WHITE PAPER

TITLE: Positive Youth Development Recommended Responses to the Widening Opportunity Gaps As a Result of the COVID-19 Pandemic

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COVID-19 has affected every person across the globe, with vulnerable and marginalized youth populations being especially impacted by the closing of school buildings, youth programs and other services. As the pandemic progresses, young people need caring adult relationships and youth focused services to strengthen and develop their resiliency and life skills.

The pandemic has exacerbated the existing opportunity gaps for youth. Opportunity gap is defined as how the circumstances in which people are born and/or live determines their opportunities in life (Silliman Cohen & Bosk, 2020). Youth living with the largest gap in opportunity include youth who are: lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer, and/or questioning [LGBTQ]; migrants and refugees; living in rural areas; of indigenous, racial or ethnic minorities; and those with disabilities and/or physical and/or mental health conditions. Disparities for vulnerable and marginalized youth existed before the pandemic and will continue to exist into the future. Young people, particularly those who are experiencing opportunity gaps, are struggling to cope with changes to family life that include parental job loss, isolation, financial strain, uncertainty, and increased familial stress responses. It is important that youth, families, and communities work together to improve resiliency and lifelong development (Bartlett et al, 2020).

A BRIGHTER FUTURE FOR ALL (Birth to Five)

COVID-19 has brought an enormity of stress to the average family's day to day lives. High rates of unemployment, serving as full time caregivers, embracing virtual education, lack of mental health services, and loss of socialization, just to name a few stressors, have been added to

parent's plates. Children are inherently vulnerable because they depend on adults to have their most basic needs met. When those adults lack the wherewithal to cope with the immediate, urgent, and multiple adaptive demands a pandemic places on families and when support systems do not exist, falter, or cease, it can result in unmitigated disaster for the very young (Early Childhood Education Journal, 2020).

Birth to five years is a critical time period in a child's life as the brain develops rapidly. Young children depend on parents, family members, and other caregivers as their first teachers to aid them in developing the skills needed to become independent and lead healthy, successful lives. How the brain grows is strongly affected by a child's experiences with other people and their environment. Exposure to stress and trauma can have long-term negative consequences for a child's brain (CDC, 2020a). During COVID-19 our youngest learners have been exposed to increased levels of Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACES). The pandemic may have increased intra-familial adversity, by exposing children to increased parental anxieties, especially those associated with job loss, food insecurity, and housing insecurity. Additionally, by amplifying toxic stress, increased family adversity may impair child brain development, particularly during the early years (Sanders, 2020). Youth Development professionals can take a proactive approach by educating themselves on ACES and providing families with resources and needed services.

Over half a million people in Wisconsin have filed for unemployment benefits as of May 4, 2020 (Barrett, 2020). Families and individuals with low incomes struggle during normal times, but this unprecedented modern crisis has intensified their hardship while also creating barriers to seeking help. Families of all economic levels are struggling with job loss, food shortages, covering rent/mortgages and paying monthly bills. The Center on Poverty and Social Policy projects that if unemployment rates rise to 30%, the annual poverty rate in the United States will increase from 12.4% to 18.9%. This would represent an increase of more than 21 million individuals in poverty and would mark the highest recorded rate of poverty since 1967 (Parolin & Wimer, 2020). The household income of many families with young children has been affected during the COVID-19 pandemic due to job loss and lost wages. Youth in families experiencing economic insecurity is linked to adverse childhood experiences that can negatively impact a child's social-emotional development, learning, and health (CDC, 2020b). Youth development professionals are needed to support families and assist adults in building skill sets that help parents secure and maintain a job, provide responsive care for children, manage a household, and contribute productively to the community.

