing the organizations we fund together they would naturally become a cohort, but it never happened,” said Thompson Cole. “We knew building a network was going to take a deliberate effort.”

VPP determined that it would play a well-defined role as the backbone organization. In this role, VPP would provide the necessary backbone support, facilitating and bringing in various experts and consultants at key junctures to help the network’s development. VPP would not dictate goals, tactics or outcomes – this challenge would be addressed by the developing network.

“As nonprofits, we’re used to getting direction from funders and then making it happen,” observed Veronica Nolan, CEO of Urban Alliance. “At the first meeting we were all like ‘Okay, funder, just tell us what you want to do and we’ll do it.’ But that wasn’t the case here.”

youthCONNECT Network: Getting to Work

The National Capital Region is one of the most prosperous and well-educated communities in the nation. Yet as VPP documented in its 2012 seminal report, *Capital Kids: Shared Responsibility, Shared Future* (<http://capitalkidsreport.org/>), more and more children in select jurisdictions of the region were falling behind – not gaining the education and skills they needed to reach successful adulthood.

Each of the six youthCONNECT network partners was successfully addressing some of the issues faced by youth in the region. However, all network partners were aware that these challenges were not being approached in a holistic manner and wondered what more could be done by working collaboratively. From the outset, leaders agreed that the facts surrounding youth in the region were daunting.

At the inception of youthCONNECT, there were 135,000 vulnerable youth in the National Capital Region needing support to successfully transition to a thriving adulthood.

Regional educational and support systems fail to prepare most vulnerable youth for high school and postsecondary completion. Currently in Washington, D.C.:

- 43 percent of students graduate from high school in the District within five years.
- 29 percent of graduates enroll in college within 18 months of graduation.
- Only 9 percent of District high school freshmen graduate from college within five years of completing high school.

Attaining a postsecondary credential is necessary for meaningful employment. Without support, talented youth are not reaching their full potential, and the region is losing a valuable asset.

How Can the “Backbone” Support a Healthy Network?

- Have a shared understanding of network partner issues and interests.
- Remain adaptive and emergent and committed to a long-term vision.
- Surface and tap resources across the network—knowledge, skills and capacity.
- Enable participants to quickly become productive and encourage self-organized action.
- Gather ongoing feedback from across the network, and act on it.

*With consulting support from Monitor Deloitte Institute

All partners viewed youthCONNECT as an opportunity to have a greater impact on life outcomes for at-risk and disconnected youth in the National Capital Region. As work began, youthCONNECT partners collectively identified two primary issues of concern:

- There was a lack of economic opportunity for young people and their families. The partners viewed as the root of all the secondary issues their respective programs were seeking to address; and
- The services youth needed to overcome the challenges presented by poverty lacked public support and local government resources.

Group Dynamics and Redesign

While the network agreed to key priorities, each nonprofit retained its own independent mission to fulfill. For this group of leaders to become an effective network, it was critical to build relationships of mutual trust and respect between all the players, including VPP as the backbone organization.

Early youthCONNECT meetings included executive directors from all six organizations, their various staff members, VPP team members and several consultants. While the commitment by the leadership of each partner to actively participate was important, the group including staff and consultants, was simply too large to tackle what needed to get done in a constructive way. It quickly became apparent that

subgroups would be required to allow for meaningful collaboration and for the work to gain traction. Smaller working groups were developed to focus on specific challenges and provide youthCONNECT with a structure that could grow and adapt to the network’s needs as it evolved and matured.

ECOM and the Common Outcomes Framework

One of the first work groups VPP formed was the Evaluation and Common Outcomes Measures (ECOM) group. From May to December 2011 the work group met biweekly to forge what would become known as the Common Outcomes Framework. In its role as the backbone, VPP and Child Trends staff facilitated ECOM meetings. These meetings included the team members from each of the network partner organizations who were most involved in performance management and program evaluation activities.

