

**INCLUDING YOUTH IN COMMUNITY ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT:  
A CALL FOR PRO BONO ASSISTANCE FOR YOUTH ENTREPRENEURS**

Renee is a twenty year old fashion design student who works two jobs to make her dream of designing and selling her own clothing a reality. Jason is a sixteen year old high school student who with the help of his friends has been running a successful event promotions business for over a year. These two young people have the drive, commitment, and skills to become successful entrepreneurs. They are both members of youth-directed nonprofit organizations that focus on entrepreneurship education and enterprise development. Through their participation in youth entrepreneurship organizations they are gaining the business, marketing, communications, and financial literacy skills to develop their own businesses, but they are missing important legal services necessary to grow budding businesses that create their own jobs. This article describes the need for youth entrepreneurship legal services and how pro bono lawyers can assist low-income youth entrepreneurs.

In 2001, the American Bar Association's publication *America's Children Still At Risk* identified legal services for youth entrepreneurs as one of its unmet legal needs for youth.<sup>1</sup> Despite the greater needs of low-income entrepreneurs ages 16 to 24, the vast majority of small business legal services have not targeted youth entrepreneurs. To address this unmet need, business lawyers should provide targeted pro bono legal services to these entrepreneurs. Youth entrepreneurship legal services is an emerging field that deserves greater exploration and development.

As a Skadden Fellow at the Community Law Center, Inc. in Baltimore, Maryland, I am building a youth entrepreneurship legal services project called the Youth Entrepreneurship Initiative (YEI), to provide legal education and legal counsel to low-income youth entrepreneurs and youth organizations serving these entrepreneurs. The YEI targets low-income youth ages 14 to 24 years old who are or aspire to be entrepreneurs. Working with youth organizations, community groups, and small business technical assistance providers, YEI offers free business legal education and legal services to youth entrepreneurs in Baltimore City.

Youth today are facing dire economic straits. In 2008, the employment rate for teens ages 16 to 19 was 32.7%, its lowest in 60 years, and the youth employment projections for 2009 are even worse. All youth do not face the same employment prospects. Black and Hispanic youth are disproportionately more likely to be unemployed than White and Asian youth. Low-income youth are most likely to be unemployed. Higher household income translates into higher employment rates for youth in those households, except for the highest income brackets of households making over \$150,000 a year.<sup>2</sup> Early employment provides youth with substantial benefits including the ability to gain employability skills, earn their own wages, and contribute to the economic life of their communities. Also, youth employment often bridges the gap between school and work and connects youth with the formal economy early in their working lives. Youth

entrepreneurship which results in self-employment can be a bridge from school to work, as well as a long term wealth building strategy.

Youth entrepreneurship is one strategy to address youth unemployment and include youth in the economic development of their communities. Youth entrepreneurship is a proven means of creating jobs, building employability skills, fostering self-esteem and empowerment, and connecting youth to the resources and economic development needs of their communities. Youth entrepreneurship is also an important tool in creating greater opportunities in low-income communities for youth to develop the skills to effectively compete in the labor market and produce new options for employment in their communities. With the help of pro bono lawyers, youth entrepreneurs can successfully navigate the legal landscape of business development and growth.

Pro bono lawyers working with youth entrepreneurs can help them with choice of entity, licenses, permits, contracts and intellectual property protection. Additionally, lawyers can provide access to social networks and serve as supportive adults/mentors to help young people build the resources necessary to create and sustain viable businesses. In assisting youth entrepreneurs, pro bono lawyers play multiple roles.

The role of educator is very familiar to business attorneys. Often, the legal representation begins with helping clients understand the legal opportunities and barriers for starting, developing, and growing their businesses and then assisting clients in developing plans to achieve their goals. In addition to learning the legal steps of starting a business, youth entrepreneurs expand their understanding of what “the law” is and how it applies to the world of entrepreneurship.

