**Exploring Rural YouthBuild Programs Podcast Series**

**#1 Podcast Script:**

Today’s recording features two YouthBuild grantees: Northshore Technical Community College in Louisiana and Olympic ESD 114 in Washington. They will be discussing the strategic approaches each used to align with the YouthBuild program model with organizational and local needs and how that model fits into the rural setting.

This presentation is part of the *Exploring Rural YouthBuild Programs*podcast series. We will explore the dynamics YouthBuild programs experience during program planning, implementation, and program sustainability efforts in rural areas. Our focus will center on the common factors affecting service delivery in regards to funding, staffing, geographic accessibility of services, training and employment, technological capacity, partnerships, and population.

I’m Ronald Vargas, and I’m Marjorie Fong. We are from the U.S. Employment and Training Administration’s (ETA) Office of Special Initiatives and Demonstrations. Our guests today, Ms. Danielle Keys, Program Director from Northshore and Mr. Jeff Allen, Youth Service Director from Olympic ESD 114, will provide insight and details into their unique challenges and share some of their best practices surrounding strategic planning and program implementation in rural communities.

So, Danielle and Jeff, we are so excited to have you here today. We’d like to kick things off with Danielle, and then xxx with Jeff. So before we dive a little bit deeper into some of the questions we have for you on service deliveryXxx Can you discuss a little bit about your community and organizational background? And if you could talk a little bit about

**Danielle Keys**:

Sure, hello everyone, this is Danielle Keys, program director at YouthBuild Bogalusa. YouthBuild Bogalusa was founded in 2001 under the auspices of Northshore Technical Community College. Located in Washington Parish, Bogalusa is a rural city having a population of about 19,000 residents where nearly 45 percent of the youth under 18 live in poverty. The mission of YouthBuild Bogalusa is to prepare disadvantaged young adults to change their lives while in a safe, secure and supportive environment; and of course to empower them to learn, develop and apply technical and life skills so they can obtain full-time employment and become responsible citizens. Here at Yb bogaloosa we offer HiSet xxx

**Jeff Allen**:

Thank you, Ron, I really appreciate being here. Olympic ESD 114 is a regional educational service agency (established by statute) that works with the state office of public instruction to support the school districts, Tribal compact schools, private and charter schools on the Kitsap and Olympic Peninsulas of Northwest Washington State. While we’re situated on the west side of Puget Sound in the City of Bremerton, and a one hour ferry ride from Seattle, the vast majority of the districts we serve are in rural and remote communities, all the way out to the Pacific Coast.

Our agency’s mission is to be an indispensable partner with school districts and education stakeholders to advance the learning and achievement of all students. We do this through wide range of services, including our early learning with our Head start and Early Head start programs, providing technical and budgetary support for districts, teacher professional development, a special education consortium and support for opportunity youth, including operating two juvenile justice facility schools and being awarded the contract the WIOA Title 1 Youth program in the region for the past 20 years.

We purposely designed our program, YouthBuild Kitsap, in partnership with the Bremerton School District’s drop-out reengagement program and the West Sound Technical Skill Center, a collaborative CTE program that serves high school students throughout the region. Participants are enrolled in both programs which provides them access to additional resources that the district can provide.

We also partner with Habitat for Humanity of Kitsap County giving our participants hands-on construction experiences that target low-income families and their communities. However, this also presents a challenge that we can get into later.

Discuss the grant organization’s vision, mission, strategy, and action planning compared with the vision described in the FOA. (see grant goals above)

**Marjorie Fong:**

**What was your organization’s strategic approach to accomplish the goals of the grant? What are some things about the process – the brainstorming, the prototyping, the failing quickly – what are some things that you learn through that process?**

**Danielle Keys**:

Our team meets weekly to brainstorm new ideas and/or to address issues of the program. We work strategically with other programs across the state, engage in TA with YouthBuild USAs and community partners to learn the strategies that are working well for other programs. This enables the program to stay abreast of the latest trends and take a proactive step addressing barriers that may arise. In addition, ensuring that all staff receive the needed training is vital to being successful in accomplishing the goals of the grant. All staff are hired as employees of Northshore Technical Community College so not only do they receive training opportunities through the college but through YouthBuild USA and resources such as WorkforceGPS.

**Jeff Allen**:

I think a strength of our program is our agency’s connection with the school district, skill center and our local workforce development board. This provides us an opportunity to connect with a well-established training and education resources that benefit our participants. This is a relatively small community and thus there are a not as many opportunities for leadership and community service when compared to a large metropolitan area like Seattle. For example, Habitat for Humanity is the only low-income housing provider that meets DOL construction site requirements. However, we’ve been blessed in the relationships we’ve formed with local government and other service providers. Our participants have had the opportunity to engage in community service projects with the local food banks and “Backpack Brigade” (providing weekend backpacks of food and supplies for low-income students in the community) and speak before the County Housing and Homelessness Committee to discuss the lived experiences housing insecurity for youth.

Recruitment of staff is a challenge. Because of our location, we often do not receive a robust pool of applicants for open positions (this is a common problem for human resources staffing). We do pay a bit better than most human services providers. As far as training and professional development opportunities, our staff take advantage of the resources provided on WorkforceGPS and the YouthBuild USA TA trainings. Our YouthBuild USA coach has been a huge help.

Our staff also take advantage of trainings offered by our agency (and partners) around youth mental health and resiliency to Adverse Childhood Experiences.