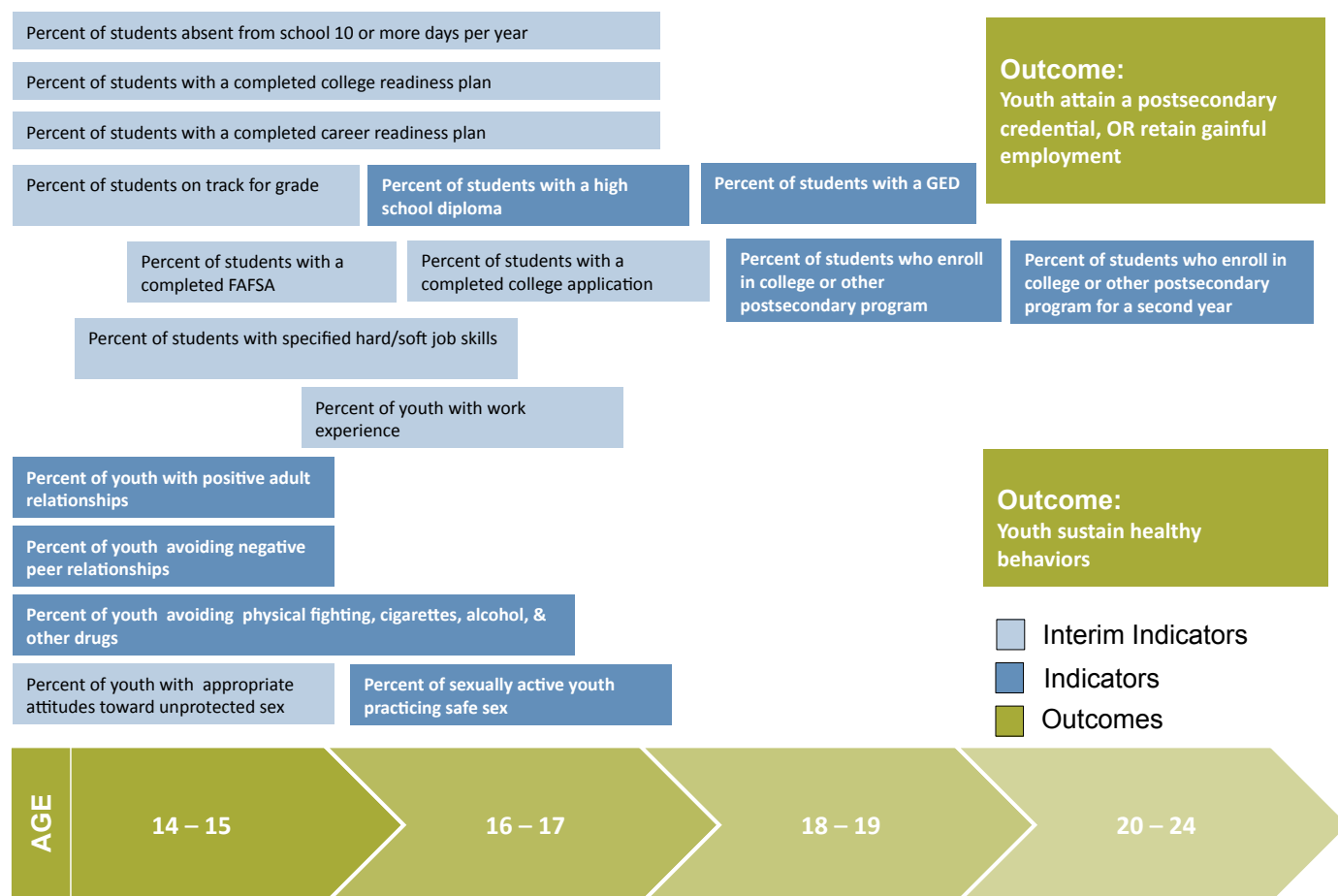
According to Child Trends’ David Murphey, who was part of the ECOM work group, it quickly became apparent that some basic issues, including a common understanding of language, would need to be hashed out.

“People were using words right and left with sort of similar but different meanings,” recalled Murphey. “Some people talked about outcomes. Others referred to results and indicators and measures and metrics. There are all the different words that people can use in ways that can be confusing and really get in the way of doing the work. For purposes of our meetings we decided that we were going to use specific words in specific ways it was a big step forward.”

Once common communication was established, group members developed a vision statement and a set of common outcomes so that everyone would be on the same page about what they were setting out to do through youthCONNECT.

Early on, the group established that the ultimate purpose of the network was to enable the region’s most vulnerable youth to gain the necessary skills and education to help them achieve a self-sustaining future. In a series of meetings, the ECOM work group considered long-, medium-, and short-term outcomes and specific indicators that would be used to measure youthCONNECT’s progress toward that goal. The ECOM work group also researched other collaborative efforts,

Common Outcomes Framework



and began to consider which outcomes would be the most feasible and powerful for youth in the region. The more options that ECOM explored, the more complex things became.

“We began to realize that as much as we’re peeling the onion here and getting down to specifics, there are even more layers when it comes to actually operationalizing data collection,” says Murphey. “Who is going to collect all this data and with what tool? These were six very different programs, and it wasn’t easy.”