Thirteen million parents rely on childcare outside of the home, 60% of childcare facilities have shut down during this national crisis. Of those that are open, 86% of respondents are serving fewer children now than they were prior to the pandemic. On average, enrollment is down by 67%. At the same time, upwards of 70% of child care centers are incurring substantial, additional costs for staff, cleaning supplies, and personal protective equipment (Hogan, et al., 2020). These closures have forced 28% of parents to reduce work hours and 16% of parents to take a leave of absence, either paid or unpaid (U.S. Chamber of Commerce Foundation, 2020). A study done by the National Association for the Education of Young Children notes that 38% of Wisconsin parents who rely on childcare can no longer afford to pay the monthly tuition fees (NAEYC, 2020). Those hardest hit by these closures are low income Black and Brown parents who are less likely to have remote work options and more likely to be laid off. In addition to meals and

other resources provided by many early childhood development programs, children are deprived of both social and cognitive stimulation outside of their homes. The learning gap for these youth increases when early childcare programs such as Head Start, a federal program for preschool children from low-income families, are reduced or diminished. The Heckman Equation proves that investing in early childhood education can reduce the learning gap, improve health outcomes, can boost earnings in adulthood, and has proven to decrease the rate of crime (Garcia, et al., 2017). As the pandemic progresses child development has not paused, and supporting children, families, and care providers is as important as ever. Communities need to begin investing in early childcare education (birth to 5) in order to prevent a widening learning gap and lifelong trauma for our youngest learners.

EDUCATION IN CRISIS: THE IMPACTS OF COVID-19 ON LEARNING CAPACITY (5K - 6th Grade)

Early estimates show that on average, students may have lost 30% of the reading gains and over 50% of the math skills from the 2019-2020 school year, according to Kuhfeld and Tarasawa's research (as cited in National 4-H Council, 2020). Researchers predict that a wave of students returned to school with elevated needs, including addressing traumatic effects of the pandemic. Some youth are already trailing behind those with academic privilege and, as a result, retention loss further widens the opportunity gap.

Many school districts around the state have offered families the option of face-to-face or virtual learning for the 2020-2021 school year. Yet, policies in place could see many schools transitioning to full virtual learning at some point due to local health concerns. A fully virtual schedule further impacts learning gaps for disadvantaged youth whose families cannot access or afford reliable internet. In Wisconsin, the counties with the lowest internet access rates and lowest incomes are in rural areas, where almost 40% of households below the ALICE [Asset Limited, Income Constrained, Employed] Threshold do not have an internet subscription (United Way of Wisconsin, 2020). Lack of access could lead to a greater "homework gap" in these areas. The homework gap is defined as the divide that is caused by the lack of internet access for all families due to income, lack of available services, and having no computer at home. This further impacts students when local businesses, community centers, and libraries, which have free wi-fi access, are shut down and students experience more challenges in logging on. When examining how COVID-19 affects young people it would be remiss if society did not recognize the fact that the pandemic disproportionately impacts racial and ethnic minorities. Across the Midwest, the pandemic hits Black communities at a greater rate than others. In Wisconsin, the hardest hit area with higher rates of infection and death for the Black community is Milwaukee where people of color make up the largest percentage of the population (Department of Psychiatry, 2020). Brown families are most likely to be worried about paying for internet access and cell phones in the home. A racial divide in broadband access is evident. Statewide, 13.6% of Black residents and 11% of Hispanic/Latinx residents lack broadband access (Wisconsin Policy Forum, 2020).

With so many of educational programs going virtual, a piece of the solution for access has fallen to schools: 37% of Americans say that K-12 schools should be providing computers to ALL students, while an additional 43% say that they should provide them for students who cannot

afford them (Vogels et al., 2020). Youth development professionals continue to play an integral role in facilitating students growth and success including integrating new strategies and supports. Professionals can promote online learning-by-doing approaches that are practical, interactive, and flexible; and supply the tools and training needed to effectively use and apply remote facilitation, mentoring, and instruction as it relates to students and intentionally considering those with disabilities. Another approach is to be certain that both youth and educators are trained in online safety and appropriate behavior. Adults that work with young people can also ensure that materials are available in all relevant languages and accessible formats for people with disabilities and limited or no internet access in the event of school or learning facility closures.

Opportunity gaps compound further for household units with single or precariously employed parents, where constant monitoring and support of virtual learning is near impossible. Youth in these types of households lack in-person engagement and thus fall behind further. In this case, even if affordable, and quality internet was accessible to vulnerable families, young people may still struggle to complete school work on time.On top of the impossibility of keeping up with an online course without online access, vulnerable families inherently have more demands outside of the home that do not allow for active monitoring of virtual schooling that may be necessary for success. Without internet access and present adults, the educational opportunity gaps for youth will deepen. While there is not a large body of research in this area, there are things that youth professionals, employers, families, and the community at large can do to help students succeed. Urban and rural communities may be very different in demographics, but their needs are more similar than they are different. Flexible work schedules or the opportunity to work from home are ways that employers can allow families to navigate some of these new challenges or at least be physically present and not exacerbate the need for supervision. Teachers, youth professionals, community members, and other youth serving organizations and supporters can offer small group or individualized in person learning opportunities, study hall, or internet access. Investing time in helping youth identify individuals that can help and support them can have long term benefits.

