

children
atRisk

Textual Analysis of Local
Workforce Board
Strategic Plans:
Opportunity Youth and
Young Adults



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Glossary of Terms

OPPORTUNITY YOUTH & YOUNG ADULTS (OYYA)

Youth aged 16-24 that are not in school or working.

LOCAL WORKFORCE DEVELOPMENT BOARDS (LWDB)

The Texas Workforce Commission (TWC) oversees 28 Local Boards; LWDBs are part of the Public Workforce System, a network of federal, state, and local offices that support economic expansion and develop the talent of the nation's workforce. Each varies in terms of size and geography.

WORKFORCE INNOVATION & OPPORTUNITY ACT (WIOA)

Workforce Innovation and Opportunity Act (WIOA) Youth funding is the primary source of funding available for OYYA, and it is administered by the Texas Workforce Commission (TWC) through the Local Workforce Development Boards (LWDB's).

TEXAS WORKFORCE COMMISSION (TWC)

The state agency that supports the development of the Texas workforce.

TEMPORARY ASSISTANCE FOR NEEDY FAMILIES (TANF)

TANF stands for Temporary Assistance for Needy Families, a federal program that provides assistance to families with children who are experiencing poverty. It's a block grant program where states receive funding from the federal government to design and operate their own TANF programs.

TEXAS EDUCATION AGENCY (TEA)

The Texas Education Agency (TEA) is the state agency responsible for overseeing public primary and secondary education in Texas. It sets educational standards, implements policies, and ensures compliance with state and federal regulations. The TEA also manages funding for public education, administers the statewide assessment program, and oversees various programs aimed at improving student outcomes.

TEXAS HIGHER EDUCATION COORDINATING BOARD (THECB)

The Texas Higher Education Coordinating Board is an agency of the U.S. state of Texas's government that oversees all public post-secondary education in the state.

Glossary of Terms

WORKFORCE AND EDUCATION READINESS CONTINUUM (WERC)

The Workforce and Education Readiness Continuum (WERC) is a collaborative network of organizations in Austin, Texas, providing services to help individuals enter or re-enter the workforce. It offers a range of support, from basic education and job readiness training to occupational training, empowering individuals with the skills needed for career advancement and economic growth. WERC is funded by the City of Austin and Travis County.

COMMUNITY-BASED ORGANIZATIONS (CBO)

Community-Based Organizations (CBOs) are most often nonprofit organizations—particularly service organizations—that work at the local level to provide services to communities and specific target audiences which improve a community's health and well-being.

TEXAS ESSENTIAL KNOWLEDGE AND SKILLS (TEKS)

The Texas Essential Knowledge and Skills (TEKS) are the state-adopted curriculum standards that outline what students are expected to learn in public schools in Texas. These standards, determined by the State Board of Education, cover various subjects and grade levels, ensuring a consistent and comprehensive education for all Texas students.

Introduction

Local Workforce Development Boards are crucial in developing regional workforces and supporting our local economies. **Young people are the cornerstone of Texas' future economic prosperity.** Unfortunately, a significant portion of those aged 16-24, termed opportunity youth and young adults (OYYA), struggle to enter or stay in school and the workforce. This disconnect not only affects individual lives but also threatens the long-term vitality of our state's economy and tax base.

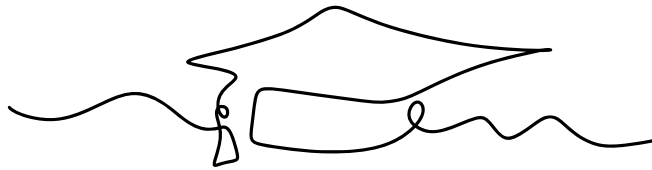
Workforce Innovation and Opportunity Act (WIOA) funding is the primary source of funding available for OYYA, and it is administered by the Texas Workforce Commission (TWC) through the Local Workforce Development Boards (LWDB's). Some of the boards can also provide resources to OYYA using Texas Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF) and Pell Grants. However, WIOA funding remains the critical lifeline for reconnecting OYYA to education and employment opportunities.