After much discussion and debate, it was agreed that youthCONNECT would focus on enabling youth, ages 14–24, in the National Capital Region to achieve success in the personal, social, academic, and work-related transition to adulthood. The groups later added “Healthy behaviors” was later as an additional outcome.

The selection of these outcomes was informed both by the SIF proposal and from taking an inventory of the kinds of outcomes the six programs were already

tracking as part of their internal performance management.

The ECOM work group then began building out the Common Outcomes Framework (<http://www.vppartners.org/results/reports/youthconnect-network-progress>), a guide to map the work required to realize the established outcomes.

The Common Outcomes Framework was designed so that the partners in the youthCONNECT network could jointly measure their individual impact helping youth make progress against a common set of indicators. By looking at how successfully the targeted youth were progressing toward high school graduation, college enrollment or training that would lead to a career; the framework provided a way to measure the collective achievements of the network. This approach allowed for the evaluation of six different programs against a specific set of indicators, regardless of differences in program activities, models, demographics and size.

The Common Outcomes Framework has become a critical document and guide for youthCONNECT's work today. It has been instrumental in keeping the problem or challenge at the center of the network's focus, while allowing the partners to address them collaboratively. The Framework has been effectively used several times to refocus a difficult or complex discussion and get the youthCONNECT network realigned.

"This is difficult stuff, and nobody has completely figured out how to do it," said Murphey. "The only way is if there is some kind of collective effort on the part of many different organizations. By giving up a certain amount of turf and individual identity and thinking differently, we'll be able to make a dent in some of these big problems, like the big problem of

disengaged youth. Certainly none of these organizations is going to solve it on their own."

Throughout the process of developing the Common Outcomes Framework, VPP and Child Trends were very focused on creating a safe space where this work could happen. Knowing that there must be a certain amount of goodwill that people bring to the table, VPP and the organizations brought on to counsel and facilitate the network's progress concentrated on making the youthCONNECT partners feel comfortable airing individual opinions. As the backbone organization, VPP even supported the partners in revealing sensitive information about an individual program that might not ordinarily be revealed to outsiders in order to reach a common understanding.

Year One: Key Accomplishments

youthCONNECT partners made significant progress toward the milestones set for the network's first year and, more broadly, laid the foundation for and made progress toward a fully functioning and collaborative network.

- VPP funding for youthCONNECT allowed network partners to directly serve 6,242 children and youth. In Year One, 2011:
 - College Summit trained 200 rising high school senior Peer Leaders and 50 educators to implement College Summit's curriculum, serving 3,136 students.
 - In KIPP DC's class of 2011, 86 percent have graduated from high school, and of those who graduated, 75 percent matriculated to college.
 - LAYC's Promotores program served 220 youth with a 96 percent retention rate.
 - Metro TeenAIDS established relationships with 14 new charter schools.
 - 98 percent of the youth that graduated from Urban Alliance's 2010 -2011 High School Internship Program enrolled in college, the highest percentage in its history.
 - Year Up NCR hired its first health navigator and three masters of social work interns to provide additional counseling, health care services and educational workshops through its Healthy Behaviors Initiative, evolving into serving 240 youth per year.
- VPP hired a director of outcomes, assessment and learning, to strengthen internal evaluation capacity.
- The ECOM work group was formed and created a vision, mission, and logic model for the youthCONNECT network and finalized development of a Common Outcomes Framework to guide evaluation and performance management activities.
- ECOM members engaged in a collaborative process to develop Year Two individual and youthCONNECT network performance milestones.
- Five of the six youthCONNECT network partners experienced high-level and youthCONNECT program-related staff departures. VPP supported succession planning and provided strategic assistance to ensure smooth transitions.
- VPP developed and implemented the subgrantee monitoring program, consistent with its responsibility to provide fiscal oversight and to ensure compliance with federal regulations. It conducted site visits were conducted for all six of the network partners and recommendations for improved reporting and documentation were noted and conveyed to all subgrantees.
- Trust, respect, and personal rapport grew between the executive directors of the six network partners.