In addition, while many schools and community organizations were placing increased emphasis on social-emotional learning in their curriculums and programming before the pandemic, there is a marked need to ramp up those efforts now. Social and emotional learning is the process through which individuals learn to understand and manage emotions, feel and show empathy for others, and establish positive relationships (Evers, 2018). These ‘soft skills’ are foundational in maintaining healthy relationships with supportive adults and peers. In an online survey conducted in May 2020, over 90% of youth reported that the pandemic has negatively and significantly affected their friendships and, as a result, are worried or sad about it. The same survey illustrated that the impact is greater for Black youth and young people living in households with income less that $50,000 per year (GENYOUth, 2020). This is concerning data when professionals who work with young people consider that positive peer relationships are important for thriving development as significant factors in coping with stress. High emotional intelligence of staff and the ability to help students develop a growth mindset related to self-awareness, self-regulation, internal motivation, empathy, and social skills helps instill a sense of agency and be able to navigate the situations and conflicts that they are certain to encounter. Being a caring adult, and reaching out to authentically check in with young people can be a great

way to model social-emotional learning. Youth organizations can also serve as a resource for non-traditional ways to integrate life skills.

In 2019, 50% of students in Wisconsin were feeling anxious. Half of the youth in the state is already alarming, yet, it is likely that number has grown significantly as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic. The closure of schools and community youth programs significantly reduced access to face-to-face mental health services and lessened the meaningful contact with adults at school or in the community trained to screen for mental health needs. Of course, these greater barriers come just as the pandemic increased familial stress, lessened peer support and deepened anxiety about the future, all factors that can contribute to depression. For youth of color, who already experience inequities in access to culturally appropriate mental health services, the current landscape is leading to an even wider mental health disparity gap. (Wisconsin's Office of Children's Mental Health, 2020). Mental health, while still very stigmatized, is openly talked about more now than ever before. Schools can integrate dialogue, curriculum, and supplemental educational materials for youth, families, and professionals to identify stressors and positive coping mechanisms. In addition, adults must ensure youth's physical needs are met, they are food secure, and they have transportation available to reach school and critical services. Adults can also embrace professional learning development opportunities to educate the community and themselves about trauma-informed practices, suicide prevention techniques, and mental health supports. It would also be prudent for youth workers to build their professional skills with strategies that support young people with increased mental health needs as a result of the COVID-19.

YOUTH VOICE: YOUNG ADULTS & ADOLESCENTS (7th - 12th Grade)

The pandemic will undoubtedly be a defining moment for Generation Z (youth born between 1997-2010) and Alpha (youth born after 2010) as it is expected to have enduring social, cultural, economic and political impacts that will shape how young people make decisions for the rest of their lives. COVID-19 has stripped youth of many opportunities to be agents of change as well as the typical ways to elevate their voice in their communities and programs they engage on a daily basis.

The survey report, *Life Disrupted: The Impact of COVID-19 on Teens*, found that youth are "no longer living their lives the way they want to" and that teens are "less able to exert control and make their own choices freely." It is important for youth to have informal and formal ways to provide input as a way of being heard and taking back power. For youth that were already disproportionately disenfranchised and disconnected before the pandemic, it can be reasonably concluded that their voices are even more hidden now (GENYOUth, 2020).

The good news is that a May 2020 poll conducted by GENYOUth found that 80% of teens believe that adults are listening to them when making decisions that affect them during the pandemic (GENYOUth, 2020). Yet, across Wisconsin there are many examples of youth being shut out of the process to inform the development of school reopening plans, provide perspective on the evaluation of the impact of the pandemic on programs, or guide policymakers during a crippling budget crisis.

