



# Opportunity Youth United

Lashon Amado  
Director  
Opportunity Youth United  
% Tides Center  
1014 Torney Ave.  
San Francisco, CA, 94129

President Joseph Biden  
Vice President Kamala Harris  
The White House  
1600 Pennsylvania Ave. NW  
Washington, DC 20500

May 19, 2021

Dear President Biden and Vice President Harris:

Opportunity Youth United is a national organization of diverse young people and adult allies from urban, rural, and tribal areas. Through our own experiences, we are experts on the economic, social, and institutional challenges that face millions of young adults, ages 16-24 and beyond, who have grown up in low-income American communities.

First, we want to thank you for the critically important steps you and your Administration have already taken to address the issues of poverty, inequality, racial injustice, and lack of equal opportunity in America through the American Relief Plan, the American Jobs Plan, and your proposed FY'22 budget with increased domestic discretionary spending. This could be a turning point in American history thanks to your obvious awareness of the key issues facing low-income Americans.

We are writing to share our detailed recommendations regarding how to improve the conditions in our communities, the life prospects of the residents, and the well-being of our nation as a whole. We hope to serve as a resource to your Administration as you work to increase opportunity and decrease poverty and injustice in America. We can add deeper awareness of the priorities affecting low-income youth and young adults.

We know that you, as our nation's president, are aware of the 4.4 million young adults who were out of school and unemployed in 2018. According to the National Conference of State Legislatures, that number has increased to 10 million due to the pandemic. They are some of the people who have been ignored, and who stand to gain from your promises to create great schools, safe neighborhoods, and jobs for everyone. They include Black, White, Native American, Latinx, Asian, and mixed race young adults of all religions and gender identities, from urban, rural, and tribal communities. They have enormous untapped talent. Opportunity Youth United includes representation from all these groups. Although we are so different, we are united in seeking to improve the life prospects of all Americans, including those born in America and immigrants from all over the world.

According to a 2012 study called *The Economic Value of Opportunity Youth*, the lifetime direct cost to taxpayers of one 20-year-old who is out of school and unemployed, and who does not reconnect to education or employment, was \$235,680. The broader social cost of each one amounted to \$704,020. In 2011 alone, disconnection of 16 to 24 year olds cost taxpayers \$93.7 billion in lost taxpayer revenue and in government support. These numbers have surely increased since 2012.

On the other hand, there is enormous value to society that comes from preparing "Opportunity Youth" because they are seeking opportunity and offer an opportunity to society - to enter and advance in the workforce, start their own businesses or social enterprises, pursue higher education or whatever path they choose to help them reach their dreams, and become self-sufficient and contributing members of society.

As a result, our immediate priority is to help reconnect at least 1 million Opportunity Youth a year through increased federal investment. We have laid out a road map for investment that would help young people climb out of poverty and reach their full potential. **The Bridge to Reconnection**, researched by Civic Enterprises, lays this out and is attached. The investment required to reconnect one million low-income young adults would cost an additional \$4.1 billion/year of federal dollars. Furthermore, research also shows a return on that investment of at least \$102 billion in savings to the taxpayer over the lifetime of each annual cohort of young adults reconnected to education and employment.

In addition to this investment strategy that will support direct pathways out of poverty for millions of opportunity youth, we would like to share our ***Recommendations to Increase Opportunity and Decrease Poverty in America***. Our recommendations include solutions to the systemic issues in the public schools and criminal justice system, plus opportunities for upward mobility, family support, and community economic development. All of this must also be done consistent with the necessary attention to climate justice and environmental stewardship that will affect us all. We are sharing these ***Recommendations*** with you, and we hope you will share them with key officials in your administration. They provide a perspective from young leaders tirelessly working on the ground to transform our communities through civic engagement and education.

## **Young People, Hunger, and the Pandemic**

The pandemic has put a burden on young people and their families, and **many are struggling to find resources to meet their basic needs**. According to the USDA, there are 30 million adults and 12 million young people who are experiencing hunger and struggling with food insecurity. Many are either already experiencing or at risk of experiencing homelessness and also lack adequate healthcare. It is also worth mentioning that there are 40 million young adults who are family caregivers. Young adult caregivers face many of the same challenges as their older counterparts.

