



YOUTH CAREER SERVICES TOOLKIT

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WELCOME

INTRODUCTION

For many young people with lived experience of homelessness, pursuing a job in the housing justice field is a no-brainer; you have inside knowledge about how the system works, lived expertise, and a personal vested interest in changing the system to ensure every person experiencing homelessness is provided safe, stable housing. Still, making the move to a full-time role can be an intimidating and, at times, hostile experience. So many organizations that appear to be invested in youth action and undoing oppressive structures can still fall into familiar workstreams and behaviors rooted in capitalism, such as white supremacy, heterosexism, patriarchy, and adultism, all of which contribute to work environments that breed toxicity- especially for youth with lived experience.

Developed by the National Youth Forum on Homelessness, this toolkit was made with the intention of assisting youth and young adults looking to navigate employment opportunities, from the job search to the hiring process, to tips for self advocacy and identifying and overcoming adultism. If you're a young person looking to pursue a career in the housing justice movement, this is the toolkit for you.





ISSUE OVERVIEW

WHAT'S THE ISSUE?

Often, when organizations look to hire young people with lived experience of homelessness or housing instability, they are not set up with the proper infrastructure to support them in the work. Many organizations in the housing justice sector are just now beginning their equity journey, which can create tensions around antiquated notions of “professional culture” or “professional behaviors”. The idea of “professionalism” is designed to force people to conform to norms founded in white dominant culture, perpetuating an oppressive organizational culture. The brilliance of young people is that they are able to bring their whole selves to the work - including all of their experiences and identities. However, this brilliance can lead to burnout and turnover when young people are also pushing organizations to become more transformative.

Organizations and workplace environments are also riddled with organizational politics that can be difficult to navigate. For example, when is it ok to copy the executive director on an email? What kind of personal information is ok to share with colleagues? How will my colleagues and peers understand the expertise that comes with my experience and identity? These are all hard questions to answer and navigate as new employees and even harder for folks entering the workforce for the first time.





KEY TERMINOLOGY

Below is a list of key terminology that is important for folks to understand when entering the workforce.

- **Salary employee:** Also referred to as an exempt employee, is someone who receives the same amount of money regardless of how many hours they work. Instead of being paid an hourly wage, their salary is usually discussed as an annual wage and based on a 40 hour work week.
- **Hourly employee:** An employee who receives a per hour rate for actual hours worked. Most hourly employees are eligible for overtime.
- **Consultant:** Consultants are folks who provide guidance, input, analysis and/or advice based on their expertise and experience. Often this is a fee-for-service agreement meaning the consultant and the organization or company can more easily negotiate a fee.
- **Independent Contractor:** An independent contractor is a person that provides services under a written contract or a verbal agreement. Unlike employees, independent contractors do not work regularly for an employer, but rather as required, and usually do not receive benefits beyond the payment agreed in the contract.
- **W-2:** A tax form released in the first few months of the year that outlines all the important tax information from your employer for the previous year. If you held more than one job that year, each employer will issue you a separate W-2 form, so make sure to look for those and keep them in a safe place.
- **1099-MISC:** Similar to a W-2, this is a tax form that is issued to you with all relevant tax information. However, a 1099-MISC form is not issued from an employer, but from any other organization or company that may have paid you money in a calendar year (ie, consultant fees paid out to you, gambling winnings, etc.) It's often referred to simply as a "1099."
- **Net Pay vs Gross Pay**
 - **Gross pay:** Gross pay is what employees earn before taxes, benefits and other payroll deductions are withheld from their wages.
 - **Net pay:** Net pay refers to "take-home pay", or the amount employees earn after all payroll deductions are subtracted from their gross pay.

KEY TERMINOLOGY CONTINUED

Below is a list of key terminology that is important for folks to understand when entering the workforce.



- **Retirement**

- **Individual Retirement Arrangements (IRA):** A tax-advantage personal savings plan where contributions may be tax deductible. Employers sometimes set up IRAs for their employees as part of a retirement benefit where the money you contribute comes directly from your paycheck. Some employers may even match contributions to your IRA, in which case whatever amount you contribute monthly to your IRA from your paycheck will be matched by your employer up to a certain percentage.
- **401k:** A retirement account that some employers set up for their employees similar to an IRA account. The difference between an IRA and a 401k is the employee can contribute more in a 401k than an IRA. Many companies also offer a 401K match, usually as a percentage of the employee's salary.