In the role of resource builder/connector, lawyers provide information and resources to youth entrepreneurs that facilitate their goals. By connecting youth to professional and business networks, lawyers can extend their social capital to low-income youth entrepreneurs through a range of resources from business plan development to financing possibilities.

Finally, connecting youth entrepreneurs to professional and business communities is one of the ways that lawyers can serve as mentors to youth entrepreneurs. These mentorship relationships help youth entrepreneurs map out plans for success in their businesses, personal lives, and communities.

*An Example of Youth Entrepreneurship Legal Services: “Getting YOURS the Right Way”*

One YEI project is called “Getting YOURS the Right Way.” “Getting YOURS the Right Way” is a model of providing legal education and legal services to youth entrepreneurs. As its name implies, students are encouraged to find legal business opportunities as opposed to getting involved in drugs and violence. This model combines a community education workshop series with brief advice sessions for youth entrepreneurs. YEI operates this program in partnership with Youth Organizing Urban Revitalization

Systems, Inc. (YOURS), a nonprofit organization that organizes youth as catalysts for change through the creation of a network of community-owned cooperative programs serving and benefiting the people of Baltimore. The YOURS Youth Entrepreneur Team (Youth Entrepreneurs) are young people who have self-identified as aspiring or existing entrepreneurs. Each young person has a business idea that he or she would like to develop and launch over the course of the YOURS one year program.

“Getting YOURS the Right Way” is a weekly workshop series with alternating weeks of business legal education and individual legal advice sessions. During the business legal education sessions the Youth Entrepreneurs learn about business law basics by focusing on their identified business ideas.

Each session explores a basic question about the Youth Entrepreneurs’ business ideas. For example, where will you sell your product/service? The young people are expected to answer the question, learn how and why zoning and permitting restrict and enable entrepreneurs to grow their businesses, and discuss what this means for their businesses. Through this discussion, the Youth Entrepreneurs develop a legal vocabulary and an understanding of how “the law” works in respect to their businesses. During the bi-weekly brief advice sessions, Youth Entrepreneurs sign-up for individual legal advice meetings to address a specific legal question about their business ideas.

With the appeal of youth entrepreneurship growing and the awareness about the link between youth entrepreneurship and community economic development building among community economic development professionals, more youth entrepreneurship legal services are needed.

Lawyers can provide pro bono legal assistance through programs like YOURS by offering brief advice and business legal education. Lawyers can also judge youth business plan competitions targeting low-income entrepreneurs. Finally, lawyers can seek out youth entrepreneurs in need of legal assistance through small business technical assistance providers and bar associations.

### *Conclusion*

Youth entrepreneurs need targeted legal services that recognize the greater challenges youth entrepreneurs face: less social capital, financial resources, education, and training. By providing legal services and assisting youth entrepreneurs in developing the necessary skills, networks, and financing, lawyers can help young people achieve their dreams of being their own bosses. In this process, lawyers address an important and neglected part of economic development in low-income communities—youth inclusion in community economic development.

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<sup>1</sup> AMERICAN BAR ASSOCIATION'S STEERING COMMITTEE ON THE UNMET LEGAL NEEDS OF CHILDREN, AMERICA'S CHILDREN STILL AT RISK 457 (2001).

<sup>2</sup> Andrew Sum, Ishwar Khatiwada, Joseph McLaughlin & Sheila Palma, THE HISTORICALLY LOW SUMMER AND YEAR ROUND 2008 TEEN EMPLOYMENT RATE: THE CASE FOR AN IMMEDIATE NATIONAL PUBLIC POLICY RESPONSE TO CREATE JOBS FOR THE NATION'S YOUTH, [http://www.clms.neu.edu/publication/documents/The\\_Historically\\_Low\\_Summer\\_2008\\_Teen\\_Employment\\_Rate.pdf](http://www.clms.neu.edu/publication/documents/The_Historically_Low_Summer_2008_Teen_Employment_Rate.pdf).