Despite the importance of this funding and the programs it supports, there are significant gaps in community engagement, fiscal transparency, and strategic planning that hinder its effective utilization. There are no current local requirements to notify workforce officials regarding the creation of new subsidized jobs, which can leave local workforce boards unprepared to provide the support new workers will need, such as job training, childcare, and transportation. Although LWDB's track their OYYA spending and other metrics to comply with federal requirements, that information is not readily available to legislators and local stakeholders, impeding data-driven decision-making and resource allocation. Moreover, some improvements can be made to increase collaboration and efficiency. Planning efforts also vary considerably across the state—for instance, eighteen strategic plans make no mention of the term “opportunity youth” and twelve do not reference “disconnected youth”. Nevertheless, all strategic plans express their support for this population, though using different terminology. This inconsistency hampers the development of targeted, statewide approaches to addressing OYYA needs and prevents the replication of successful initiatives across regions. **By incorporating an OYYA section in their strategic plans with clear goals, metrics, and transparent reporting requirements, LWDBs could enhance their support for opportunity youth.**

To ensure Texas maintains a robust workforce pipeline and a strong economy, it is crucial to implement policy reforms that enhance community engagement, increase fiscal transparency, and mandate strategic planning for OYYA inclusion. By doing so, we can improve coordination between economic development and workforce readiness, increase OYYA workforce participation, and ultimately secure Texas' economic future.

Empowering Texas' Disconnected Youth: A Crucial Step Towards Economic Prosperity

Opportunity youth and young adults (OYYA), aged 16-24 and neither in school nor employed, are key to achieving Texas' 60x30 goal of 60% of Texans ages 25-34 completing a certificate or degree. This demographic demands urgent attention from Local Workforce Boards (LWDBs). **In Texas, a staggering 13.1% of young people in this age group—approximately 484,894 individuals—are disconnected from education and employment.** While rural areas show higher OYYA rates, urban centers house the majority due to population density. **Many OYYA remain unaware of alternatives to traditional college paths, such as apprenticeships, trade schools, or certifications.**



OYYA face numerous challenges that hinder their engagement in education or employment. These include basic needs such as food and housing insecurity, mental health issues stemming from adverse childhood experiences, lack of childcare and transportation, and higher risks of incarceration, disability, poverty, and high school dropout. Quick, affordable certifications leading to high-wage, sustainable jobs particularly appeal to those balancing parenting with education or struggling to meet basic needs. **To effectively re-engage this population, LWDBs should enhance outreach efforts, conduct comprehensive needs assessments, provide holistic support, including mental health services, offer "earn as you learn" or paid training options, and educate OYYA about diverse career pathways beyond traditional college.**

Enhancing Community Engagement & Coordination Between the Texas Workforce Commission, Local Workforce Entities, and Community Stakeholders

Under current law, local and state governmental entities that provide subsidies for the creation of new jobs are not required to notify local workforce officials of those new jobs. As a result, local community leaders lack sufficient advance notice to effectively plan resource allocation regarding workforce supports such as job training, childcare, transportation, and other needs to allow local workers and officials to prepare for and access newly created employment opportunities.

To address this communication gap and improve coordination, the Texas Workforce Commission could establish a formalized notification system that requires local and state governmental entities to inform workforce officials about upcoming job creation initiatives. This system would enable local workforce development boards to proactively align their programs and resources with emerging employment opportunities. By having advance notice of new jobs, workforce officials can tailor their training programs, adjust resource allocation, and coordinate with educational institutions to ensure that local residents are adequately prepared for these positions.