- **Insurance**

- **Health Maintenance Organization (HMO):** A type of health insurance plan that limits coverage to doctors who work for or contract with the HMO.
- **Preferred Provider Organization (PPO):** A health management plan that contracts with healthcare providers like hospitals and doctors creating a network of participating doctors. HMOs and PPOs are very similar except HMOs typically cost less and are less flexible about seeing out of network providers. PPOs cost more and have more out of network benefits.
- **Flexible Spending Account (FSA)/Health Savings Account (HSA):** Accounts that employees can contribute to before taxes are taken out of their paycheck that can be used on healthcare-related expenses.
- **Termination:** The end of an employee's work with a company. Termination may be voluntary, such as when a worker leaves of their own accord. Involuntary termination occurs when a company downsizes, makes layoffs, or fires an employee.



A SEAT AT THE TABLE

The following section will walk through considerations to think about and tips to utilize while searching for, interviewing, and getting hired for a position.

THE JOB SEARCH

Searching for a job can be stressful and anxiety-inducing, and that's before you even get an interview! Sure, you've decided to pursue a career in the housing justice field, but where do you even start?

JOB POSTINGS

There are a lot of considerations to weigh when deciding where to look for a new job. First, ask yourself- are you staying local or are you interested in relocating? No matter what you decide, (and if you don't know, that's ok too!) now is the time to begin making a list of qualities you're looking for in an organization. Are you passionate about direct service work? National advocacy? Do you want to work for a younger organization or one that's a bit more established? Depending on your answers, start making a list of organizations that fit those criteria, and be sure to look at their websites to see if they have any job openings. Another option is to follow organizations you're interested in on social media. This is a great way to stay up to date and get to know their work a little better. If you can, check for job postings on a weekly basis or set up alerts so you won't miss any opportunities.

Don't forget to look for jobs through different employment portals, such as Indeed, Idealist, or other job boards. These websites allow you to filter certain requirements to make sure you're getting results for jobs you are interested in applying for. Some organizations are now prioritizing folks with lived experience in their job postings, so make sure to include that in your keyword search. Even if you don't think you have the exact qualifications a job is looking for, there's no harm applying anyway!



RESUME & COVER LETTER

The importance of having a thoughtful resume and cover letter cannot be overstated. It's an organization's first impression of you, and it's your job to make sure any work experience and skills you have are appropriately played up. This is not the time to be humble! Gas yourself up! Were you the cashier at a burger joint? Sounds like you excel in a fast-paced environment, were responsible for handling and accounting for large sums of money, and have the ability to build productive relationships and resolve complex issues. Use action verbs, be concise, and get creative with how to weave in your knowledge and expertise. And remember - while an organization will likely need your legal name in order to process payment or to utilize insurance, it is perfectly legal to use your preferred name on your resume.

As for the cover letter, they are more often than not required. But for someone with lived expertise who may be lacking in "traditional" job experience, the cover letter can be a place where you can really let your knowledge, vision, and passion shine. It's ok to use similar cover letters for different jobs, but be sure to triple check that the organization is correct before you send it out.

Below are some resources for drafting impactful resumes and cover letters.

- [Resume & Cover Letter Tips](#)
- [Action Verbs for Resumes](#)
- [Resume Template \[.doc download\]](#)
- [Sample Cover Letters](#)

REFERENCES

Strong references are a crucial part of the job search! When choosing a reference, try and select supervisors or mentors who you trust to sing your praises. It's ok to ask a potential reference, "Would you feel comfortable being a positive reference for any jobs I apply for?" Include as much context about the job you're interested in with the request for a reference - this can include the job posting, a copy of your cover letter, or a small blurb explaining why you think you're a good fit. Ideally, your references will come from different organizations or companies so they can each highlight something different about your past experience.

THE INTERVIEW

Before the interview, research the organization and the people you'll be meeting. Review the job description and identify scenarios from your work history or personal life that match their requirements. Practice answering questions until your delivery feels natural. Remember, they're people just like you. Talk yourself up, because you really are the G.O.A.T.!