To counteract these effects of the pandemic, youth professionals can intentionally consult with and encourage leadership by youth to address issues important to them, including responding to COVID-19 and social justice issues. Creating and providing both formal and informal spaces where youth can converse, advocate and take leadership on what the future looks like can give youth space to champion what matters to them. The connections that youth professionals have with young people create spaces to bring together both teens and adults, and invite youth into spaces where decisions are being made. Youth workers can also promote and recruit for youth in governance programs that are in place, including youth advising local government, local advocacy programs and more. Youth having a voice in what the future looks like, including their own schooling (both secondary and post-secondary) gives them influence over their futures. The technology that is being used today opens up possibilities for youth to attend meetings and other events that they may not have otherwise been able to attend with their school and extracurricular schedules.

Research shows that bouncing back from today's stressors, or "being resilient," is one of the best life skills young people can develop. The enormity of the COVID-19 crisis presents the biggest test to date of their resiliency, especially for those who were already disadvantaged before the pandemic began. Assets young people possess and the contexts in which they live determine their development. The cumulative effect of the distress caused by the COVID-19 pandemic has the potential to create a negative cascading developmental impact on youth (Roehlkepartain et al., 2020).

When asked what adults can do to help youth cope with the effects of the pandemic, 30% of youth reported that adults could help provide a sense of what the future will look like (GENYOUth, 2020). While no one knows what the future holds, supportive adults can provide spaces for youth to be a part of co-creating the future which can help youth have a sense of being grounded, supported, and valued, all key factors to buffering stress. As adults work with young people, they can use trauma-informed practices in interactions as well as helping youth build their own resiliency by strengthening adult mentorship opportunities that provide positive relationships with young people. Adults should also be aware of what resources are available in their area so that they can direct youth to mental health services that are available to them.

Youth also need opportunities to explore their world and give back to their community. Increasing young people's social capital, the connections among people and organizations that make things happen, is important not just during a pandemic, but always. Youth need to feel a sense of belonging with their peers, family, schools, workplaces, and sporting programs, and need positive adult role models in their lives. Youth need to feel engaged and be part of the rebuilding process - the solutions sought in the months and years ahead. Young people need to be part of the discussion to create solutions to the educational, economic, and health issues that create opportunity gaps. While children are not the face of this pandemic, its broader impacts on children risk being catastrophic and amongst the most lasting consequences for societies as a whole. Let this be a time to honestly acknowledge and address the opportunity gaps that have been present in society for so long. Being rural, Black or Brown, born in poverty, or any of the other gaps are not something that have been chosen by our youth, so why are they suffering because of it? All need to work together to narrow that opportunity gap that has been widening for too long.

EMERGING ADULTS DISTRUPTED BY DISTRESS (18 - 21 Year Olds)

For many emerging adults, ages 18 - 21, the COVID-19 pandemic is a period of marked disruption and despair. Whether in college or in the workforce, it is likely that most emerging adults will look back on this period in their life as a time of financial and social losses, interrupted living situations, and many other hardships that had consequential impact on their mental health.

A group of emerging adults who have experienced deep disruption and loss during COVID-19 are 18 year olds who just graduated from high school. An August 2020 national survey of those incoming freshmen who planned to attend a four-year university found that 40% were unlikely to attend fall semester (Simpson Scarborough, 2020). Much anecdotal evidence suggests that many of these emerging adults may consider a "gap year." The time off between high school and college is ordinarily considered a period to explore one's self through travel and other life-changing experiences. With limited group opportunities and travel restrictions, it has to be considered whether or not such gap year goals can be reached during a pandemic. Furthermore, the longer the pandemic lasts the less likely that many emerging students who will return to their plans to pursue post-secondary education following a gap year. Just shy of 30% of emerging adults in one national study of 1500 reported that they expect to earn less at age 35 as a direct result of losses experienced during COVID-19 (Esteban, et al,. 2020). Regrettably, this is likely a future reality for many currently between the ages of 18 and 24, especially for those who do not find ways to bolster their self-understanding and reimagine their educational and career objectives during the pandemic. Adults have the opportunity to aid this age group in their personal growth by including them in volunteer programs tailored to connect them with both their peers and their community. Youth development professionals can work to involve young adults in social justice efforts that are both meaningful to them and help them contemplate their own place in the world. Consequently, professionals can support emerging adults in endeavors to ensure time during the pandemic adds to their resume and their development toward adulthood.