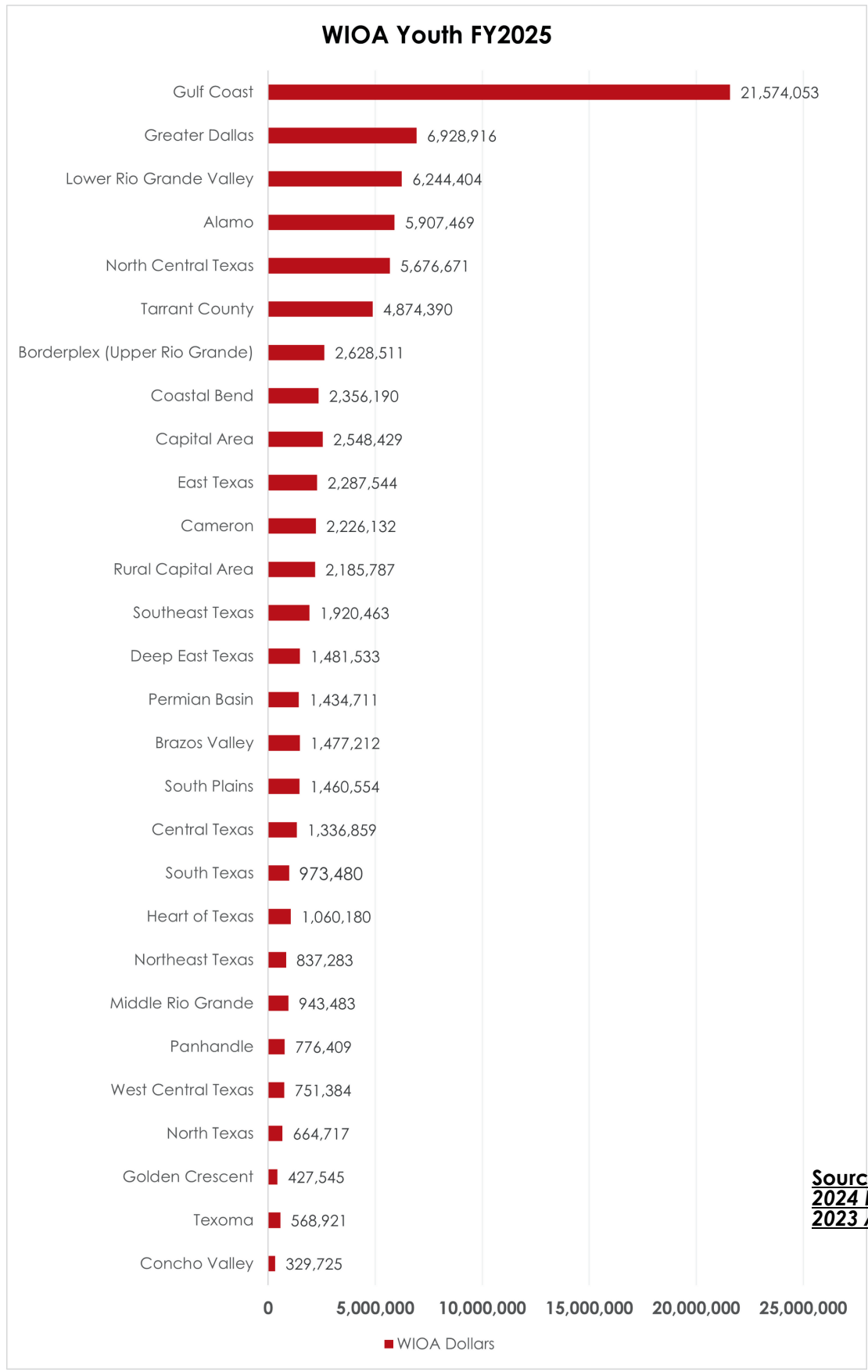
To enhance the utilization of WIOA funds for youth services and promote job creation, effective coordination with local employers, workforce development agencies, and community service providers is crucial. Establishing strong partnerships with organizations that offer job training and placement services can significantly improve employment outcomes for at-risk youth. For instance, collaborating with local businesses, non-profits, and community-based organizations, LWDBs can provide comprehensive support needed to address the multifaceted challenges faced by these young people, while simultaneously creating pathways to employment. These partnerships can leverage WIOA funds to develop targeted job readiness programs, vocational training initiatives, and work-based learning opportunities, effectively connecting at-risk youth with sustainable career options in their communities.

Ensuring Fiscal Transparency and Efficient Use of Funding

The Texas Workforce Commission (TWC) and the 28 (LWDBs) are positioned to be able to assist the OYYA population. The LWDBs are groups of community leaders who oversee workforce programs and other services in their area. They represent businesses, industries, educational opportunities, community-based organizations, and more.¹ LWDBs operate independently, resulting in significant inconsistency among them, with the scope of the issues they address varying widely. There are numerous challenges related to serving opportunity youth, and a better understanding of how dollars are being utilized could improve effectiveness and efficiency.

