



## **Reforming Youth Experiences at HRA**

By David R. Jones

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One in five young people in New York City between the ages of 17 and 24 — an estimated 173,000 youth — is neither in school nor in the workforce. One-third of these disconnected youth lack a high school diploma and are thus disadvantaged in terms of their employment prospects and their chances of avoiding a life marked by poverty.

Low-income youth in New York City ages 17 and older are eligible to apply for cash benefits if they are considered “independent.” They apply with the New York City Human Resources Administration (HRA) through a network of offices called Job Centers, where eligibility is determined. Some cash assistance recipients are required to participate in work-related activities while they receive benefits.

A series of regulations encourage or require HRA to place youth and other individuals who lack a high school diploma in educational programs to fulfill their work requirement. Here is an opportunity to help these youth get the educational credentials they need to succeed in the labor force.

The Community Service Society and the Resilience Advocacy Project conducted research and issued a report that shed light on what happens when young people apply for public assistance. Our findings suggest that there appears to be a wide divergence between HRA’s stated policies and the day-to-day implementation of these policies.

We found that HRA sends most young people to the Back to Work program – a job search and resume writing program geared to adults - to fulfill their work requirement, regardless of their age, educational level, or work experience.

Young people are sometimes discouraged from applying for cash benefits, wrongfully denied such benefits, and/or given incorrect information about their eligibility. In five instances, study respondents were incorrectly told that they had to be 21 years of age to apply for cash assistance, when in fact eligibility begins at the age of 17.

We propose reforms to current HRA practices — none of which would require any change of existing legislation regarding the city’s welfare policy.

The Back to Work program is not a suitable option for young people, many of whom have not yet held a job. We recommend that HRA offer rigorous, youth-specific programs targeted to the needs of each young person. Instead of helping them write a resume, HRA should be helping them toward getting something worth putting on a resume.

All young people who enter HRA Job Centers must receive correct information about their eligibility and options to fulfill their work requirement. Youth ages 17 to 21 who are without a high school or equivalent diploma should be placed in high school or GED programs within the Department of Education's Learning to Work initiative. Youth ages 22 to 24 who are without a high school or equivalent diploma should be placed in adult education programs toward GED attainment before job placement. Youth ages 17 to 24 who possess a high school or equivalent diploma should join an expanded Young Adult Internship Program, an existing youth-oriented transitional job program developed by the Mayor's Commission on Economic Opportunity.

HRA's approach to youth placement represents a missed opportunity to reconnect these young people to educational services and job training. It is also a poor use of public funds that should be used to provide opportunities to promote self-sufficiency and help break the intergenerational cycle of poverty.

The report on HRA activities, *Missed Opportunity: How New York City Can Do a Better Job of Reconnecting Youth on Public Assistance to Education and Jobs*, can be found online at [www.cssny.org](http://www.cssny.org).

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