

Operation Fresh Start Launches Young Adults into Careers

Lindsey Tyson, Nathan Sick, and Shayne Spaulding

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Corps Program Overview

Operation Fresh Start (OFS)¹ is a corps program that focuses on building trades and conservation pathways for young adults. Youth corps are organizations or programs that engage young adults ages 16 to 30 in service projects that address conservation and community needs, in many cases while building workforce skills.² OFS is based in Madison, WI, and supports participating youth and young adults (referred to here as “members”) who have faced challenges in school to earn a high school credential while also building skills for careers. OFS runs eight programs spanning many hands-on job trainings and certifications. They provide wraparound academic, career, and personal supports to help members succeed.

“The mission is to get young people launched into an actual career path, not just a job that they could get for themselves and to get them into real training that can get them competitive, despite whatever’s happened in their past or whatever barriers they face.”

—OFS staff member

Fast Facts

- **Population served:** Members 16 to 24 who are low income and primarily residing in Dane County, WI, with most members from the Madison area. Most members are “opportunity youth”—defined as young adults are disconnected from school or work or at risk of disconnection.
- **Program size:** In 2025, OFS served 408 members across its eight programs, with 219 enrolled in the infrastructure training programs that are the focus of this profile.
- **Sector and occupation focus:** Construction and conservation, including in-demand jobs in energy efficiency, habitat restoration, public park development/maintenance, trail work, and water efficiency
- **Funding:** Diverse mix including 29 percent public funding, 15 percent public fee for service contracts, 33 percent from philanthropic, and 23 percent from other sources
- **Outcomes:** 95 percent job placement rate with average starting wages of \$21.20. In addition to job placement outcomes, OFS tracks high school and equivalency completion, pre-apprenticeship certificates awarded, and job retention.

The Organization

Operation Fresh Start was founded in 1970 and has served over 9,000 members. Its mission is to “empower emerging adults on a path to self-sufficiency through education, mentoring, and employment training.” OFS has 41 staff and serves upwards of 400 members annually. As a long-running organization, OFS prioritizes diversified funding including The Corps Network (a national association of corps programs)³; the federal YouthBuild program;⁴ Department of Labor; state, county, and city funds; philanthropic and foundation funding; and “fee-for-service” work with local partners. In 2025, its “Fresh Start Society” recipient list had 146 unique donors giving more than \$1,000, many of whom are local businesses and community members.⁵

Who Operation Fresh Start Serves

While Operation Fresh Start does not have a specific target population, it aims to provide opportunities for young people who have faced challenges in finishing high-school, or entering the workforce, and are motivated to pursue a different pathway. To be eligible for OFS programs, applicants must be ages 16 to 24. Some programs have additional eligibility criteria. Most members served are from the Madison metropolitan area, with referrals coming from the Madison Metropolitan School District. Recently, approximately 5 percent of the district junior class have applied for the Legacy program, described below. With over 25,000⁶ students in the Madison Metropolitan School District, approximately 240 applied for only 55 slots available in 2025. OFS does not engage in active outreach for applicants thanks to the school district pipeline, the longevity of the program, and word-of-mouth recruitment via OFS graduates. Most members are 17 or 18 years old at intake and not on track to graduate or not having had success in other forms of schooling. Other common characteristics include having individualized education plans and experience with the criminal legal system, trauma, and poverty. Most members (95 percent) are low-income and 86 percent extremely low income.

How Operation Fresh Start Prepares Members for Jobs and Career Pathways

OFS has eight programs, which aim to meet differing needs of members to get on the path to self-sustaining careers. Staff described how members are at the center of planning and action, “... *from the very first moment we meet them and then working together to build this vision on paper.*” Many members complete multiple programs depending on their career journey, individual needs, career exploration—they may even complete one program to meet the eligibility requirements of another.

The programs with the most robust job training components are Legacy, Build Academy, and Conservation Academy (described below).⁷ All OFS programs include mentorship, career coaching, occupational exploration, one-on-one tutoring, and post-secondary application support (as needed). Each program includes a follow-up session one year after a member completes the program.