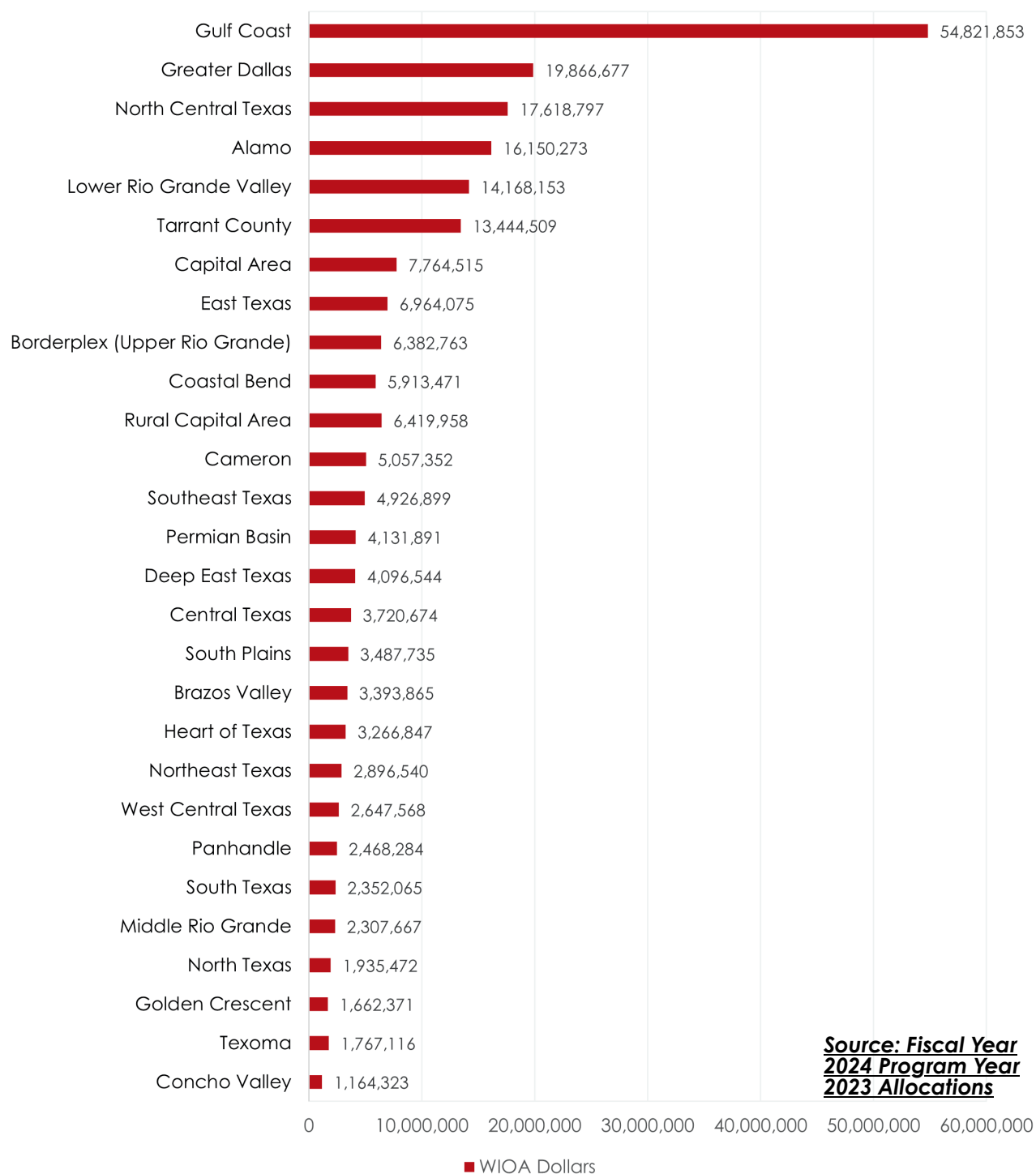
LWDBs are crucial in ensuring the effective allocation, management, and utilization of WIOA funds. Detailed reporting on the use of these funds and the progress of projects is necessary for ensuring accountability and transparency. LWDB's are already reporting much of this information to the Texas Workforce Commission through annual reports and auditing. **Despite the current reporting systems in place, there is still a lack of transparency regarding the funds and how they are being allocated.** Having easily accessible reports that are available to the public allows for transparency and fosters public trust for legislators, taxpayers, and local stakeholders.