Year One: Lessons Learned

- **Relationships are important:** Even when individuals within a group have skills that can support collaboration; group formation is a complex, time-consuming process that must be carefully nurtured. VPP had hoped that pre-existing relationships between several of the partner groups would accelerate the process of turning the individual groups into an effective network. As it turned out, those relationships needed significant time to evolve organically and through shared experiences.
- **Clarify roles:** The network executive directors expected VPP, in its role as the funder, to display more leadership in setting the network's goals. In contrast, VPP made it clear that the partners should determine the network's goal and direction. Clear articulation of roles, responsibilities and expectations to all participants from the beginning of the process can minimize tension and accelerate the work.
- **Consider time demands:** The time commitment required for participation in youthCONNECT was difficult for the executive directors and ECOM representatives to make. Participants in a network of this nature need to be cognizant of the significant time commitment that is required from leadership and high-level staff.
- **Expand staff-level communication:** Network partners must increase staff-level communication at their respective organizations to incorporate the role of collaborative partnerships. At the outset, executive directors must convey to their own organizations and stakeholders the value of investing organizational time and resources in the network. As the network evolves, connections should expand beyond leadership to program staff at the respective organizations. Across agencies, there was a sense that, at all levels, staff would like to know more about the youthCONNECT partners, particularly if there were ways to make links to their direct work.



PART FOUR

Year Two—The Strategic Planning Process

“When you ask a group like this to knit themselves together and find really powerful ways they can align into action, that’s when they start to build this shared view of the larger story of the change they want to see in the world.”

— Monitor Institute Specialist Leader
Anna Muoio



With key outcomes in place, VPP partnered with the Monitor Institute, a part of Deloitte Consulting, to drive the strategic planning process for youthCONNECT. The Monitor team shared VPP's belief that leading-edge change was happening where organizations were mobilizing into networks of aligned actors to drive social impact. January 2012 began an intensive year of work that would ultimately result in a shared vision and common agenda for action for youthCONNECT.

"The problems we face are outstripping our ability to solve them, and people are arriving at the understanding that we can't solve them on our own in a unilateral way," noted Anna Muoio, project lead and specialist leader at the Monitor Institute, who designed and led the process to create an action strategy for youthCONNECT.

The core objectives of the strategic planning process were for youthCONNECT partners to develop a shared understanding of the needs of disconnected or at-risk youth and the "system" they must navigate in the National Capital Region. Using the Common Outcomes Framework as a starting point, VPP's hope was that the partners would come together around a new vision for the region and then create a plan for coordinated action that would begin to realize that vision.

"There is no 'one-size-fits-all' to aligned action and network work. It really does require a very thoughtful, custom-designed process that is very sensitive to the resources available."
— Monitor Institute Specialist Leader
Anna Muoio

The strategic planning process was conducted in three distinct phases: **Knowing the Network**, **Knitting the Network** and **Organizing the Network**.

Phase One: Knowing the Network

In the first phase—Knowing the Network—the six partners worked to gain a thorough understanding of each other's mission, key activities, and footprint in the region. The groups began by physically mapping out the connections that already existed between each of the six youthCONNECT network organizations.

Based on the network map, the group brainstormed ideas for youthCONNECT's potential impact, each partner organization sharing its own specific hopes for what youthCONNECT might achieve for the youth of the region. Those opportunities were then prioritized and ranked.

Together, youthCONNECT also created a system map of the major challenges facing youth in the region and the various groups and agencies addressing those challenges. The system map proved to be a tangled, messy web of government entities and organizations—public and private—that highlighted the complex and convoluted path faced by young people and their families seeking to navigate the system effectively.

This process raised several questions: What rules govern the current system? Where does the current system break down, and why? What are the greatest points of leverage for making significant, systemic change? Who holds the power over the system? And lastly, how can youthCONNECT organize itself to bring about real change that will move the needle on the big issues facing youth in the community?

This is a critical point in the evolution of youthCONNECT—the point where it became clear that *the rules of the system would have to change*. The defining question for the group became “If you want to change the rules of the system, what does that mean?” That single question framed all the work going forward.

The network set about finding the intersection where the collective work had the opportunity to amplify each individual organization’s mission. Finding opportunities that were “win-win” was largely made possible by the groundwork they had laid by taking the time to know each other, mapping the network and mapping out the system. All involved said that

