

**Boys & Girls Clubs of Greater Oxnard and Port Hueneme, Calif.**

[**bgcop.org/youth-empowerment-program**](https://bgcop.org/youth-empowerment-program/)

This organization offers youth of all ages a wide variety of programs at its traditional Clubhouses, school-based sites and teen center that expose members to diverse careers, help them prepare for postsecondary education and the workforce, and give them first-job experience through in-Club and out-of-Club job placements. In addition, it implements the Youth Empowerment Program (YEP) for “opportunity youth,” young people ages 16 to 24 who are neither in school or working. YEP is funded by a federal Workforce Innovation Opportunity Act (WIOA) grant through the Workforce Development Board of Ventura County.

First established in 2004, YEP sets the foundation for young people to gain the skills needed to be ready for the workforce. It serves about 100 young people per year. During the year-long program, YEP participants start by attending 20 hours of sessions at the teen center to build their skills for getting and keeping a job and explore various career paths. Then, depending on their individual goals and needs, participants work to earn a high school diploma or GED, pursue a college education, complete vocational training and certifications, and/or find employment.

The teen center has a dedicated College and Career Center space, equipped with computers, workstations, tables for group work, job and social services information kiosks and work readiness posters and college pennants on the walls. Dedicated YEP staff facilitate the program sessions using home-grown content and materials that they update yearly to reflect the local context. They also adapt some content from Boys & Girls Clubs of America Targeted Programs such as CareerLaunch for the program. The organization leverages its partnerships to bring in guest speakers for workshops and presentations on life skills topics such as dating, anger management and financial literacy, and organize field trips to colleges, college fairs and job fairs for program participants. The organization regularly asks for input from Club teen members and YEP participants, in person and through surveys, on what they want to learn or experience in the workforce readiness programming, e.g., what industries interest them, where they want to go on field trips, what they think of special events in which they participate.

Each YEP participant has an academic and career advisor who serves as a mentor and monitors that young person’s progress during the program and for another year after the program. The advisor assists the young person in navigating systems and procedures, meeting his or her basic needs, and accessing other social services that might be needed. For example, for young people pursuing vocational training, the advisor can help the young person enroll in local technical school courses and request grant dollars to help cover the costs of tuition, textbooks and certification exam fees. Through YEP, young people can earn certifications in first aid/CPR, safe food handling, nursing assistant, phlebotomy and entry-level IT. If the young person wants to gain real-world work experience after completing the YEP classroom sessions, the advisor can make a referral to a job developer who helps the young person obtain a job placement subsidized for the first 125 hours. The advisor can also request grant funds to help the young person with job interview clothes, uniforms, public transportation and driver’s license fees. The organization currently has four college and career advisors and one job developer on staff.

The Club organization uses many strategies to recruit young people from the community, as well as recruiting Club members or alumni if or once they are out of high school. The organization distributes fliers in high schools, asks partners to make referrals, distributes program information to parents at the teen center and invites them to orientations, promotes the program at community coalition and public housing resident meetings, and asks YEP graduates to refer other young people to the program.

The YEP program’s director dedicates much of her time to cultivating and stewarding partnerships with the county workforce board and many other local educational institutions, social services agencies and employers. The organization has diverse partners for different purposes; some provide job placements for young people, some provide vocational or technical training, and some provide funding to support and sustain the program. Social service agency partners are also critical because of the needs of the “opportunity youth” population the program serves.

"Having partnerships is a priority. We can't do it all, so we need all those other services. We're not trying to duplicate efforts and do what they are doing. Our young people still need assistance with housing, family violence prevention, therapy and probation. We need to have a strong information and referral network. It's a must. It's a priority for a successful program. It takes time to build, and it can be very daunting. But it doesn't hurt to ask. Even if an agency says no, it may direct you to another organization in their network," said YEP Program Director Mariana Cazares.

For new and existing partnerships, having regular, open communication and clear expectations are critical for success. For new partners, the YEP director showcases the program using an overview sheet that lists how potential partners can fit into the program, and meets at their sites with their community liaisons. YEP staff regularly update resource partners that refer youth to the program through emails and calendars of upcoming program orientation sessions. With job placement partners, the job developer or other Club leaders meet once per year with them face-to-face to touch base and discuss all the services they and Club can provide. The organization uses a written Memorandum of Understanding and a supervisor agreement with job placement partners to keep roles and responsibilities clear.