Workplaces are important community learning spaces that help emerging adults explore careers, build relationships with mentors, and develop job skills that propel them toward post-secondary pathways. Over half of workers aged 16-24 are employed in the retail industry where closings, caused by the COVID-19 pandemic, have resulted in the emerging adult unemployment rate skyrocketing to over 30%. This rate is even greater for Black and Brown youth. Young adults in the 18-21 age range also often do not qualify for income loss continuation or unemployment insurance which increases their burden. Moreover, many of emerging adults that are now reemployed are in positions that cannot be performed remotely which puts them at increased health risks (The Reconnecting Youth Campaign, 2020). Furthermore, many 18-21 years olds were considered dependents for tax purposes and therefore did not receive the federal stimulus checks like other adults even a few years older. Another significant portion of emerging adults experienced a loss of summer internships and jobs as a result of the pandemic. One survey found that 40% lost a job, internship, an opportunity to travel abroad, or a position offer in the summer of 2020 (Esteban, et al,. 2020). Subsequently, 450 out of 1000 college students surveyed online in April 2020 self-reported that they were struggling to meet their financial obligations during the pandemic (College Finance, 2020). Mitigating financial loss will not be easy, but conducting

personal and small cohort coaching sessions that help emerging adults and their families cope with the financial impact they experience as a result of the pandemic is imperative. Coaching sessions should center on connecting emerging adults with Coronavirus Aid, Relief, and Economic Security (CARES) Act information centered on student-loan forgiveness and building their financial literacy skills related to independent living, funding their current and future education and meeting their monetary life goals. In addition, professionals that work with emerging adults can invest resources in community-based service-learning programs that mimic internships and apprenticeships but allow for either remote contributions or participation on a smaller scale close to home to limit health exposure and keep cost barriers low. These opportunities would benefit emerging adults most if they provide the opportunity to foster authentic mentor relationships.

During any 'normal' year a myriad of emerging adults find the transition to college to be a rocky one riddled with difficult decisions, but the 2020 pandemic precipitated a distinct disruption for college students by thrusting them into virtual learning, disturbing their living situations and playing havoc with their social connections. As a result of the upheaval, 77% of college students do not believe they are getting the full value of their tuition and campus experience during the pandemic. (College Finance) In direct correlation, a study of 1500 college students found that 13% of students have delayed graduation due to the pandemic (Esteban, et al,. 2020). Lower income students are 55% more likely to have delayed graduation (Esteban, et al,. 2020). This year the number of 2020 Free Application for Federal Student Aid (FAFSA) renewal applications also saw a steep drop further illustrating the cutting impact for youth most socioeconomically vulnerable (Esteban, et al,. 2020).

Since February 2020 the number of young adults living with one or both of their parents has risen significantly; for those in the 18-24 age group over 70% (up almost ten percentage points) were at home with their parents, most often as a result of campus closings or job losses. This represents the largest percentage of emerging adults living with their parents since 1940 (Fry, 2020). The time following high school graduation is often considered an important rite of passage for many emerging adults. Unfortunately, many feel they have been stripped of this rite and, as a result, are experiencing grief associated with the loss of control to make their own life decisions and the loss of independence often gained from living away from home for the first time.

In addition, most college students, especially freshman and sophomores that were forced to leave their dorms in March 2020, report feeling a notable loss in their sense of community (Inside Higher Ed, 2020). In summer of 2020 a survey found that 56% of college students now acknowledged they missed campus life and almost 3 in 5 college students now recognized they took for granted the social cohesion they received from their in-person classes (College Finance, 2020). A sense of community is incredibly crucial for emerging adults. Research shows that a feeling of belonging is linked to increased educational and personal achievement, aspirations and resiliency (Strayhorn, 2018). Providing spaces for college students to discuss with peers their stressors and uncertainties is critical. Those spaces, either remote or in small pods following pandemic protocols, may be most successful when they are centered on student-engagement and are guided by professionals trained in motivational interviewing. Emerging adults will find these evidence-based strategies worthwhile because they take into account how difficult it is for individuals to make significant life changes while still offering internal decision-making

approaches that promote self-agency and resiliency. The most productive discussions will also be highly student-centered; focusing on emerging adults' shared experiences to build a sense of belonging and community.