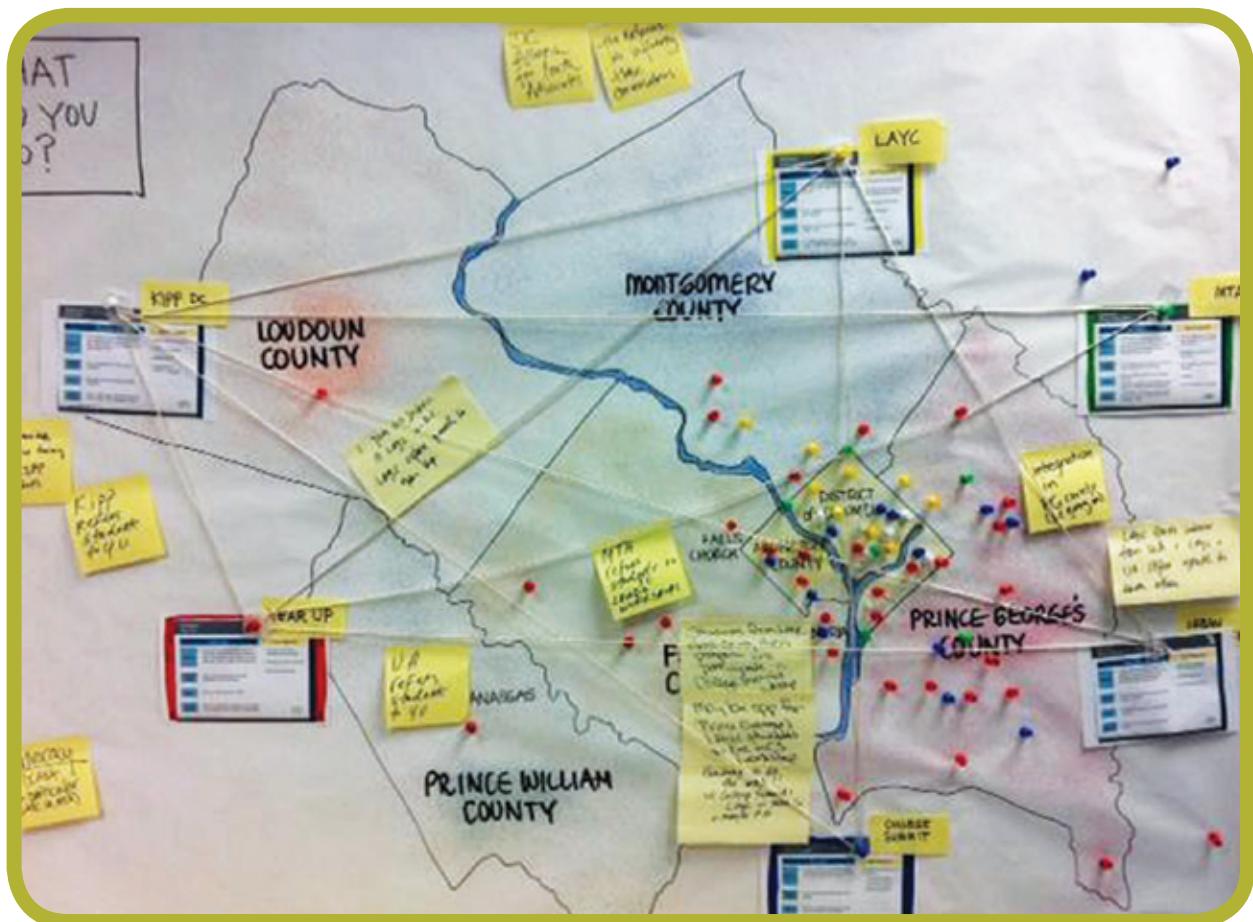
the Knowing the Network phase of the work was time-intensive, but ultimately critical to advancing the work.

