

## Reconnecting Youth to Education and Jobs

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

Most disconnected youth have grown up in economically disadvantaged households and often find themselves in financial crises of their own as they transition into adulthood. Low-income youth ages 17 and older are eligible to apply for cash benefits if they are considered “independent.”

Individuals apply for cash assistance from the New York City Human Resources Administration (HRA) through a network of neighborhood-based 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. Unfortunately, HRA sends most of them to the Back to Work program - an HRA job search and resume writing program geared to adults - to fulfill this requirement. It is generally agreed that young people and those without high school or equivalent diplomas will not succeed in the labor market without a strong foundation in basic skills and an appropriate level of educational attainment.

### Youth Experiences at HRA

The Community Service Society and the Resilience Advocacy Project conducted research that shed light on what actually happens when young people apply for public assistance. We spoke to scores of randomly selected young people as they entered and exited HRA Job Centers in Manhattan, Brooklyn, and the Bronx to apply for or recertify their cash assistance benefits. We also conducted more in-depth interviews with young people who had applied for public assistance in the recent past to learn about their experiences with HRA’s work requirement programs.

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. In some cases, the policies themselves seem flawed. 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.

Most youth are placed in HRA’s “one-size-fits-all,” adult-focused Back to Work program, regardless of the young person’s age, education level, interests, or aspirations. We were able to determine the work requirement placement of 70 of our respondents. Forty-six of the 70 did not have a high school diploma, yet 39 of these 46 were placed in the Back to Work program.

A GED and job training program called Opportunities for a Better Tomorrow (OBT) is approved by HRA as fulfilling the cash assistance work requirement. OBT is located right across the street from HRA’s Thornton Street Job Center in Brooklyn. Yet every young person we spoke to from OBT who applied for cash benefits at the Job Center was given a Back to Work program assignment.

Most youth who have participated in the Back to Work program claim that it does not help them develop their skills or find work. They report that the program, which consists largely of job search activities, is not appropriate for them given their lack of workforce experience.

### **Reforming HRA Practices**

To address these critical concerns, we propose reforms to current HRA practices — none of which would require any change of existing legislation regarding the city’s welfare policy.

All young people who enter HRA Job Centers must receive correct information about their eligibility and options to fulfill their work requirement. As part of this effort, HRA should be more transparent about how it serves young people, tracking and publishing data on the demographic makeup, work requirement experiences, and outcomes of all its applicants.

Under New York State Law, HRA is required to conduct a comprehensive assessment of each applicant that takes into account that individual’s educational and employment history, as well as his or her abilities and preferences. HRA should integrate youth-appropriate questions, language, and processes into the existing assessment structure.

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.

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 and successful youth-oriented transitional job program developed by the Mayor’s Commission on Economic Opportunity.

New York City’s approach to young people who apply for cash assistance represents a missed opportunity to reconnect these youth to educational services and job training. It also represents a poor use of precious public funds that should be used to provide meaningful opportunities to promote self-sufficiency and 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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