In a study, of nearly 20,000 college students across 14 campuses 66% of college students reported that the pandemic has resulted in more financial stress (The Healthy Minds Network, 2020). The fiscal pressure put on emerging adults from unused lease agreements, loss of income and dropped courses, to name just a few, has led many 18-21 year olds to feel depressed. Financial stress is one significant predictor of mental health.While emerging adults report lower levels of mental health since the pandemic uprooted their lives, they also report higher levels of resiliency. One reason for this improved capability to bounce back from hardship might be that while the pandemic has made access to mental health services more difficult, the stigma of seeking those services has reduced (The Healthy Minds Network, 2020). Youth development professionals can position themselves to build on this recent resiliency by coaching emerging adults to recognize the signs of post-traumatic stress, depression, and suicide and refer peers to behavioral health resources when appropriate.

The COVID-19 pandemic will most certainly create a generational trauma for emerging adults. It will be vital for professionals that work with this audience to provide them with the tools to face emotional and financial adversity while also finding ways to help them feel connected to their peers and communities. In order to be resilient emerging adults, youth development professionals must aid them in regaining autonomy in an adulthood with an altered outlook.

YOUTH & ADULTS SUPPORTING EACH OTHER

The social contexts of a young person's life, including school, sports, clubs, workplaces, and other community activities, have all but disappeared. One of the most essential aspects of these contexts, relationships with caring adults, has been curtailed or eliminated altogether, leaving young people without the critical buffering support they need to navigate this new world (Arnold et al., 2020).

Not only are youth affected by all that is going on around them, they can be crucial to helping families and society move forward. It has been shown that youth-adult partnerships [Y-AP] promote positive youth development when young people are actively engaged in meaningful volunteer service, and work in close collaboration with adults. As a result, young people are likely to show better school performance, a more positive self-concept, better relationships with peers, increased social contacts, a greater sense of responsibility, and higher rates of college graduation. They are also more likely to have lower levels of alcohol and drug use, later onset of sexual activity, lower levels of delinquency, and reduced levels of depression when they have positive relationships with caring adults (Zeldin et al., 2010). Other positive impacts of Y-AP include youth safety and belonging; efficacy and empowerment; sociopolitical awareness and civic competence; and community connections. Adults experience an increase in confidence and competence, generalized positive view of youth value, reflection on negative stereotypes, and advocating for youth participation. Genuine Y-APs have proven to engage collectively both

youth and adults both within and outside the opportunity gap to address issues faced by individuals, groups, and communities.

To help cope with stressors that are occurring, youth need safe spaces to socialize, such as schools, youth centers, churches, sporting programs, and after-school programs. Research shows how important it is for young people to be connected to caring adults, with support coming not only from family but also adults outside of the home like teachers, coaches, mentors, relatives, and other youth program leaders. The Search Institute has spent decades analyzing research with more than five million youth including interviewing students from different backgrounds to better understand the importance of relationships in their lives. The Institute's findings show that nothing has more impact in the life of a child than positive relationships (McNeill, 2010). These positive relationships and support networks have been stifled during the COVID-19 pandemic due to stay at home orders and social distancing rules. Positive relationships can bridge the opportunity gap and help build and maintain relationships that continue to be a challenge to foster during the pandemic.

Communities can support and build positive adult relationships with young people during COVID-19 by tapping into educational institutes and youth organizations. Youth professionals should offer families parental learning opportunities that connect them to community resources and positive support systems. Youth professionals can also help families in developing and strengthening adult-youth relationships through mentoring programs that take place in person and remotely.

The COVID-19 pandemic has introduced an unprecedented degree of unpredictability and disruption to both youth and adults. Social distancing, working from home, and virtual schooling have changed the way that families are connecting and building relationships. Trauma faced by young people during the pandemic may have long-term consequences across their lifespan. As a society it is our responsibility to work together with our young people and emerging adults to provide them with the tools needed for them to grow into healthy, resilient adults. As we move forward into 2021 youth professionals are in uncharted waters and must remain proactive, not reactive, in their programming and in the resources that are offered to both youth and emerging adults.

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