Phase Two: Knitting the Network

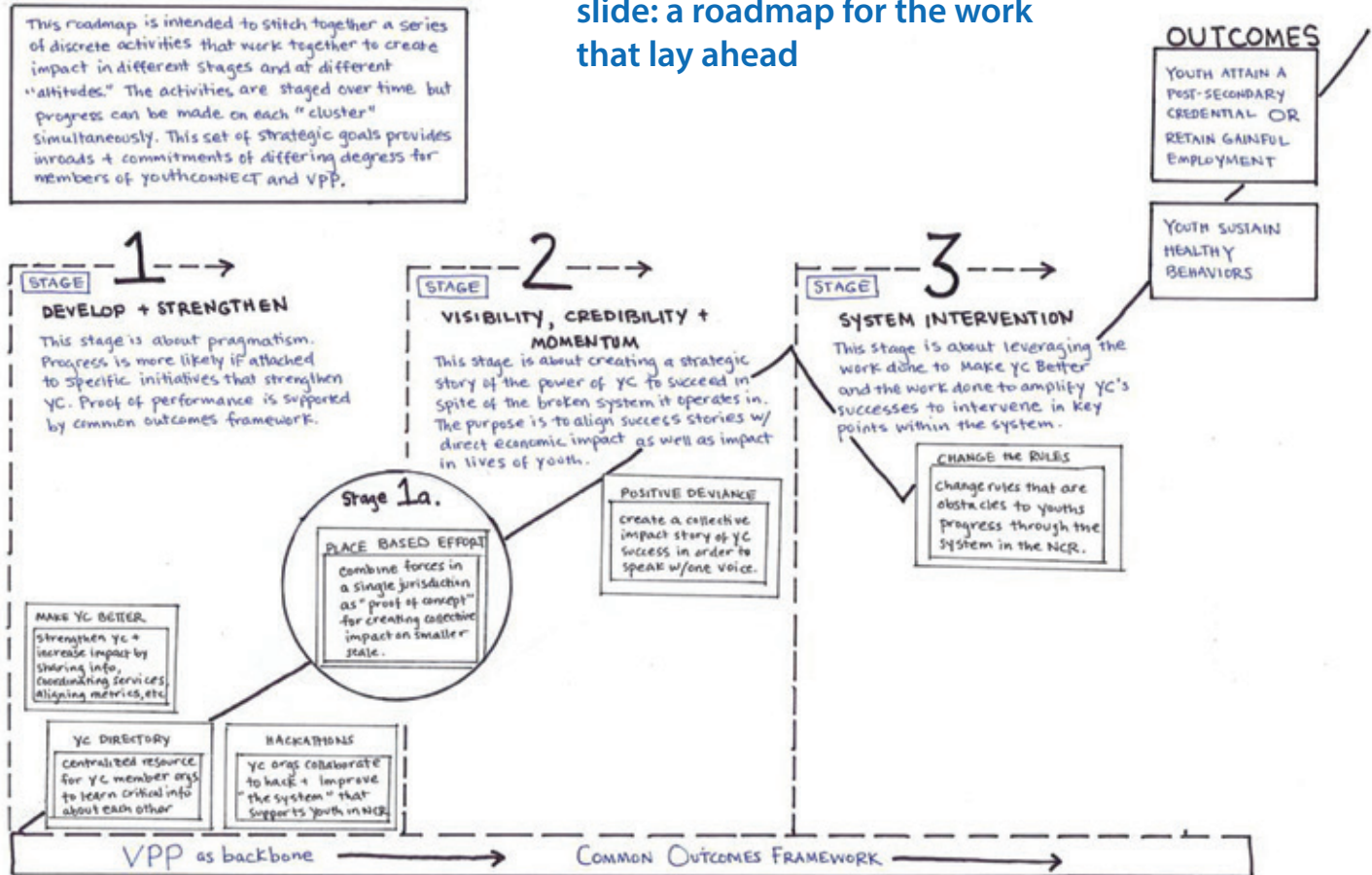
The second phase of the planning process—Knitting the Network—meant translating the network’s understanding of the system it drew out into a practical strategy for breaking down the barriers for system change.

The group reviewed and prioritized its most achievable opportunities and potential actions. These prioritizations were “mashed up” to see what they looked like as a group, and a set of clusters around key activities emerged. These clusters provided the foundation for youthCONNECT’s strategy and activities, which were combined in what became known as the “portfolio of action.”

Mapping out the existing connections between the six youthCONNECT network organizations.



The youthCONNECT mountain slide: a roadmap for the work that lay ahead



This portfolio was visually depicted in a roughly drawn sketch that came to be known as the "Mountain Slide"—a roadmap for the work that lay ahead, with clusters of activities that would need to be tackled in the near and long term.

"It was a very conscious call on our part not to 'set the strategy in stone,' which is why it was drawn on paper and not put into a formal PowerPoint file," according to Muoio. "This is really about thinking of adaptive strategy, which is where you set a vision for the work you want to do and you start doing it, and then you learn from that and iterate and refine your plan as you go."

Phase Three: Organizing the Network

The first stages involved developing the network's understanding of its shared role in the region and system of support for young people, and drafting a story of how youthCONNECT could succeed in spite of the broken systems in which it was operating. The

third stage would focus on taking those lessons and translating them into action: organizing the network to best leverage the expertise of the partner organizations while changing key rules that were blocking the progress of youth in the region.

In the early days of youthCONNECT, the executive directors had been the primary drivers of the network's progress. Now program staff from each of the organizations began to get involved in a significant way.