The graph below outlines how LWDBs manage nearly 80 million WIOA Youth dollars per fiscal year. Despite these resources, there is little clarity on where the money is spent. The importance of LWDBs reporting on the allocation of WIOA funds extends beyond transparency. An accurate and detailed report ensures that funds are used to address the communities' specific needs, such as job training, education, career counseling, and necessary support services. Accurate information on where the funds are being allocated will also help lawmakers understand the specific needs in each area, leading to better community support while reinforcing the credibility and impact of workforce initiatives. This, in turn, helps to create a more skilled and adaptable workforce and is crucial for economic growth.



**Source: Fiscal Year
2024 Program Year
2023 Allocations**

WIOA Combined FY2025



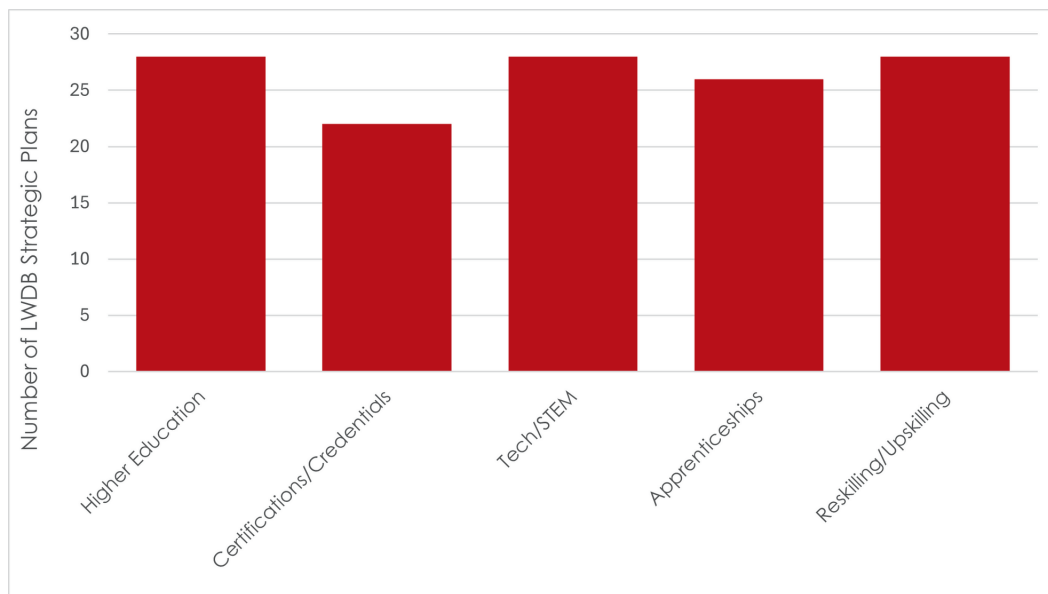
Current Strategic Plans and Opportunities for Improvement

Every LWDB is tasked with developing a strategic plan, lasting for four years, concerning their locations, industries, employment needs, and in-need populations. Every LWDB has WIOA dollars that can be spent to better support OYYA, and all of the LWDB's mentioned youth within this age range within their strategic plan. However, the terminology and depth differed widely across different Boards; some merely mentioned the population as a population of interest or in need of support, while others provided specific strategies they were using to implement the provision of resources and supports to opportunity youth. This shows the clear and evident disparities between the LWDBs.

Many LWDB strategic plans also list target industries that need an expanding workforce which helps service providers and those seeking further education or employment to target their efforts better. Specific fund allocations are not mentioned in strategic plans, but each LWDB has a strategy for OYYA; some are better defined than others.

