

Cleveland's Summer Youth Employment Program (Y.O.U.)

Transforming Youth Employment in Ohio's Second-Largest City

Cleveland's summer youth employment landscape is anchored by Youth Opportunities Unlimited (Y.O.U.), a nonprofit workforce development organization that has operated in partnership with the Mayor's Office since 1982 and Cuyahoga County Jobs and Family Services since 1999. Since 2008, Y.O.U. is the primary provider of summer jobs and internships for our region; acting as steward to collaborators including hundreds of non-profits and businesses. The program serves approximately 2,000 youth annually with federal and philanthropic funding, operating in collaboration with local government's strong commitment to youth development and violence prevention. With rigorous academic research documenting positive outcomes across criminal justice and educational measures, Cleveland is well-positioned to strengthen and scale its program as a model for nonprofit-led, community-partnered youth workforce development.

PROGRAM OVERVIEW

Program Goals: Cleveland's SYEP targets youth from under-resourced communities in Northeast Ohio, providing paid work experience and career-readiness skill development to address the city's elevated youth unemployment and crime rates while providing viable career paths and guidance that increase chances youth emerge from poverty to prosperity.

Population Served: The program serves youth ages 14–19 who are currently in high school or recent graduates residing in economically distressed communities in Northeast Ohio. The program reaches approximately 2,000 teens and young adults annually, though demand consistently exceeds available slots, necessitating a lottery-based selection process.

Program Structure:

- **Scale:** Approximately 2,000 youth annually
- **Duration:** 6–8 weeks, mid-June through early August
- **Youth Compensation:** \$13.50 per hour or more, up to 25 hours per week

Placement Types:

- Traditional summer jobs (maintenance, food service, retail)
- Industry-specific Career Academies (aviation/maritime, culinary, healthcare, manufacturing, pharmacy, information technology, arts/entertainment)
- Positions in city recreation centers, pools, arts agencies, and schools
- Internships and credential-bearing training programs

ADMINISTRATION AND FUNDING

Institutional Partnerships: Cleveland's SYEP is led by Y.O.U. in close coordination with the city and county government:

- Mayor's Office of Prevention, Intervention, and Opportunity for Youth and Young Adults (PIOYYA) — government lead
- City of Cleveland Parks and Recreation Department
- Cleveland Metropolitan School District (through mayoral oversight)
- Cuyahoga County Department of Jobs and Family Services (TANF)

Community Stewards: Y.O.U. serves as the leader and fiscal intermediary for the region and acts as steward of the summer jobs program coordinating with non-profits and municipalities so that the youth and families have one stop shopping for all opportunities. Y.O.U. value add includes: managing employer relationships, operating payroll, navigating complex government compliance regulations, and offering job coaching. Partner organizations are too numerous to name, however a sampling includes: Habitat for Humanity, MAGNET: The Manufacturing Advocacy and Growth Network, CVS, The Cleveland Schools, Esperanza – a community-based organization that focuses on Hispanic population, University Hospitals, Cleveland Housing Network Partners

Funding Sources: Y.O.U. receives federal funding via TANF (through a contract with the county Jobs and Family Service Department) to support youth from lower income families. As this is the largest funding source, all families are asked to explore TANF eligibility. If youth are not eligible for TANF funds, our intake team has other options that allow for enrolment: :

- Corporate sponsors
- Private foundations
- City of Cleveland

BEST PRACTICES

Leverage a Strong Nonprofit Lead: Y.O.U.'s 40+ year institutional history provides administrative stability, employer relationships, and logistical infrastructure that many city and government agencies lack.

Embed Job Coaching as a Core Feature: Y.O.U. assigns job coaches to all participants, with coaches visiting worksites twice weekly to provide mentorship and ensure program quality. This high-touch model supports both youth retention and employer satisfaction and merits replication.

Use Career Academies to Bridge Employment and Credentialing: Cleveland's Summer Career Academies connect employment experiences to industry-recognized certifications (e.g.,

pharmacy technician licensure, manufacturing soldering certification), creating pathways to full-time employment for youth who do not pursue college. This dual focus on immediate income and long-term career readiness is a distinguishing program strength.

Research and Evaluation: Cleveland's SYEP has been subject to rigorous academic evaluation. A comprehensive study conducted by the Center on Urban Poverty and Community Development at Case Western Reserve University (2014–2017) used propensity score matching to compare program participants with similar non-participants. Results showed statistically significant positive outcomes, including reduced delinquency filings, lower incarceration rates, improved school attendance, and higher high school graduation.

Financial Literacy – Y.O.U. has Bank of America facilitate financial literacy at each youth orientation and youth are offered opportunities to open up bank accounts. We implement the Young Money Mentors program that was developed by Cities for Financial Empowerment. Four youth are employed as mentors and teach hundreds of young people enhanced financial capability skills.