Three new work groups were added to the original two (ECOM and Executive Directors) to support the main work streams and to enable a broader swath of staff members from each organization to participate in and contribute to the network. These new work groups would focus on three key areas: making youthCONNECT better, developing an action plan for a place-based initiative and creating and implementing a communication strategy.

youthCONNECT Work Groups

Name of Work Group	Purpose	Members
Executive Directors	Vision, strategy, high-level collaboration	Executive directors, VPP
ECOM	Common Outcomes Framework, data collection across all agencies	Performance management, research, and evaluation staff, Child Trends, VPP
Make youthCONNECT Better	Strengthen youthCONNECT and increase impact by sharing information, learning together, coordinating services, and aligning metrics	Program management staff, VPP
Place-based	Combine forces in a single jurisdiction as “proof of concept” for creating collective impact on a more localized scale	Executive directors, VPP
Communications	Share the learnings and successes of the youthCONNECT network	Communications and development staff, VPP

A Place-Based Initiative Emerges

From the outset, youthCONNECT partners grappled with how this group of nonprofits could have greater collective impact on local youth than they could by working individually. In the “Organizing the Network” phase, the concept of taking a “place-based” approach to solving the toughest problems facing youth in the region emerged. Could the six nonprofits work together at a single location or around a specific cohort of youth, to provide many services in a more holistic and effective fashion than had been done before? With help from Monitor, youthCONNECT worked to draft a concept note describing the purpose and value of such a place-based initiative.

The goal was to demonstrate what it would actually look like with a more holistic model of thinking about youth succeeding not just in terms of academic success, but in terms of employment success and health success as well. The place-based initiative was designed to both test and illustrate this approach, underpinned by the Common Outcomes Framework.

Each executive director analyzed and defined organizational core competencies to determine which services could provide the most benefit within the youthCONNECT network. The network researched

communities that might provide the best opportunity for such an initiative. Then they convened a “gut-check panel” of local stakeholders from philanthropy, government and business to gather additional input about whether a place-based effort could add value in tackling some of the region’s most pressing youth-related issues.

It was ultimately decided to pilot youthCONNECT in one of the network’s own partner sites, a trusted place to test the initiative. The place-based approach launched in September 2013 at LAYC’s Career Academy.

The planning process demanded both funding and time commitments from all participants. But as a result of that investment, youthCONNECT partners were able to establish a strong foundation for their work ahead.

“The strategic planning process took a lot of time, which was both a benefit and a challenge, because it was hard to carve out half a day, sometimes a full day, to sit in those sessions,” said Ronda Thompson, executive director, Year Up NCR. “But it was really valuable, and there were things that not only helped the network but also helped me to start thinking about things differently within my own programs.”

Supporting the Network's Success

As 2012 drew to a close, so did the planning process and Monitor Institute's formal involvement with youthCONNECT. In its final presentation to the VPP team and board of directors, the Monitor Institute offered the following recommendations for how VPP, in its role as a backbone organization, could best support the network's success.

- **As a flexible facilitator with a strong point of view:** Design a rigorous process to support the Executive Directors as they work to advance the network's agenda—keeping the larger goal in mind, maintaining the focus to get there, but staying flexible in what the destination is and how it is reached.
- **As a valued participant, not the final arbiter:** Maintain VPP's stance as a participant rather than an arbiter as it has done to date.
- **As a catalyst for action:** Connect the network to helpful resources or people when external input or support is needed to advance the agenda of the group—and expect the youthCONNECT network to play this role as well, when appropriate.
- **As a funding organizer:** Take the initiative in making connections and starting conversations to fundraise while recognizing that there must be a shared responsibility between VPP and network partners to maximize funding for youthCONNECT.

Hacking for Ideas

On a hot day in August 2012, members from the youthCONNECT network piled into the VPP offices, ready to sit in a conference room until they came up with concrete solutions for the transportation challenges facing the youth their organizations serve. Five hours later, at the end of VPP's first "hackathon," network partners were able to collectively identify several ways to help youth better navigate the D.C.-area transportation system.

Hackathons are popping up around the country as a way for a broad base of people to intensely focus on one problem and collectively determine the most effective solutions. First started in the software industry, other sectors have since taken note. Instead of software developers, VPP brought together some of the best youth developers in the region.

youthCONNECT network members divided up into teams across organizations to come up with solutions to the hurdle of transportation, a topic they agreed is a fundamental barrier to achieving success. They segmented suggestions into solutions for today, for tomorrow and in their "wildest dreams."

"The solutions we came up with were quite powerful in their simplicity," said Nathaniel Cole, D.C. program director for Urban Alliance. "These solutions aren't hard to enact; they just need collective support to get the decision maker's attention. The youthCONNECT network can provide that support and get some of these things done."

The hackathon gave the network a space to identify and develop a cohesive voice to advocate for solutions to shared challenges. This kind of collaborative work is exactly what youthCONNECT is about: combining the expertise of six great organizations to help them to do their work better and dramatically improve the lives of the youth they serve.