The ones that mention OYYA have goals that may include engaging them in different employment opportunities and educating and training them in different areas. Targeted industries and jobs could be used to help direct OYYA towards industries with positions that need to be filled. Organizations and those that partner with an LWDB should be aware of these targeted jobs and industries to connect OYYA to industries in need. However, far fewer of these strategic plans include objectives or explain how they plan to measure performance.

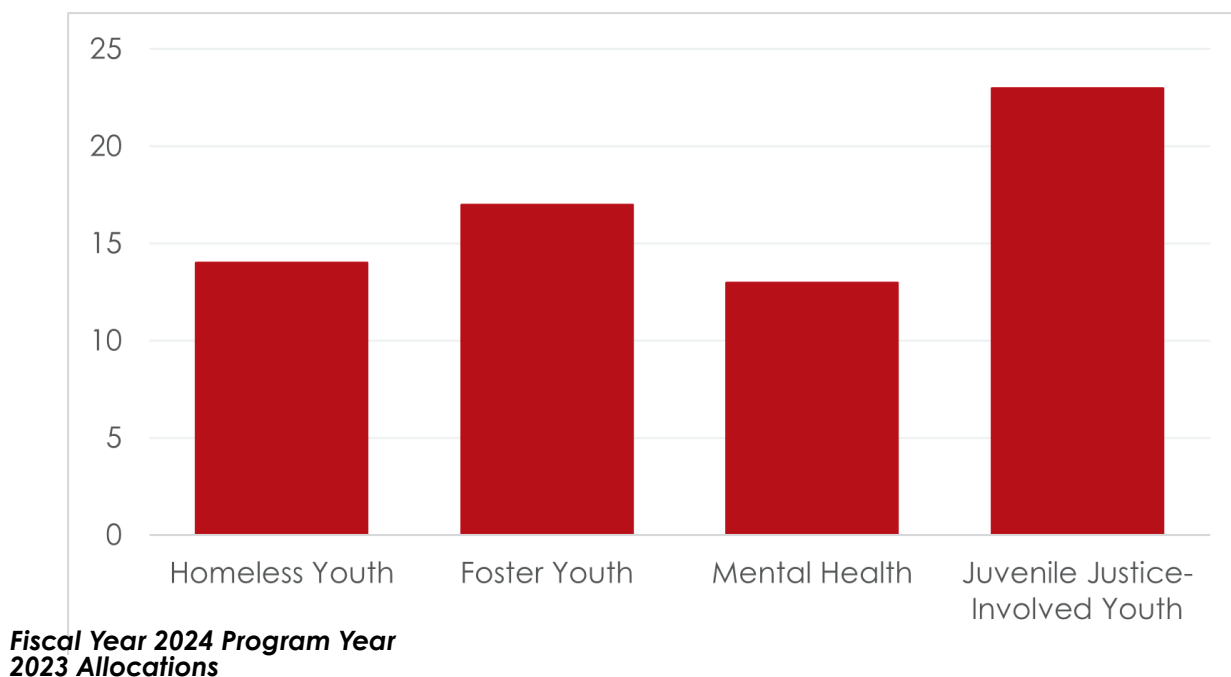
Services Addressed in LWDB Strategic Plans



**Fiscal Year 2024 Program Year
2023 Allocations**

Local Workforce Development Boards (LWDBs) employed various services and strategies to support OYYA. Nearly all LWDBs highlighted certifications or credentials, apprenticeships, reskilling/upskilling, and financial literacy services as crucial to reaching their objectives. Several have limited strategies supporting high school reintegration or GED support. If TEA and THECB worked more closely with LWDBs, the funds allocated for in-school youth could be more effectively utilized to prevent school dropouts. **Although around 25% of WIOA dollars are intended for prevention, LWDBs often face challenges in identifying eligible youth and maximizing the use of these funds.** Additional WIOA funds should be spent servicing career pathways, ultimately leading to a sustainable wage. Strengthening coordination and building partnerships with employers and community service providers can help overcome these challenges and ensure that these dollars are used effectively to support and retain at-risk youth. Additionally, all LWDBs utilize technology to engage with OYYA or focused on tech/STEM-related learning and employment opportunities, which is important for the growing workforce needs.