Program Model

OFS operates a tiered program model in its infrastructure-focused programs that combines education, career exploration and work readiness and increasing specialized technical training as members progress.

The AmeriCorps⁸-affiliated Legacy program is their oldest running program and serves as the first stage for most members. Legacy helps young people finish high school while spending at least 1,000 hours doing paid, on-the-

COMMUNITY SERVICE AND WORK EXPERIENCES

- Home renovations
- New commercial construction
- Building affordable housing
- Conservation field work
- Habitat restoration
- Land stewardship
- Brush cutting and invasive species removal
- Tree planting and landscaping
- Stormwater land management
- Trail and park maintenance

CREDENTIALS MEMBERS CAN EARN

- Driver's license
- Registered pre-apprenticeship
- OSHA 10
- First Aid & CPR
- Multi-Craft Core Curriculum (MC3)
- Chainsaw Use and Safety (SAWW Level 1)
- Incident Communication (ICS-110 and IS700)
- Wildland Fire (S130/190 and L-180)
- Pesticide application (6.0 Right-of-Way)

job learning with a construction crew building affordable housing, or a conservation crew restoring native habitats, planting trees, and doing flood-prevention and water system projects.

Legacy members have a four-day program week, with three days on the job site and one day in the classroom earning a high school diploma. OFS provides training to address certain barriers to employment, such as transportation, for which they offer driver's education. OFS offers financial literacy classes to help members in the transition to adulthood and self-sufficiency. While worksite and class days differ, staff shared that both parts of the learning experience are closely connected, "One of the things I think is really neat about our curriculum from an in-class perspective is that ... we view the work site as an extension of the classroom, and it is this holistic approach."

OFS has a long-standing relationship with the Wisconsin Department of Workforce Development's Bureau of Registered Apprenticeship. For more than ten years, the Legacy program has offered pre-apprenticeships. Each Legacy graduate gains a pre-apprenticeship certification in Conservation/Urban Forestry or Construction, depending on their pathway.

Members who want to continue their work can apply for the Conservation Academy or the Build Academy; although with prior experience, they may also begin with one of the academy programs. For this more specialized training, members work in full-time jobs in conservation or construction to gain industry skills while developing workplace interpersonal skills. At the end of the academies, OFS staff work to place members into a registered apprenticeship or a job in a related field; they subsequently follow up with post-completion support.

Meeting the Needs of Members

Career coaching and mentorship are woven into all OFS programs. Additionally, OFS provides key supportive services directly to members and through referrals to local resources. Key areas of support include the following:

- **Housing:** OFS has a small short-term emergency support fund for a limited number of members. When housing becomes a difficult barrier, staff help members explore options, connect with community resources, and problem-solve so that members stay enrolled. Because resources are limited, staff manage these supports actively through regular check-ins with members.
- **Food insecurity:** OFS provides members with daily access to a fully stocked kitchen to support their well-being. Members are encouraged to grab breakfast items, snacks, and drinks to help them stay energized, and the kitchen is regularly supplied with fresh, easy to prepare options. Members can bring food home as needed to lighten their financial burden. OFS staff also connect members with food banks to ensure that both members and their families do not go without food
- **Mental health:** Integrating mental health awareness into programming and building trusting, supportive relationships are ways in which OFS creates a welcoming environment. OFS recognizes that many members have stress, trauma, and personal challenges. OFS is exploring ways to expand in-house mental health services, including an ongoing relationship with a health care clinic that provides therapy to members on an as needed basis.
- **Transportation:** Staff consistently identify transportation as a *major* barrier for members, often requiring multiple layers of support. OFS runs the "DRIVE" driver's license attainment program with driver's ed and

YOUTH VOICE

While not formalized, OFS gives members opportunities to give feedback and advocate for themselves. For example, OFS offers a full kitchen, and the crews can make themselves lunch every day and the stock is determined by the members themselves.

Even without mechanisms for formal youth design input, OFS staff say that if members have feedback they can candidly share.

permit or DMV application help so members can reliably get to school and work. In emergencies, members can also receive a stipend for a rideshare or a city bus pass.

