



Hartford Foundation for Public Giving Testimony on

House Bill 7250, An Act Implementing the Recommendations of the Juvenile Justice Policy And Oversight Committee

Judiciary Committee

March 26, 2026

Good afternoon, Senator Winfield, Representative Stafstrom, Senator Kissel, Representative Fishbein and distinguished members of the Judiciary Committee. The [Hartford Foundation for Public Giving](#) is grateful for this opportunity to submit written testimony on **House Bill 7250, An Act Implementing the Recommendations of the Juvenile Justice Policy And Oversight Committee (JJPOC)**. **The foundation appreciates the legislation's intent to enhance the ability to implement JJPOC recommendations. The bill's provisions cover a range of critical issues related to juvenile justice system involved and at-risk youth, including efforts to tackle chronic absenteeism, examine juvenile review boards and youth diversion programs, develop a statewide youth diversion policy and police officer training curriculum, track progress in implementing a Specialized Trauma-Informed Treatment Assessment and Reunification Enhancement Plan, and provide an annual evaluation of reentry success plan recommendations.**

Since 1925, the Hartford Foundation has proudly served as the community foundation for the 29-town Greater Hartford region. This year, the foundation celebrates 100 years of service and remains committed to building an even greater Hartford region. Over the past two years, we have distributed more than \$100 million in grants to promote equitable opportunity for all residents in our region. Made possible by the gifts of generous individuals, families and organizations, the foundation has awarded grants of more than \$1 billion since its founding.

As part of our efforts to dismantle structural racism and improve social and economic mobility for Black and Latine residents of Greater Hartford, the Hartford Foundation invests in efforts that remove barriers to economic success and increase social cohesion and the perception of community safety. To help accomplish this, the foundation invests in programs and improving systems to expand access to education, physical and mental health care, job training and work-based opportunities, and other youth services to support their success, prevent incidences of violence, divert youth from incarceration, and support their families.

The foundation and other philanthropic organizations have supported this work; however, the state must lead the support of justice system-involved youth and their families and diverting young people from incarceration. Public commitment must also address the interconnection across basic human needs programs and systems to increase access to healthy food, physical and mental healthcare, and housing services and to provide adequate support to the nonprofit organizations and state agencies delivering these services. JJPOC's work recognizes the multiple challenges of justice-system involved youth, addressing behavioral health as well as the layered needs of youth in order to be successful.

The foundation has worked for many years with local school districts and other community partners to address education issues across Greater Hartford. Through its early work supporting Hartford's Community Schools and continuing work with the Greater Hartford region's Alliance Districts (Bloomfield, East Hartford, Manchester, Vernon, Windsor, and Windsor Locks), the foundation has seen how stronger partnerships among schools, families, nonprofits, and the community help students feel an increased connectedness to their school, leading to increased attendance, academic engagement, and persistence to graduation.



The General Assembly has acknowledged with its recent investments in mental health services for children and youth that young people face unprecedented challenges that make it more difficult to persist and achieve in the classroom. One primary point of emphasis in the foundation's work is addressing chronic absenteeism with support of district offices focused on family, school, and community partnerships. Engaging students has become even more challenging after the pandemic where chronic absenteeism has significantly increased. We would encourage the Judiciary Committee and JJPOC to reach out to Hartford Foundation staff who have been working with local districts to address these challenges.

In collaboration with the Connecticut Department of Education on behalf of the Governor's Kids Cabinet, the Hartford Foundation for Public Giving has awarded a one-year grant to the nonprofit [RE!NSTITUTE](#) to lead a planning effort designed to support the Greater Hartford region's education and homeless response system to ensure that students experiencing homelessness can remain present and engaged in school. Goals include improving educational outcomes by addressing the overrepresentation of marginalized students in housing instability and strengthening cross-sector collaboration to enhance support systems and public awareness of available programming.

The grant allows RE!NSTITUTE to leverage McKinney-Vento Homeless Assistance Act resources along with services and expertise of [Greater Hartford Coordinated Access Network \(CAN\)](#) to connect more students and families to housing and resources in school districts and communities. The Greater Hartford CAN geographic coverage area includes 17 school districts, representing ten percent of the state's public-school districts overall. The Greater Hartford CAN reported that nearly 900 students have experienced homelessness, which represents approximately 16 percent of all students experiencing homelessness in Connecticut.