Vulnerable Populations



Most LWDBs directly addressed young adult populations that are vulnerable to disconnection, such as unhoused youth, young adults who have aged out of foster care, previously incarcerated youth, and those suffering from mental health issues. **All LWDBs address youth in and aging out of foster care, but only 17 LWDBs outline a specific strategy for this population to reconnect.** This is likely partly due to the statutory requirement that Local Workforce Boards enter cooperative agreements with their local Preparation for Adult Living (PAL) programs. PAL programs aim to prepare foster care children who are aging out of care for the independence and responsibilities of adulthood.

Conversely, only 14 strategic plans included strategies for homeless youth, 13 addressed mental health assistance, and 23 strategic plans mentioned services and support for previously incarcerated youth. Mental health challenges are among the leading causes of disconnection for opportunity youth, with both children and adults frequently facing difficulties accessing care. **For instance, 60.3% of youth in Texas who reported a major depressive episode did not receive treatment.**

Additionally, Texas ranks 51st in access to mental health care, according to Mental Health America.² Finally, most strategic plans did not address economic insecurity, even though we know this is a major contributing factor to both becoming disconnected and staying disconnected.

Although local autonomy is important, LWDBs would benefit from engaging local non-profits serving opportunity youth and incorporating OYYA voice on how to most efficiently spend WIOA funds. These recommendations would assist LWDBs in developing a dedicated section in their strategic plan focused specifically on OYYA.

Several LWDB's are currently using effective strategies to connect with OYYA such as using technology and apps, collaborating with post-secondary institutions, offering financial literacy classes, or working with juvenile probation centers. Several LWDB's are also partnering with agencies that are working towards establishing sustainable career pathways. Although these strategies are in place, several gaps remain. For example, while many services target children in foster care, a significant number of opportunity youth still lack access to, or awareness of, these resources. Additionally, there is a need for more detailed plans, particularly in outlining collaboration efforts and specifying how funds will be used. For instance, clearer guidelines could be established for engaging with local community organizations to ensure that all at-risk youth, not just those in foster care, are reached. Moreover, a more transparent allocation of resources could help stakeholders understand and optimize the impact of available funding.

EXEMPLAR GREATER DALLAS AREA LWDB

Although several LWDBs could use improvement regarding their lack of comprehensive plans for opportunity youth, a few stand out as leading examples, with Workforce Solutions Greater Dallas being a prime example. Greater Dallas excels in communicating the challenges and needs OYYA is facing while taking a proactive approach with its strategies and partnerships to effectively address those needs. Their strategy places a strong emphasis on certifications, apprenticeship programs, educational opportunities, and diverse career engagement approaches, offering a wide range of options for OYYA. Additionally, the Dallas workforce system offers a broad range of services addressing workforce challenges with employer-led solutions with a "no wrong door" approach. These services include in-person and virtual seminars for resumes, customized training, scholarships for job training credentials, and layoff services. Workforce Solutions Greater Dallas closely partners with the

TRAC program to serve current and former foster youth. To help the youth overcome various barriers, they offer services to assist with educational opportunities, employment, and any other additional services they may need such as mentoring services and life skills classes. They also provide services that target OYYA who struggle with mental health issues and need to seek crisis intervention.

EXEMPLAR PANHANDLE LWDB

Another standout LWDB is the Panhandle area, which exceeds expectations through its focus on education and career engagement. By partnering with three local colleges, the Panhandle area offers a wide variety of work-based training opportunities, including internships, apprenticeships, industry-recognized skills certification programs, and a university-sponsored small business incubator program. Additionally, the Panhandle LWDB provides comprehensive support services, such as financial literacy programs and counseling services for drug and alcohol abuse. What truly sets this LWDB apart is its dedication to supporting vulnerable youth populations including foster youth and previously incarcerated youth. Through collaboration with the state and community agencies, like the Amarillo Foster Youth Transition Center, this LWDB offers workforce occupational training for these individuals. Moreover, by working with Texas Department of Criminal Justice (TDJC), the Panhandle LWDB ensures local Parole Division Officers have the necessary information on Job Seeker services to help previously incarcerated youth find, secure, and retain employment and connect them with adult education programs.