Solutions like providing tax credits and rental assistance; increasing SNAP; and providing all Americans with affordable, quality health care are a few of the many promises made by your administration that could shift the tide for millions. We appreciate these commitments.

In our policy recommendations, OYUnited also calls for expanding access to healthy food, greenspace, farmers' markets, and neighborhood gardens; resources and housing options for homeless youth and adults; affordable housing that does not incentivize single parenthood; and access to comprehensive healthcare that includes mental health supports. If implemented, many families will reach the stability and security they need to provide a better future for themselves and their children.

## **Criminal Justice Reform**

We would also like to shine a light on **the urgent need for criminal justice reform**. With 1.8 million people still behind bars in 2021, and America having the highest rate of incarceration of men, women, and children of any country in the world, it is important to set forth policies that keep families together, save lives, and help foster safe and healthy communities. Too many families have been torn apart due to mass incarceration, and far too many have lost loved ones at the hands of police officers. Federal legislation like the George Floyd Act, the Second Look Act and various other examples that are pending at the state and local levels are all good examples of potential progress.

OYUnited also recommends training police in community relationships, sensitivity, and not stereotyping communities of color; rebuilding relationships and communication between the police and community; creating pathways other than incarceration, including community-based services; expanding effective reentry programs and greatly improving the probation and parole systems so that they provide support for transitioning back into society; and ending the for-profit prison system. If our recommendations are implemented, the justice system will evolve into an institution that protects our communities, instead of harming our communities. Thank you for the attention you have already paid to some of these issues.

## **Young People and Jobs**

As the unemployment rate soars, **young people continue to get locked out of the labor**

**market.** According to our partners at CLASP, young people were unemployed at more than double the national average - even before the pandemic. Needless to say, black, brown, and indigenous youth have higher rates of unemployment compared to their Asian and White counterparts. It is critical to address this issue and create access for young people of all races to obtain good, quality jobs that lead to economic mobility.

The Connecting Youth to Jobs Act, raising the minimum wage, and expanding Earned Income Tax Credits are some examples of positive federal interventions. OYUnited also recommends expanding private internships and job opportunities for opportunity youth; expanding comprehensive job training, education, and service programs that equip young people with the skills and preparation needed to be successful on the job; ending “ban the box” and other discriminatory practices; offering small-business development opportunities in low-income communities for entrepreneurs; and creating equal access to financial support and mentorship for social entrepreneurs who have emerged from poverty. That way, young people can reach their full potential and become self-sufficient. They can also contribute their talents and passion to the well-being of society.

### **Young People and Education**

**Access to a quality education is a human right.** However, schools in low-income communities lack adequate resources to meet that promise. A quote from one of your predecessors, George H. W. Bush, states that “Education is the ticket to opportunity. It’s a ticket out of poverty.” We find that to be true and have seen many examples of opportunity youth who have obtained their degrees and watched doors open for them in ways they never thought would be possible. If only we could provide the same opportunity to every young person who is willing to seize it.

Taking the police out of schools, ending corporal punishment in schools, integrating civic education into schools, expanding student access to mental health services, and providing student loan forgiveness are all examples that the federal government could help move forward. OYUnited also recommends increased funding for schools in low-income communities; curriculum that includes the young people’s culture in an accurate and fair manner; assessment measures that take into account different learning styles; disciplinary practices that are more restorative than punitive; free tuition for community college; second chance alternatives or non-profit charter schools for students who left high school without a diploma; and a more equitable funding structure that does not primarily use property taxes as its basis. Not only do we believe all people are entitled to a quality education, we also believe that they are deserving of schools that are safe, adequately resourced, caring, and respectful to young people.

### **Protecting Voting Rights and Our Democracy**

**Protecting voting rights for all Americans is another critical issue. The future of our democracy is at stake.** Historically, black, brown, and indigenous people have been disenfranchised in various ways and denied their right to vote. Consequently, the conditions of poverty continue to invade our communities. Over the last couple of years,

we have worked hard to empower individuals to exercise their right to vote, especially within communities that have been systematically excluded from the electoral process, or where people had chosen not to vote because they believed their vote didn't count.