Partnerships

OFS partners with local workforce development groups, state and local government, private employers, unions, and the public school system. OFS continually seeks new formal and informal partnerships to expand their impact.

Community organization partners

The Workforce Development Board of South Central Wisconsin (“workforce board”) shares OFS’s mission and is one of their longer-standing partnerships over the last 20 years. Formally, OFS served as one of the workforce board’s Out-of-School Youth service providers, under the Workforce Innovation and Opportunity Act. Both organizations maintain formal service contracts for several grants that the workforce board administers and OFS operates. OFS is also a partner in the region’s One-Stop Career Center, contributing to coordinated service locally.

OFS and the workforce board often partner informally on community initiatives with organizations such as United Way, technical colleges, and local government. The organizations collaborate to develop new ideas, solve shared challenges, and co-apply for competitive grants with OFS, the workforce board, or other community organizations leading. OFS partners with the workforce board on several state- and federally funded projects and regional initiatives to develop career pathways related to infrastructure, conservation, biotech, and health care.

One of the outcomes of the partnership has been the development of OFS’s certified pre-apprenticeship programs. The workforce board helped OFS secure state approval for two pre-apprenticeship tracks, aligning them with registered apprenticeship sponsors and meeting the rigorous standards of Wisconsin’s Bureau of Apprenticeship Standards. This elevated OFS’s status as a training provider, strengthened its credibility with industry partners, and provided youth with meaningful, competency-based pathways into skilled trades.

The Madison Metropolitan School District (MMSD) and OFS have a long-standing formal partnership that has grown into an alternative education pathway for high school seniors and some graduates up to age 24. MMSD contracts with OFS to provide hands-on, skills-based learning alongside academic high school instruction. MMSD staff see OFS as a key initiative of its Office of Youth Re-Engagement, offering an option where students earn academic credits, receive classroom support, build work readiness skills, and complete high school. The relationship is highly collaborative: MMSD gives administrative support and access to extracurricular activities and district services, while OFS delivers all day-to-day education, tutoring, and career-focused training. MMSD staff include a teacher, counselor, and social worker who meet regularly with OFS.

The goal for MMSD students during their time with OFS is to improve their reading and math skills by two grade levels over the enrollment period. However, in the past two years, students have surpassed this target, averaging closer to three grade levels of growth in that timeframe, and opportunity youth have also achieved success. OFS measures these improvements using the TABE (Test of Adult Basic Education), providing reliable, standardized evidence of students’ progress. Program staff and MMSD attribute the gains to the combination of hands-on, real-world learning paired with intensive classroom instruction. MMSD tracks these outcomes through ongoing data

PARTNERS OF OPERATION FRESH START

- Madison Metropolitan School District
- Workforce Development Board of South Central Wisconsin
- Wisconsin Department of Workforce Development
- Construction Companies
- Madison Stormwater Engineering Division
- Dane County Parks

sharing with OFS, adding evidence that the approach boosts foundational literacy and numeracy skills in ways that traditional school settings may not.

Employer and Industry Partners

OFS and the City of Madison’s Stormwater Engineering Division have formally partnered over the past 10 years to introduce mostly Legacy and Conservation Academy OFS members to conservation and municipal work with crew-based placements. Madison benefits from community investment, a development pipeline, and affordable 10-week crews to manage 1,600 acres of stormwater land. The crew work includes brush cutting, planting, invasive species control, conservation, and litter cleanup. Crews also do community interaction and education that allows members to engage with residents and discuss their work—often satisfying community curiosity about their job. The Legacy and Build Academy programs hold strong connections to local construction employers, and interested Build Academy graduates are usually placed into a registered apprenticeship program upon completion.

Key Takeaways

Partners consistently describe OFS as successful because it delivers strong, measurable outcomes for youth, while meeting critical real-world community and workforce needs; yet the organization also faces challenges. Key takeaways include the following:

A shifting funding environment and insufficient resources creates challenges

Securing resources in a competitive funding environment has always been difficult, but recent instability and unpredictability of federal and state funding has created new challenges. OFS must continually adapt to shifts in resources while trying to maintain program capacity. This can hinder what services OFS can deliver. Funding challenges also affect how well OFS can support and compensate their staff, which in turn can contribute to issues with staff recruitment and retention. Supervisor roles are demanding and emotionally complex, leading to turnover that disrupts service delivery and reduces OFS’s capacity to meet contracted service days.