EXEMPLAR GOLDEN CRESCENT LWDB

Golden Crescent area serves as another exemplary case study with a robust strategy to assist youth with GED and high school completion activities, tutoring, subsidized employment, college visits, and career information. This is being done by strengthening partnerships with local school districts, colleges, and AEL providers to prevent youth from dropping out of school. The Golden Crescent area takes a proactive approach in raising awareness and educating middle and high school counselors to foster a post-secondary school culture. Their efforts help students and parents understand the wide range of career and educational choices, including Programs of Study and Industry-Based Certifications. This LWDB is exceptionally inclusive by supporting vulnerable populations, such as homeless youth, ex-offenders, and foster youth through partnerships, programs, workshops, and wrap-around services.

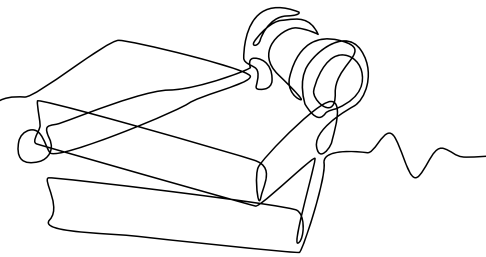
EXEMPLAR CAPITAL AREA LWDB

The Capital Area region exemplifies the diverse needs of OYYA and stands out in every area. The approach is clear, concise, and effective in both strategy and execution. "Opportunity Youth" is mentioned 20 times throughout the strategic plan and feels thoughtfully designed with this population in mind, ensuring it meets their specific needs. The Youth Program is backed by a strong collaboration between 5 agencies and 20 organizations, working together to provide support and develop skills in areas such as employment, job training, employment services, and the Workforce and Education Readiness Continuum (WEREC). One of the Capital Area LWDB key priorities is apprenticeships. They've appointed four industry directors specializing in skilled trades/manufacturing, IT, healthcare, and mobility to support this. These directors work closely with Austin Community College and community-based organizations (CBOs) to develop training programs and apprenticeships that align with employer needs. It's clear they have a deep understanding of youth in their region and are going above and beyond to meet those needs meaningfully.

EXEMPLAR BORDERPLEX LWDB

The Borderplex region excels in high school re-engagement, apprenticeship programs, and technology/STEM-based careers. The major emphasis on high school re-engagement is unmatched, and the region utilizes a system where an internal team member coordinates with middle schoolers and high schoolers to provide resources for high-demand jobs. This is important because having middle schoolers and high schoolers think about post-secondary education early increases the likelihood of attainment. This emphasis on education is both preventative and proactive in the approach of keeping youth engaged. The WIOA program targets both in-school and out-of-school youth, providing services such as secondary education and employment opportunities post-graduation through a curriculum called TEKS Aligned. Another priority for The Borderplex Workgroup is technology/STEM through a partnership with Tech Quest to facilitate apprenticeships specifically for the technology sector. Additional services include technical skills training, soft and social skills development, financial literacy, and job training to prepare youth better to transition into the workforce.

Proposed Policy Recommendations



Children at Risk proposes three specific policy reforms for the 2025 Texas Legislature:

- **Enhanced Fiscal Transparency**
 - Mandate the aggregation of already existing data on workforce spending, activities, and collaboration for young Texans (16-24)
- **Strategic Planning**
 - Require local workforce boards to include strategies for engaging Opportunity Youth and Young Adults in their strategic plans
- **Increased Community Engagement**
 - Require notification to workforce officials when large-scale subsidized job creation (over 100 jobs) occurs
- **Outcomes/Impact**
 - Improve program evaluation and make information more accessible to policymakers and other stakeholders
 - Enable data-driven decision-making and resource allocation
 - Promote consistent, targeted approaches to address OYYA needs statewide
 - Facilitate the replication of successful initiatives across different regions
 - Allow better preparation for workforce needs, including job training, childcare, and transportation support

These policy reforms aim to improve coordination between economic development and workforce readiness, increase OYYA workforce participation, and ultimately boost Texas' economy and tax base in the long term.