REMEMBER TO INTERVIEW YOUR INTERVIEWER

Keep in mind that the interview process goes both ways and typically follows the same format. First, the interviewer(s) will ask you a few questions related to your background and expertise. Then, there's usually time to let you ask them questions. Never walk into an interview empty handed! Being prepared with questions indicates your interest and is usually the only time you'll be able to gauge whether that position and organization aligns with your values.

Ask about the working environment, organizational culture, specific role responsibilities, and even their understanding of equity. Here are some sample questions to ask during the interview:

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“HOW LONG HAS THIS POSITION BEEN AVAILABLE?”

This shows that you are interested in your future at the organization. It also shows concern for turnover and that you are attentive. Listen carefully to the answer provided, sometimes interviewers tell on themselves about the work environment - both good and bad!

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“WILL I BE WORKING WITH A TEAM OR BY MYSELF?”

It's great to know your own personal work ethic. Do you work better with a team or alone? Do you mind being micromanaged? Do you like order or can you work under pressure? These questions allow open dialogue and give a sense of how the organization runs on a day-to-day basis. Engagement is key! If this question is answered in the job posting (“this position will be part of ABC team and report to XYZ position”), modify the question to ask about that specific team and/or the management style of the team leader.



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“WHAT ARE YOUR PROTOCOLS FOR DISCRIMINATION POLICIES?”

Inquire about specific anti-discrimination policies or protections the organization has on the books. Policies are an important aspect of an equity-driven organization, and you'll want to make sure you understand what kind of work environment you are stepping into, should you decide to take the position.

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“HOW DOES YOUR ORGANIZATION ADDRESS ADULTISM?”

Ask for examples for their internal processes as individuals and colleagues, and externally as an organization. This will give you a sense of how comfortable they are discussing and talking about oppressive systems.

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“WHAT RACIAL EQUITY INITIATIVES HAS THE ORGANIZATION IMPLEMENTED?”

Try to read between the lines. If the interviewer is focusing on liberation and transformative language, it may give you a sense of whether or not racial equity is a priority, rather than a tokenizing work environment

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“WHAT IS THE STARTING SALARY?”

The question you can't wait for and dread at the same time. While it's important to have a number in your mind, ask them what they are offering. You don't want to sell yourself short! And don't forget to ask about benefits. How many vacation, personal, and sick days can I expect? What does the retirement plan look like? Does the insurance plan cover dental? You can ask all these questions before you get hired, typically after receiving a job offer.

YOU'RE HIRED NOW WHAT?

The first few months at a new job is a time for learning the ropes and getting acclimated to the team (informally known as "onboarding.") Being the new person on the block can be a bit uncomfortable, especially if you don't know anyone. Take some time to get to know your coworkers! Scheduling 15 minute chats is one way to break the ice.

UNDERSTANDING "OFFICE POLITICS"

Every office has its own culture and way of doing things; in many ways, it's a living, breathing entity! Don't expect to walk in and understand the nuances immediately. Instead, take your time getting adjusted and don't be afraid to ask your colleagues or supervisor questions as they arise.

THINGS WILL GET UNCOMFORTABLE! DON'T STRESS.

Understand your HR protocol. Some miscommunications can be eased with a cup of coffee, a mediated talk, OR ignoring when possible. If a conflict is not getting resolved, know the proper channels to escalate, starting with your supervisor.

KNOW YOUR BOUNDARIES

It's okay if you choose to keep your distance- you're at work! Having healthy boundaries means establishing your limits and clearly expressing them. Boundaries are easier to loosen over time than tighten, so keep that in mind when setting a precedent. As with anything, use your judgment to be flexible with boundaries as you see fit.