In Connecticut, students experiencing homelessness graduate at rates up to 23 percent lower than their peers. Among those who graduate, their average GPA tends to be significantly lower, affecting their college admission prospects and future career opportunities.

Chronic absenteeism is also a significant challenge for students experiencing homelessness. They miss an average of 15-20 more school days per year than their housed peers. This excessive absence rate directly correlates with lower test scores and increased dropout rates. Transportation challenges, frequent school changes, and the need to work or care for family members often contribute to attendance issues. On average, each school change faced by a student experiencing homelessness can result in a loss of three to six months of academic progress.

From the foundation's work with local school districts, we have seen how direct outreach to families whose children are experiencing chronic absenteeism, helping to identify and mitigate challenges to getting students to school can make a real difference. **The foundation supports the legislation's requirement that local school districts establish attendance review teams for schools with high chronic absenteeism rates, mandating these teams to meet monthly and report annually to the Department of Education.** In order for these efforts to be successful, districts must have adequate resources to hire and retain staff to do this intensive outreach work. We know that this work is already underway in many school districts throughout the state and recommend legislators draw on their experience in developing plans to address these challenges. We recommend that the legislature consider deadlines for reporting that allow a thorough examination of the challenges and opportunities to effectively address chronic absenteeism.



The Hartford Foundation has made considerable investments in efforts to support opportunity youth, defined as individuals aged 16 through 24 who are not in school or working, and may be involved in the foster care and/or the juvenile justice systems. Data continues to show that youth of color are far more likely to be referred to juvenile justice services than their white peers, and at younger ages. Early involvement in the juvenile justice system can have a lasting impact, disconnecting young people from their families and communities and limiting their access to opportunities, often making it more challenging to achieve their full potential.

The report [Connecticut's Unspoken Crisis: Getting young people back on track](#), sponsored by one of our peers and funding partners, Dalio Education has helped to draw attention to one of the greatest challenges facing Connecticut, with many young people in danger of becoming disconnected from school and the workplace. This has devastating consequences for the present and future of our state. We are grateful that legislators recognize the need to act and address the needs of our youth to ensure a better future for them and our state.

The Dalio report acknowledges something that many policymakers, educators, and youth service providers have known for a long time, that while the vast majority of youth disconnected from school and jobs are concentrated in our urban areas, they can be found in every community throughout the state, including in our lower income rural communities. This is a statewide challenge that demands a comprehensive statewide response that engages policymakers, community leaders, youth advocates, parents, and young people to develop effective strategies to meet the needs of vulnerable youth.

According to the [Tow Youth Justice Institute](#) young Black or African American, Hispanic/Latino and American Indian/Alaskan Native young people being twice as likely people of almost all races/ethnicities are more likely to experience disconnection compared with White young people. Hispanic/Latino young people have the strongest association with disconnection, at two times that of White young people. Black or African American young people have the second strongest association, at 1.8 times that of White young people. Young men of color are particularly vulnerable to disconnection, with 41 percent of this population ending up disconnected. Twenty-nine percent of young men are disconnected versus 20 percent of young women, indicating heightened risk of disconnection dependent on sex.

In August 2021, the Hartford Foundation partnered with the **City of Hartford, Dalio Education** launched an initial 18-month investment of \$9.85 million to support opportunity youth, who are individuals 16 – 24 who are currently disengaged from school or work. The funding was provided to [COMPASS Youth Collaborative](#), [Our Piece of the Pie](#), and [Roca, Inc.](#) to allow these organizations to provide individualized, trauma-informed, high-touch support to the young people they specialize in working with:

- COMPASS to expand its [Peacebuilders](#) programming model, increasing the number of violence interrupters in Hartford working to de-escalate conflict and build relationships with the hardest to reach youth.
- OPP to significantly increase the capacity of the [Youth Service Corps](#), allowing it to serve 100 additional young people, on top of the approximately 250 young people they currently serve annually. Former Hartford Mayor Luke Bronin led the creation of the Youth Service Corps in 2016 to give young people part-time jobs as well as one-on-one coaching and mentoring.
- Roca, a national youth-serving organization that is also working in Massachusetts and Maryland, came to Hartford to offer a program [specifically serving young women](#), including young mothers, who are victims of abuse and neglect. Roca has recently added basic skills and workforce development as part of their programming.