**Ronald Vargas:**

**Can you tell us a little bit of how your organization collaborates with your LWDB and AJCs for relevant labor market information to assist with planning?**

**Danielle Keys**:

YouthBuild is fortunate to have a great relationship with our local One Stop (Geaux Jobs), we work collaboratively with the Workforce Board stay abreast of the latest trends in regional workforce opportunities and trainings. Other advantages of the partnership include job searching skills, access to the Career Solution Job Center’s career counseling, and a range of post-graduation opportunities. YouthBuild Bogalusa (YouthBuild) co-enrolls Workforce Initiative Act (WIOA) participants in the youth formula program for access to financial literacy, entrepreneurship training, internships and paid and unpaid work experience. This, coupled with our Chancellors membership on the State Workforce Development Board, opens avenues for employment placement.

**Jeff Allen:**

Our Olympic Workforce Development Council (LWDB) has been a great help. We regularly attend council meetings and share information about YouthBuild Kitsap. They have been certainly helpful in providing labor market information, but more importantly they are a cheerleader of our program and talk about it with other partners. This has also resulted in stronger relationships with construction industry partners.

**Ronald Vargas:**

**We tend to see programs different methods of and regularity collaborating with local industry and employers. How are employers and industry leaders engaged in the development of your program? Are industry leaders engaged in the development of the career pathway program and the design of the program?**

**Danielle Keys**:

Industry partners play a critical program role in curriculum and program review, credentialing standards, and student placement. Industry Based curriculums used by YouthBuild Bogalusa are state approved postsecondary curriculums by the Louisiana Community and Technical College System (LCTCS); developed with the aid of statewide industry experts. Local and regional industry leaders on Program Advisory Committees (PACs) provide overview of all curriculums.

**Jeff Allen**:

One of our best industry related partners is the local builder’s association (Kitsap Building Association). This is an association of construction industry companies, ranging from home builders to landscapers, roofers and plumbing companies. The KBA, in collaboration with us, implemented a “Builders Grant” program that pairs employers with youth interested in the trades. It provides the youth with a stipend to pay for tools and transportation as well as a 6 week paid internship with the employer. This is not exclusive to YouthBuild but we’ve had a few of our participants be awarded the grant.

**Ronald Vargas:**

**Tell us a little of how your program identifies which businesses to approach?**

**Danielle Keys**: Being in a rural area, we found it vital to develop a relationship with all businesses that are in our community. While we may not have a formal relationship, we establish a rapport for the advantages of future employment opportunities.

**Jeff Allen**:

It’s two-fold -- our relationship with the Kitsap Building Association has helped us to connect with a number of employers. Additionally, we will from time to time have an employer reach out to us asking if they can volunteer or support the program. Recently, one of the larger construction companies in the region donated a tool trailer for our program.

I think a key is to ask them to visit our program or arrange for a visit at one of their construction sites and get to know our young adults. Begin to build relationships with them. Many of participants come to our program with the trauma of their lived experiences making them hesitant to build positive relationships with adults, especially adults of authority.

**Marjorie Fong:**

**Do you collaborate with other agencies to assist with employer engagement? Do you track employer engagement and how are you doing that?**

**Danielle Keys**: Through employer contact, YouthBuild stays abreast of employer needs and the needs of the labor market. YouthBuild utilizes our local One Stop (Geaux Jobs), Northshore Technical Community College (NTCC) Career Service and Business and Industry Solutions Divisions to implement engagement strategies that include: numerous job fairs, Life Skills speaking opportunities, participant mentorship/internships, monthly employer contacts, and customized training for Business and Industry (B&I). All of engagement opportunities are tracked through sign-in sheets and through the collection of other documentation.

**Jeff Allen**:

As far as tracking employer engagement, I think we can do a better job of that. As I mentioned, our LWDC and the building association have been very helpful in connecting us with the industry.

**Ronald Vargas:**

**Before we wrap of with today’s session I would like to discuss a little more about challenges. What, if any, challenges does your organization have to providing services to targeted populations? (Examples might include physical location, lack of fluency in the population’s primary language, lack of assistive technology, etc.)**

**If there is/was a concern with geographical isolation, how did your organization address this for your participants?**

**Danielle Keys**: Being in a rural area, I don’t think we will ever get around the geographical isolation, we address this by utilizing the resources that are available and collaborating with other agencies to address any gaps that we may face.

**Jeff Allen**:

One of our bigger challenges is transportation. The county we serve is fairly spread out with disparate communities separated by highways and bodies of water. The public transit system primary serves the largest employer in the region (the naval shipyard) and has limited routes for people who live in the outer edges of the county. We’ve had participants get up to catch a bus at 5:30am to make it to our program by 8:30 in the morning.

We provide bus passes as a supportive service to participants who need it. We have begun conversations with a local sovereign nation, who has expressed interest in the program for its members, and exploring the possibilities of providing transportation for participants from their end of the county.

**Ronald Vargas:**

**Lastly, what is working and not working, and what ways do you track progress?**

**Danielle Keys**: Our progress is captured through our data. Data will serve as the evidence if something is working or not. The most valuable jewel that I can drop on what’s working is… Rapport with your students!

**Jeff Allen**:

We are a relatively new program, and we are working to raise awareness of what we are doing in the community. Our engagement with partners and employers continues to grow.

COVID-19 has put a significant damper on our enrollment and ability to operate the program. We had just been awarded our second round of DOL funding when the state-wide shutdown went into effect. Recruitment and eventual enrollment is a challenge.

A challenge (I won’t say that it is “not working”) is coordination and integration of our program with our K-12 partners. Participants under the age of 21 are also enrolled in the school district. The challenge is more around navigating program timing and procedures. With that said, this our partnership with the district is a true strength.

**Marjorie Fong:**

Thank you both. That is a perfect end to our first episode of our **(Exploring Rural YouthBuild Programs)** podcast series. You both did an outstanding job and you shared a lot of useful information that I think will help your peers. I am really excited for our next episode to be released here soon.