TRAINING AND EMPLOYMENT NOTICE	NO. 24-14
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TO: COMPREHENSIVE AMERICAN JOB CENTER MANAGERS
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YOUTHBUILD GRANTEES

FROM: PORTIA WU
Assistant Secretary

SUBJECT: New Research Report: *Adapting to Local Context: Findings from the YouthBuild Evaluation Implementation Study*

1. **Purpose.** To announce the release and availability of a new Employment and Training Administration (ETA) research report entitled: *Adapting to Local Context: Findings from the YouthBuild Evaluation Implementation Study.*

2. **Background.** In June 2010, ETA awarded a contract to MDRC to conduct a rigorous evaluation of YouthBuild, a program for 16- to 24-year olds who have dropped out of high school, or are at risk of failing to reach key educational milestones, have been in the juvenile justice system, or are aging out of foster care. The program is a nonresidential, community-based alternative education program that provides a mix of academics, vocational training, leadership development, community service, and other activities to young people facing an array of challenges to educational and employment success.

   YouthBuild distinguishes itself from other programs serving young people through, among other things, the stipend it pays to participants and through a culture that emphasizes youth development and leadership, capitalizing on participants' strengths and empowering participants to take responsibility for their lives. Participants in YouthBuild programs learn valuable skills as they build or rehabilitate housing for low-income or homeless individuals and families in their communities.

3. **YouthBuild Evaluation Description.** The evaluation was launched in 2010, and uses a random assignment design to examine the impacts of YouthBuild as implemented by 75 programs operating nationwide. The evaluation has three major components; an implementation analysis, an impact analysis and a cost-effectiveness analysis, each of which seeks to answer specific research questions. Programs awarded YouthBuild funding in 2011 by the Department of Labor and/or the Corporation for National and Community Services, and the youth they recruited to the program, are included in the evaluation. For the evaluation, eligible program applicants were assigned at random either to a program group, which was eligible for YouthBuild, or to a control group, which was not eligible for YouthBuild. Participants in the study will be contacted by the evaluation team three times over the course of the evaluation to learn about their experiences and progress in the labor force.

4. **Publication Description.** This report presents program implementation findings from the national evaluation based largely on site visits to each of the 75 programs and extensive interviews with a range of staff and participants. This is a qualitative examination of the YouthBuild program's structure, implementation, and services. A second report, scheduled for release in 2017, will present impacts of the program at 12 and 30 months after random assignment. A third report, scheduled for release in 2018, will present impacts of the program 48 months after random assignment. The evaluation is being funded by ETA with initial support from the Corporation for National and Community Service, and is being conducted by MDRC and its partners, Social Policy Research Associates and Mathematica Policy Research.

5. **Key Evaluation Findings.**

- YouthBuild was implemented with reasonably high fidelity (adherence to the program model) among the programs in this evaluation. Fidelity was consistently high in vocational training, but varied more among programs in leadership development (including community service) and preparation for postsecondary education.
- Fidelity to the YouthBuild model manifested itself in different ways in different programs. Because the model is not highly prescriptive and programs can achieve fidelity in varying ways, any two programs might operate very differently while still maintaining strong overall fidelity.
- There was variation in the degree to which programs fully embraced the YouthBuild culture and value system. One reason fidelity to the YouthBuild model varied somewhat is because programs embraced the culture of YouthBuild to varying degrees. This culture focuses on youth development and leadership. While many programs emphasized these values, others embraced them to a lesser degree. For example, only about three-quarters of programs reported having a working policy committee composed of participants, and among those programs that did, there was wide variation in how frequently it met and in its ability to influence program policies.
- YouthBuild programs targeted young people who were demographically at risk, but actually enrolled young people who demonstrated a "readiness to change" by making it through a demanding screening process and Mental Toughness Orientation. On average,

programs recruited nearly four applicants for each available YouthBuild slot, because so many applicants were deemed ineligible or unsuitable, or dropped out during the screening process. The young people who did enroll were therefore likely to be highly motivated to succeed.

- YouthBuild programs were generally successful in augmenting their core educational and vocational services with a broad array of supplemental services, including life-skills training and workforce-preparation activities. Because participants faced multiple barriers to success, most programs emphasized life-skills training and workforce-preparation activities such as soft-skills training, career exploration, and job-search assistance. At times, these services tended to outweigh an emphasis on other supportive services that might be expected to assist young people, such as job development and job placement.
- Programs' ability to successfully implement the core components of YouthBuild varied. Key dimensions of this variation included whether or not programs developed strong and meaningful partnerships that were integrated into the program rather than being stand-alone services, whether or not they maintained low participant-to-staff ratios to meet the varying needs of participants, and whether or not they retained a commitment to certain operations and methodology of the YouthBuild model.
- YouthBuild is typically more robust and comprehensive than other youth programs located in the same communities. Similarly, few alternative programs in the communities seemed to create cultures among their participants that rivaled those developed by most of the YouthBuild programs in this study. YouthBuild participants in this evaluation therefore probably received a wider array of services than those who were not allowed to enroll in YouthBuild.

The future impact analysis will be able to provide a rigorous assessment of YouthBuild's effects. Since the programs participating in the evaluation generally demonstrated high fidelity to the YouthBuild model, the impact analysis will provide a good assessment of the effects of YouthBuild. Further, since there is some variation in fidelity across programs, and substantial variation in services and organizational characteristics, the impact analysis will be able to examine whether this variation affects impacts. The impact analysis will also be able to capitalize on the differences between the services offered by YouthBuild and those offered by other providers in the same communities, to examine whether differences in local context are associated with differences in impacts. Finally, the impact analysis will be able to use the variation in the characteristics of participants to explore whether those participant characteristics are associated with different impacts. The cost-effectiveness analysis, the third component of the evaluation, will build on the impact results and, accordingly, will be released in conjunction with the final evaluation impact results.

6. **Inquiries.** To view an abstract of this publication as well as to download the full report, visit the ETA Research Publication Database Web site at: http://wdr.doleta.gov/research/keyword.cfm.