OFS delivers student-centered programming, but member barriers can still be a challenge

Staff feel that OFS is successful because it centers every aspect of its programming around the needs, goals, and lived experiences of young people. The fact that OFS programs are voluntary means that members choose to participate and are motivated from the start. Staff focus on setting the tone during the initial interview process through clear expectations and identifying youth who are ready for coaching and accountability, and who can then receive the comprehensive support OFS provides. The organization also provides supportive services to members, but challenges like housing instability and homelessness have increased sharply. Such issues can disrupt member participation, while OFS is competing for limited community resources to support members. Logistical barriers like transportation can make consistent participation difficult even when motivation is high, despite the program’s efforts to address this challenge.

The corps delivers strong outcomes for young adults

School district leaders note that OFS produces exceptionally high completion rates and academic gains that surpass expectations. Workforce development partners praise OFS for creating a system where education, paid work experience, supportive coaching, and industry-recognized skills all reinforce one another. City partners emphasize that OFS is successful in preparing youth for meaningful careers. All partners point to OFS’s welcoming “family” environment, strong mentoring, and ability to meet youth where they are as key reasons the program works.

Operation Fresh Start meets community and employer needs

Partners noted that OFS achieves these outcomes for youth while also making tangible contributions to the community. Members do high quality conservation and infrastructure work that residents recognize and appreciate, even prompting public compliments. OFS operates as a pipeline into stable municipal jobs, with graduates moving into city positions that offer living wages and benefits—an outcome cited as a major win for youth and local government. The partnership with the public workforce system is notable and is evidence of the important role OFS plays regionally to prepare the workforce.

Given the demand for the program, as evidenced by the large number of applications received, there are opportunities to further expand programming and build on existing community and industry partnerships to continue to prepare young adults for emerging infrastructure jobs and career pathways.

Notes

¹ For more information, see Operation Fresh Start, <https://www.operationfreshstart.org>.

² To learn more about The Corps Network, see <https://corpsnetwork.org>.

³ The Corps Network is a national association representing more than 150 service and conservation corps programs from around the United States. Learn more at: <https://corpsnetwork.org>.

⁴ YouthBuild is a community-based pre-apprenticeship program that provides job training and educational services for opportunity youth ages 16–24 who left school without a secondary diploma. YouthBuild is funded under the Workforce Innovation and Opportunity Act and overseen by the US Department of Labor.

⁵ “2025 Annual Report,” Operation Fresh Start, accessed April 14, 2026, <https://www.operationfreshstart.org/annual-report>.

⁶ “About,” Madison Metropolitan School District, accessed January 2026, <https://www.madison.k12.wi.us/about>.

⁷ Other OFS programs include: (1) Career Coaching: career exploration, support in post-secondary education enrollment, job-readiness training, and mentorship; (2) CareerPoint: Specific career track training over six weeks for high-demand careers such as health care, early childhood education, finance, and customer service; (3) Drive: free driver's ed program; (4) Options: Alternative way to finish alternate pathway to complete high school and receive GED or HSED with mentorship and career planning; and (5) Drive to Succeed: mentorship program for youth ages 17.5 to 24 with past or current justice involvement looking to complete high school, receive a license, and seek mentorship for career planning.

⁸ AmeriCorps is a network of national, state, and local service programs that links individuals to service opportunities to meet community needs related to education, the environment, public safety, health, and homeland security. Members serve in full- or part-time positions over a period of 10 to 12 months, and can receive a living stipend, access to supports, and educational assistance. Learn more at <https://www.americorps.gov>.

About the Authors

Lindsey Tyson is a training and technical assistance specialist, **Nathan Sick** is a senior research associate, and **Shayne Spaulding** is a senior fellow in the Workforce, Education, and Labor Division at the Urban Institute.

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