In 2023, the Foundation made an additional commitment to support this work.

We support House Bill 7250's proposed expansion of the Juvenile Justice Policy And Oversight Committee (JJPOC) to include the Commissioners of Housing and Emergency Services and Public Protection, and two new youth members with lived experience in the juvenile justice system. This expansion recognizes that the lives of justice involved youth are impacted by a broad range of interconnected factors, and state agencies across the spectrum of issues, including housing and public safety, need to play a role in developing policies and programming to support youth staying engaged to achieve their goals.

Integrating youth voice is essential. The foundation and providers who work with youth in the juvenile justice system recognize that to fully understand the issues and develop effective solutions to existing challenges, we must engage youth and family members who have experienced the systems. Capturing these perspectives helps to generate policies that address what needs attention and community buy-in.

Through our investments in education and workforce development initiatives, we have seen firsthand what researchers have indicated, that the interplay of race, gender and where people grow up can have compounding effects on whether they disengage from school and work. This is a matter of racial equity. There is a critical need to support youth in building basic and professional skills while providing wraparound supports they need to be successful.

The foundation also offers its support of House Bill 7250's requirement that the Police Officer Standards and Training Council develop a statewide uniform youth diversion policy and training curriculum by December 2025, in collaboration with the Juvenile Justice Policy and Oversight Committee.

We recognize the importance of improving the interactions between local police and youth, promoting positive relationships and use of de-escalation techniques to preserve community safety. In 2020, the Foundation partnered with the Travelers Championship to co-fund a three-year police training initiative led by the University of New Haven's [Center for Advanced Policing](#) and the [Tow Youth Justice Institute](#). The Connecticut Institute for Youth and Police Relations program worked with police departments throughout Greater Hartford to enhance training to assist officers in balancing the demands of public safety and the best interests of Black, Latine and other diverse youth. The program sought to build bridges between the police and communities they serve. Instruction was provided by University of New Haven faculty with expertise in youth justice, child development, and community policing. The curriculum also included conversations with youth organizations and justice-involved youth. The focus was on changing approaches to situations that arise in the field and strategies for deescalating them while integrating restorative justice approaches. By developing these strategies, law enforcement can maintain better relationships with youth in the community they serve and reduce arrests and altercations.

We know that youth of color are also far more likely to be referred to juvenile justice services than their white peers. Early involvement in the juvenile justice system can have a lasting impact on youth, disconnecting them from their families and communities and limiting their ability to be successful in school.

In 2018, the foundation also awarded a three-year grant to the [Center for Children's Advocacy \(CCA\)](#) to expand its services to adolescents and young adults from Greater Hartford who are making the difficult transition away from justice-system confinement or Department of Children and Families involvement. CCA's legal support provided the groundwork that can help youth reestablish important connections, find a safe place to live, get back into school, or get a job that leads toward future security. This type of programming could have a powerful



impact on keeping youth out of the juvenile justice system. The foundation continues to support CCA in addressing the needs of justice-system involved and youth at risk.

In 2019 the Hartford Foundation's Catalyst Endowment Fund provided grants to support youth involved in the juvenile justice system, including a grant to COMPASS Youth Collaborative's NAVIGATE program to support youth who reside at the Hartford Juvenile Detention Center. The program uses an evidence-based social emotional learning (SEL) curriculum created to help youth overcome trauma and make positive life choices. Using youth mentors, young people received support to navigate the reentry process – and have access to support for four years after their release.

The Hartford Foundation supports this legislation's requirement that the Department of Children and Families (DCF) must report annually on its implementation of a Specialized Trauma-Informed Treatment Assessment and Reunification Enhancement Plan. This work to provide specialized treatment to youth and create pathways to reunite with family is crucial to supporting justice involved youth in reaching their goals. The foundation also invests in learning and evaluation to assess the implementation of the programs it supports. Providing regular reporting and assessment of DCF's efforts to support justice involved youth and reuniting them with their families will help to address gaps and build on successes.

The Hartford Foundation looks forward to finding opportunities to continue partnering with legislators, the administration, advocates, philanthropy and other stakeholders to improve community safety and to support youth to give them the support they often need to avoid involvement with the justice system, and make a successful transition, and thrive in their communities.

Thank you for the opportunity to provide testimony. If you have any questions, please feel free to contact our staff at policy@hfpg.org or 860-548-1888.