NeON Works Evaluation:
Findings at a Glance

Evaluation Overview

NeON Works is a community-based workforce development initiative implemented by the NYC Department of Probation, with funding from the NYC Young Men's Initiative and in partnership with the Mayor's Office for Economic Opportunity. NORC at the University of Chicago (NORC) conducted an evaluation of the NeON Works program which concluded June 2025.

NeON Works is transforming workforce development by centering equity, healing, and youth voice. The program offers highly personalized support to youth on probation, enabling them to build confidence, pursue education, and gain job readiness skills. Evaluation data shows that participants most value strong relationships with relatable staff, access to career training, and a sense of community and purpose.

Launched in 2021, NeON Works provides personalized career and education pathways for young people aged 16–24, with an emphasis on serving those on probation or community supervision. Using a "one-size-fits-one" approach, the program delivers individualized assessments, career exploration, and connections to job training, internships, high school equivalency programs, and postsecondary opportunities.

Yet barriers—structural, emotional, and resource-based—limit full participation. To expand NeON Works' impact, we must invest in infrastructure, peer recruitment, trauma-informed care, and cross-site learning. To achieve full implementation and participation, NeON Works should call on city leaders, funders, and practitioners to act: scale what works, fund what matters, and uplift models rooted in dignity and trust.

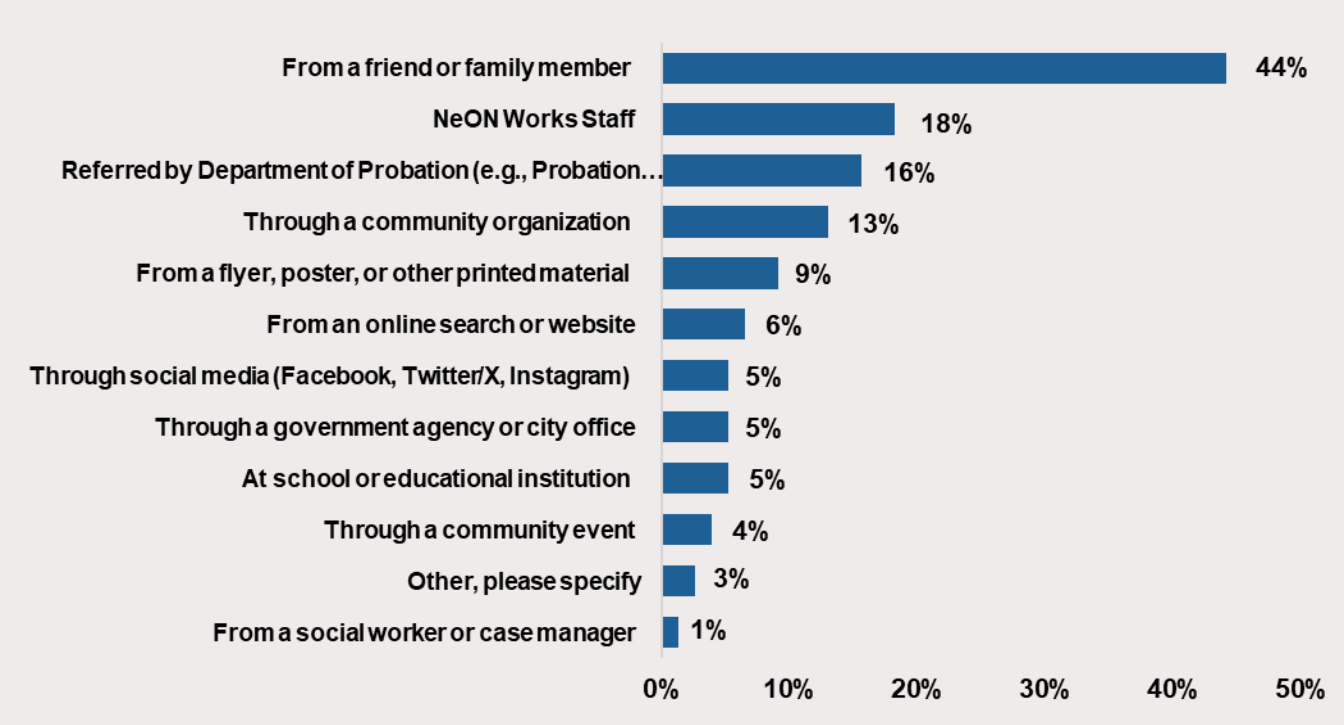
Evaluation Approach

NORC used a mixed-methods design grounded in culturally responsive and equity-focused principles, with input from a Participatory Advisory Council, comprised of five program provider staff and seven former and current program participants. Data sources included program administrative records, participant surveys, interviews and focus groups with provider staff and participants, and visits to the six provider sites included in the study.

Key Findings

- **Reach:** NeON Works is reaching both youth on probation and the broader community, with 33% of participants on probation or community supervision.
    - Completion rates and job placement outcomes are low and vary across age, education level, and probation status.
    - Younger program participants and those without high school diplomas participate less in job training or placement programs.