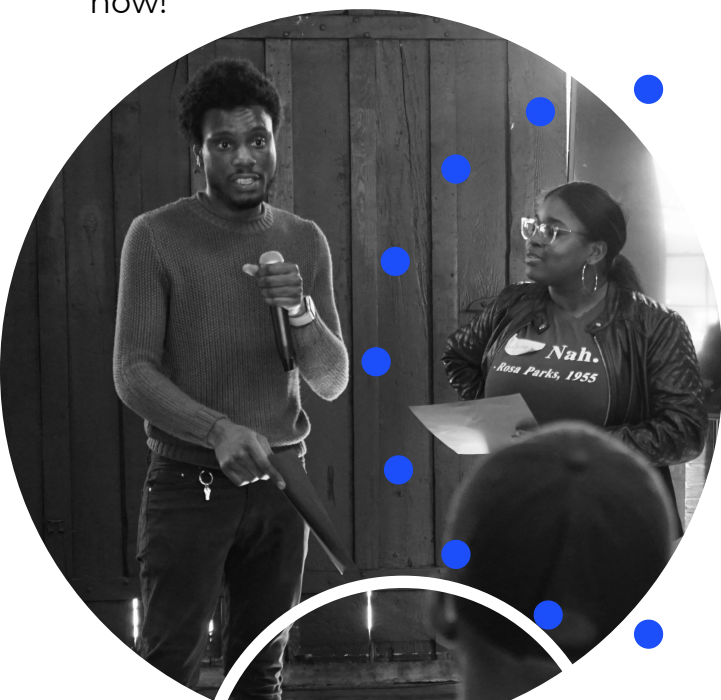
INTENTIONS VS IMPACT

Gentle reminder to read the room and try to assume best intentions from your colleagues. People mess up and it's okay to speak up when they do; respectfully of course! There's a time and place for everything. If you find yourself continually experiencing microaggressions or overt hostility, be sure to find a safe person within the organization to confide in, and escalate it as necessary.

INTELLECTUAL PROPERTY

Always read your onboarding agreement or company handbook thoroughly! It is standard protocol to sign a work contract upon being hired, and you can always ask questions before you sign. For independent contractors in particular, clarity around ownership of intellectual property (or, work that is a result of your individual creativity) is important to understand fully. For example- does the organization you are working for "own" everything you design on company time?

If you're ok with the intellectual property agreement, developing templates can be a helpful route in protecting some of your creative output. What's more, template creation is a billable service depending on the complexity of the contract you signed. Developing templates is a valuable investment in the long run as it helps establish consistent and efficient work. Remember: work smarter, not harder. If you continue the same line of work, compiling a fluid workflow that can be reproduced is a payable skill, so be sure to practice now!



BIPOC EMPLOYEE CONSIDERATIONS

For Black employees and employees of color, office processes and protocol sometimes lack the essential nuance of racial identity and racial equity. Honoring racial equity is a fairly new concept for most employers, and many have yet to take that step. This makes it really important to stay up to date with your workplace's processes and protocols, while working with your colleagues to push the needle on more transformative racial equity initiatives. For white employees, it is your responsibility to leverage your privilege and advance racial equity efforts, and to always be co-conspirators alongside your BIPOC colleagues.



If you identify as BIPOC, you can often find support and a listening ear with people who share your identity. If your workplace has affinity groups or social groups, check them out! We'll get more into what these affinity groups can look like later in the toolkit, but they can be great safe spaces to decompress and stay up to date on your workplace's happenings. Not only that, but the professional world relies heavily on "who you know". Connecting with your BIPOC colleagues creates an opportunity to uplift and support your BIPOC peers, building a crucial network dedicated to furthering one another's professional careers. There's no shame in the upward mobility game, and once you've established yourself, it'll be your chance to extend a hand to other BIPOC folks in your network. Operating from a place of community, not competition is an important mindset to avoid gatekeeping important skills, connections, and resources.



COMMON ORGANIZATIONAL POLICIES

Below is a list of common organizational policies that will likely show up in a handbook or employment agreement. You can also use this list as a guide to formulate questions about organizational policies as they come up in the interview process.



COMMON ORGANIZATIONAL POLICIES

NON-DISCRIMINATION POLICY

What does it do?

Non-discrimination policies protect people from discrimination based on a protected class such as sex, race, religion etc.

What do I need to look out for?

While race and ethnicity are federally protected classes, sexual orientation and gender identity are not and aren't always included in organization or company policies. Be mindful that policies that don't include gender or gender identity inherently don't protect trans/non-binary/enby folks.

TERMINATION/ "AT-WILL" PRACTICES

What does it do?

At will termination policies allow the employer to terminate an employee for any reason (except an illegal reason) without incurring legal recourse. Under at will termination policies, employees and staff can resign or leave a position for any reason without adverse legal consequences.