We participated actively in boosting the youth turnout in Georgia, and eleven other States, leading to historic numbers among young people. However, despite the blood, sweat, and tears it took to make that win possible, the state of Georgia just passed a new voter suppression law. In addition, there are over 200 other voter suppression bills pending in 47 states across the country, and we must continue to unite, organize, and take action to protect our democracy.

We appreciate your signing off on Executive Order 14019 to promote access to voting for all, and all the grassroots organizing taking place nationwide. OYUnited also recommends expanding and incentivizing voter registration, education, and engagement including education informing voters about candidates in non-partisan ways; and basic community organizing, knocking on every door, and empowering young people to create community improvement projects of their own design so they can invest their energy in a broad commitment to civic engagement that will reinforce their desire to vote.

### **Protecting Our Planet**

As we work to restore hope and security for all American people in the midst of a pandemic, **it is equally important to protect and preserve our planet.** Across the world, the threats of climate change have washed away communities, taken lives, and forced people to migrate abroad. From Hurricane Harvey in Texas, and Hurricane Maria in Puerto Rico, to the water crisis in Flint, MI, there are far too many examples of communities literally being ripped apart or washed away right in front of our eyes. If we are kind to our planet, it will in turn become more kind to us, and we must all do our part to become good stewards of our environment. Elements of the Green New Deal not only put forth measures to reduce climate change, but also create economic opportunity for all. OYUnited also recommends creating access to green jobs for low-income youth; equitable solutions that eliminate exposure to air pollution, hazardous waste sites, lead poisoning, and water contamination; and increasing investment in alternative energy sources.

### **Protecting Immigrant, Refugee, and Undocumented Young People and Families**

We would also like to call out the need to **protect immigrant, refugee, and undocumented youth and adults.** Children of all ages and their parents have been denied entry into the U.S, locked in cages, unfairly targeted and deported, and left living in fear for their lives. They too are part of the fabric of our country, adding to the vibrant diversity. We must do all that we can to make them feel safe, heard, and counted.

We applaud you for Executive Orders 14010, 14012, 14011, and others that aim to reunite families, strengthen integration and inclusion for new Americans, enhance

programs that serve refugees, and help end illegal and inhumane asylum and border policies. We also applaud you for protecting DACA and ending the Muslim ban on your first day in office. Progress has been made, but there is so much more to be done.

### **Racial Equity**

Systemic flaws across all of these issues have disproportionately impacted black, brown and indigenous lives. Therefore, as we move to design solutions, **it is important to embrace a racial equity lens**. In order to reach unity in this country, and to ensure the guarantee in our nation's constitution that "all men (people) are created equal," we must uplift groups that are most impacted. Every American should have equal access to opportunities that will allow them to reach their full potential, regardless of their race, gender, sexual orientation, or any other factor.

**We would like to close by saying thank you for creating space for young people to partner with your administration and have our voices heard.** We attended and enjoyed the youth calls organized by your team, led by Hannah Bristol. We found them to be very useful and empowering. This is the first time we have ever seen any president create space for young people in such a meaningful way. Including individuals who are directly impacted is critical in the fight for equity and justice, and we hope to be able to continue partnering with you and your team.

Like you, we believe that together we can create the changes we as Americans so desperately need. To open an in-person discussion of our Recommendations, please contact Lashon Amado, Director, at [lashon@oyunited.org](mailto:lashon@oyunited.org).

Respectfully yours,

Opportunity Youth United

cc: Ron Klain, Chief of Staff

cc: Hannah Bristol, Assoc. Dir. WH Office of Public Engagement

Enc: ***Recommendations to Increase Opportunity and Decrease Poverty in America and The Bridge to Reconnection.***

This letter was prepared by the following members of Opportunity Youth United:

Adriana Cortes Luna

Hikma Sherka

Jameel Beasley

Kimberly Pham

Lashon Amado

Mackayla McDonald

Simone Carter

Shaquana Boykin

Shanice Turner