- **Relationships Matter:** Word-of-mouth recruitment dominates (44% via friends/family), demonstrating community trust and satisfaction.
    - Formal outreach—especially digital—remains limited, and some sites lack visible signage or online presence.

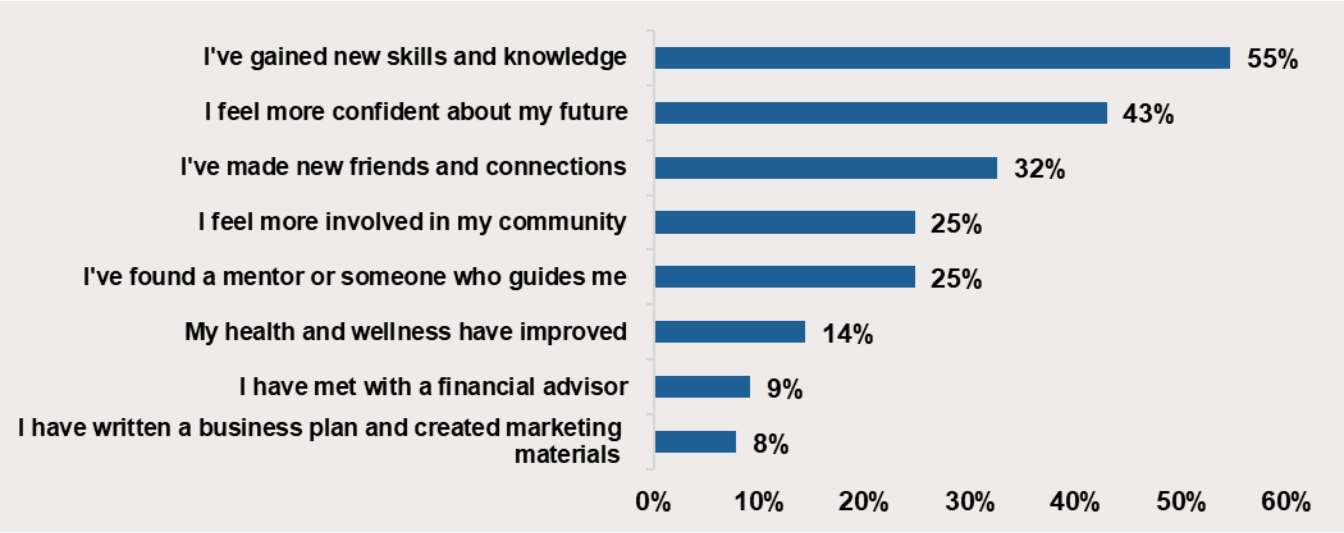


- **Implementation and Programming:** Program participants value personalized intake, staff who share lived experiences, and curated training based on interests.
    - Staff capacity is stretched, and some sites lack the resources to offer consistent incentives or excursions that reinforce engagement.

Barrier Type	Specific Barriers Identified
Practical Challenges	• Work or school commitments • Family caregiving responsibilities • Scheduling conflicts
Environmental Barriers	• Neighborhood violence and safety concerns • Transportation barriers • Housing and food insecurity • Limited access to mental health/wellness supports
Internal Barriers	• Shame, mistrust, and pride • Need for greater personal commitment to benefit from programming

- **Barriers and Participation Supports:** Participants face a range of practical (work/school conflicts), environmental (transportation, housing), and internal (shame, mistrust) barriers.
    - Staff and program participants both highlighted how trauma and safety concerns can undermine participation.
    - Virtual offerings helped but were inconsistent across sites.

- **Participant Satisfaction:** Program participants report high satisfaction with workshops, especially those focused on job training (84%).
    - Strong relationships with staff drive trust and encourage ongoing participation.
    - Comfort and belonging were central themes in both survey and focus group responses.



- **Outcomes and Impact:** Participants report gains in skills, confidence, and goal clarity.
    - Older participants were more likely to secure jobs, while younger ones engaged more in education.
    - Participants on probation had comparable employment outcomes but lower internship access than youth not on probation.

Recommendations for Future Implementation

- **Expand virtual and hybrid access** to increase flexibility for participants who are balancing competing obligations.
- **Develop peer ambassador models** and improve digital outreach to strengthen recruitment and visibility.
- **Invest in staffing and infrastructure** to support personalized case management, milestone tracking, and cross-site collaboration.
- **Expand wraparound supports,** including safety protocols, mental health referrals, and connections to housing, food, and transportation services.
- **Target equity gaps** by tailoring outreach, support, and partnerships to meet the distinct needs of younger, lower-education, and participants on probation.

Looking Ahead

This evaluation supports the centering of relationship building and equity in work development programs. As the program moves forward, sustaining its impact will require investing in infrastructure, flexibility, and long-term support. Going forward, prioritizing tracking long-term outcomes, participant feedback loops, and cross-site collaboration will ensure the program is able to adapt to real-time needs.

Conclusion

NeON Works helps youth build confidence, skills, and goals—but sustained impact depends on stronger infrastructure, equity-driven outreach, and holistic supports.

Further Reading

NeON Works Evaluation Report:
https://www.nyc.gov/assets/opportunity/pdf/NeON_Works_Evaluation_Report.pdf