What do I need to look out for?

This policy is not rooted in conflict resolution or transformative justice, but in conflict avoidance and non-direct feedback. If the organization you're applying to has this policy, be aware that there does not need to be a documented reason to fire you - meaning they do not have to have documentation or proof of misconduct, non-compliance, etc.

ATTENDANCE CLAUSES

What is it?

This is a policy that might outline various responses to an employee's tardiness, calling out, not showing up, or leaving early. It will often establish a protocol (who to call, when to call, what the employee may be responsible for, what the employer is responsible for) for such instances. It might also establish a boundary around how many times an employee can call out or leave early before recourse.

What do I need to look out for?

Make sure you are very familiar with your organization or company's attendance policy. You don't want to find yourself in a situation where you don't know who to notify or when to notify them if you are sick or some other emergency comes up. This is important in an environment that also has an at will termination policy because employers can fire anyone without giving them the opportunity to reconcile.

COMMON ORGANIZATIONAL POLICIES

DRESS CODE/ APPEARANCE

What is it?

Policies on dress code establish what is appropriate or inappropriate for employees to wear to work.

What do I need to look out for?

Policies on dress code will sometimes distinguish between appropriate attire for men and women which leaves out considerations for trans and non-binary folks. Sometimes dress codes might not take into consideration religious or spiritual attire, which is protected under the 2nd amendment.

SOCIAL MEDIA POLICY

What is it?

A social media policy is a code of conduct that provides guidelines for employees who post content on the Internet either as part of their job or as a private person.

What do I need to look out for?

Social media policies can sometimes include guidelines for personal profiles as well as interactions that you might have with professional contacts (program participants, partners, funders, other staff members etc.). You don't want to find yourself in the position of venting online or interacting with a professional contact online in a manner that unknowingly violates this policy. This is important in an environment that also has an at will termination policy because employers can fire anyone without giving them the opportunity to reconcile.





SELF-ADVOCACY AT THE WORKPLACE

As mentioned, being the new person at an organization can be hard, and at times even a bit uncomfortable. It is really easy to burn out early because of the toll this work can take emotionally, especially for folks with lived experience of homelessness. The reality is that no one can work at 100% all the time. You have to make sure you are taking care of yourself so you can show up for the work. Here are some really great tips on how to establish boundaries, prioritize self care, understand your worth (in dollars), and create more equitable spaces.

BOUNDARIES

Boundaries are a vital aspect of integrating into a new job. They shape the way you interact with your coworkers, act as a blueprint for a healthy work-life balance, and set the stage for self-advocacy. Start by asking yourself “What do I need to feel comfortable in my workspace/position/relationship with my supervisor, etc.?” and “What would keep me from being able to do this work comfortably?” Asking these “self inventory questions” give you a clear understanding on what you might need in your new role.



Saying “No”

Saying no is a skill that can help maintain your boundaries and keep your goals a priority. Consider what is being asked of you, and whether it interferes with your workload, capacity, or work-life balance. As we like to say, “No” is a full sentence.

Taking Time Off

Vacation and sick time (often known collectively as “PTO”, or Paid Time Off) are there for a reason, so make sure to use them! With busy schedules, it's important to plan vacations well in advance. As for sick time, know your limits and when your health and rest need to take priority. Check your organization’s PTO policy to see if unused vacation days roll over into the next year. If not, make sure to use your days before you lose them!

Setting Boundaries with Coworkers

It’s up to you to decide how much personal information you would like to share with coworkers. After deciding on your level of sharing comfortability, establish your own professional boundaries.

Structuring the Workday

Make sure that you structure your workdays in a way that allows time to decompress between meetings, get your work done, and even eat lunch! Blocking off time on a shared calendar sets a clear boundary for the times during the day in which coworkers can schedule meetings with you.

SELF-CARE

It is easy to fall into “work loops”, or situations where you are working nonstop without periods of rest and breaks. Capitalism can create this dynamic in organizations, and nonprofits are not immune to over-working culture. Always be aware of your own capacity, and when you need to take care of yourself. Self-care is necessary for your well-being, and it's important to know how self care looks for you and how that fits into your workplace culture.