Year Two: Key Accomplishments

- youthCONNECT served 4,388 young people in Year Two, bringing its total served to 10,630 young people and putting it on track to serve 20,000 in five years:
 - College Summit added six new partner schools for the upcoming school year, enabling them to provide college planning services to another 2,210 students.
 - From KIPP DC's class of 2012, 82 percent matriculated to college, and 95 percent of KIPP's high school seniors completed a college readiness plan that prepared them for their next steps.
 - LAYC's Promotores program has served 365 disconnected youth since the inception of youthCONNECT, helping 88 percent of them gain the soft skills they need to be successful in their career.
 - Metro TeenAIDS taught its health curricula to 865 middle and high school students and extended its services to include after-school access and parental education.
- Urban Alliance matched 182 students with internships and offered its curriculum outreach services to another 590 students. One hundred percent of all seniors completing its internship program graduated from high school.
- Every Year Up NCR student enrolled in classes at Northern Virginia Community College and, after graduating, 82 percent are employed, with an average wage of \$17 per hour.
- The executive directors agreed to pilot a place-based effort in the National Capital Region in 2013.
- Three new work groups were added to support the main work streams, enabling staff members from each of the partner organizations to participate more actively within the network. The work groups were widely credited with increasing interactions and developing relationships among network partners at all levels of their respective organizations, leading to a greater sense of trust and generating greater enthusiasm and momentum for youthCONNECT overall. In addition, the chief financial officers of each of the organizations began to meet regularly to discuss issues related to compliance and meeting the SIF's financial requirements.
- In parallel, the network made progress in other key areas including convening the first youthCONNECT Hackathon, which focused on transportation issues for youth.
- youthCONNECT partners established governing principles for fundraising across the network to eliminate concerns and tensions around competition for fundraising. The principles helped partners to leverage the network as a novel approach to fundraising and to respect each partner's individual fundraising efforts, outside of the network.
- youthCONNECT partners gained valuable experience from one another through shared work and collaboration efforts.



Year Two: Lessons Learned

- **Test big ideas on a small scale first:** VPP found it helpful to create a microcosm of the system you're trying to fix before targeting large-scale change. This is the objective of the place-based model being piloted at the LAYC Career Academy.
Design for a network, not an organization: It's critical to resist applying "organization-centric" thinking to a network in either its leadership or governance structures. youthCONNECT became stronger when VPP helped cultivate emerging and shifting leadership on select issues and in working groups.
- **Communicate clearly and often:** It is important to ensure that the network's successes and key decisions that affect the network's strategy are clearly and broadly communicated across partners/stakeholders. This ensures staff members are aware of network progress and facilitates their integration into future network activities. VPP, as the backbone organization, played a key role in supporting effective communications.
- **Emphasize knowledge capture:** It is critical to be able to "learn as you go." VPP, in its backbone role, took the lead on taking notes and initiating regular reflections on successes and challenges with network partners in order for them to learn and share the evolution of the work, facilitate smooth on-boarding of new colleagues and partners, and share the progress with the field.



Conclusion

The network partners and VPP leaders say they are pleased with youthCONNECT's early achievements, and they believe youthCONNECT has established a strong foundation upon which it can achieve programmatic success.

"Our accomplishments to date have focused on creating a structure and putting systems in place that are the foundation for the network to sustain itself in the long run," says Thompson Cole in reflecting on the progress that has been made since VPP was awarded the SIF grant. "It may have been slow and painful sometimes, and I know there will be good days and bad days. But each of these organizations is hitting important milestones in terms of the youth they serve, so we can honestly say that we're doing even as we are building." Beyond the benefits of youthCONNECT's work for the region's children, the network partners are united in their belief that the process had been positive for their respective organizations and for their own professional growth and development.

As youthCONNECT continues to evolve, the network is increasingly optimistic about the collective impact that their approach can have on improving education, employment, and healthy behaviors for low-income and at-risk youth in the National Capital Region. VPP and the youthCONNECT partners are committed to sharing lessons learned and providing updates on their work with other nonprofit groups and funders who may wish to explore a similar approach to serving populations in need.

While this report provides an overview of youthCONNECT's initial launch and early work through 2012, the network is continuing to help thousands of at-risk youth across the region. At the end of 2012, the youthCONNECT partners established an ambitious agenda for the second phase of its work, establishing a place-based initiative and expanding its reach and impact across the National Capital Region.

To learn more about youthCONNECT and its current work, please visit www.vpppartners.org/portfolio/youthconnect.

“On the honor roll ever since”

Although Kathleen had graduated from a KIPP DC middle school, she nearly didn’t make it through her first year of high school. With help from the KIPP Through College program, she got the help she needed to be successful after leaving the KIPP network, bringing her grades up to Honor Roll status. By her senior year, she had earned numerous academic awards, including a scholarship from the D.C. College Success Foundation.



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