SELF-CARE CHECKLIST

Self-care is so much more than bubble baths and vacation. There are deeply personal elements of self-care that require an assessment of what is and isn't working. Keep an eye on your own self-care practices by considering the following categories, and develop your own list with categories that make sense to you.

PHYSICAL

- EATING REGULARLY
- DRINKING ENOUGH WATER
- MOVING MINDFULLY
- GETTING ENOUGH SLEEP

PSYCHOLOGICAL

- TAKING BREAKS FROM THE NEWS AND SOCIAL MEDIA
- MAKING TIME FOR SELF-REFLECTION
- HAVING SPACE FOR DOWNTIME
- READING FOR PLEASURE

EMOTIONAL

- LISTENING TO/PLAYING MUSIC
- SPENDING TIME WITH PEOPLE WHO AFFIRM YOUR WHOLE SELF
- RECEIVING CARE UNAPOLOGETICALLY
- GIVING SELF AFFIRMATION/PRAISE

SPIRITUAL

- IDENTIFYING WHAT IS MEANINGFUL
- CHERISHING OPTIMISM AND HOPE
- MEDITATING OR PRACTICING MINDFULNESS
- BEING OPEN TO INSPIRATION

PROFESSIONAL

- TAKING BREAKS DURING THE DAY, INCLUDING LUNCH
 - ADVOCATING FOR PERSONAL NEEDS
 - CREATING A COMFORTABLE WORKSPACE
 - TAKING TIME TO GET TO KNOW COWORKERS
- 



NEGOTIATING PAY

In a perfect world, negotiating for fair compensation would not be necessary. Unfortunately as we all know, we do not live in a perfect world! Because of years of workplace discrimination, negotiation can feel very risky to LGBTQ folks, women, Black folks, and people of color.

NEGOTIATION CONVERSATIONS

Like anything, negotiation is a skill that can be learned. The following are some strategies and tactics for becoming the negotiator of your dreams.

Do the Research

In order to build an effective case for why you deserve higher wages, start by doing the research. Find out what similar organizations are paying folks at your level. One way to get this information is through online resources like Glassdoor.com, Payscale.com and Salary.com, which also take into consideration location and education level. If you can't find anything useful, utilize your network and ask your peers about their pay history. Some people can be uncomfortable talking about money, so feel free to keep it vague.

Know Your Worth!

Consider what you are bringing to the table and outline it in terms of skills, connections, experience, and impact. These qualities are an important part of advocating for a higher salary, and it's important that you are able to speak to them in a clear, succinct manner.

Consider the Benefits

Sometimes, a lower salary can be paired with wonderful benefits, such as extensive PTO, comprehensive insurance, a flexible work-life balance, matching retirement plan, or more! Find out what is offered alongside the offered salary, and explore whether or not there is wiggle room to negotiate for any additional benefits if the salary is locked in.



SAFE SPACES AND AFFINITY GROUPS FOR STAFF

Having a safe space at a new job always helps with the new hire transition, especially in situations where you feel like things need to change. Informal peer support and more formalized affinity groups (such as a staff-led group for people with similar identities) are usually the best resources to simply vent, connect with your colleagues, or tap into support for any issues you might be having.

Below you will find resources around the importance for affinity groups and/or caucuses, along with guidance around organizing these spaces.

- [Racial Equity Tools](#) - Resources for BIPOC and white staff
- [Caucuses as a Racial Justice Strategy](#)
- [How Racial Affinity Groups Saved My Life](#)
- [Why People of Color Need Spaces Without White People](#)
- [Starting a White Caucus](#)
- [Racial Equity Toolkit](#)





We extend our deepest gratitude to the dedicated team on the National Youth Forum on Homelessness and True Colors United for their tireless efforts and collaborative spirit in creating the Youth Career Services Toolkit. Their commitment to empowering young people facing homelessness is invaluable, and their expertise has been instrumental in shaping this resource. We also acknowledge the contributions of Jha'asryel-Akquil Bishop, Maddox Guerilla, Osiris Laibson-Brown, and Saki Hiyashi who generously shared their insights and experiences to make this toolkit a comprehensive and impactful resource for youth action. Together, we strive to make meaningful strides towards supporting the career aspirations of all young people, regardless of their housing status.