



**Hartford Foundation for Public Giving Testimony in Support of
Senate Bill 410, An Act Concerning Paid Internships for High School Students
Labor and Public Employees Committee
March 12, 2024**

Good afternoon, Senator Kushner, Representative Sanchez, Senator Sampson, Representative Weir, and distinguished members of the Labor and Public Employees Committee. The Hartford Foundation for Public Giving is grateful for the opportunity to submit testimony **in support of Senate Bill 410, An Act Concerning Paid Internships for High School Students.**

The [Hartford Foundation](#) is the community foundation for the 29-town Greater Hartford region. As a community foundation, over the past two years, we have distributed \$104.5 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 \$998 million since its founding in 1925.

As part of our strategic efforts to dismantle structural racism and advance equitable economic and social mobility for Black and Latine residents of Greater Hartford, the Hartford Foundation is committed to enhancing its work with government, nonprofit and other public-private partners to increase stable employment and career opportunities for youth and adults facing multiple barriers in our region.

This work recognizes that all residents of our region need access to training and employment options that provide a sustaining wage. The Foundation's efforts focus on increasing education and training opportunities, hiring and retention of residents with barriers to employment, including returning citizens and opportunity youth disconnected from school and work. **The Foundation supports Senate Bill 410 to expand access to paid internships for high school students.**

Through the Foundation's grantmaking and related efforts, we have seen a critical need for hands-on, paid work experience for youth. This essential for building life skills and reengaging youth, particularly from low-income families, who need to work. As agencies review internship programs for approval, we urge additional attention be given to the quality of the work experience and support to ensure that youth are paid for meaningful assignments and work sites are supportive, otherwise the lesson is not positive. Since the pandemic and well before, we have witnessed the challenge of engaging high school students, growing absenteeism, and the need to structure interventions effective in attracting and holding their attention.

The Foundation has been a long-time supporter of efforts to provide our youth with career readiness development and paid work opportunities. This includes the Foundation's work with Capital Workforce Partners (CWP), other local nonprofits, and the City of Hartford Connecticut Department of Labor and other funding partners to provide hundreds of youth in Hartford and the Capital Region workforce development and job experiences through the [Summer Youth Employment Learning Program \(SYELP\)](#).

The program provides career readiness development for youth between the ages of 14 and 24 through six-week summer jobs in high-demand sectors at several hundred worksites. In 2023, 1,186 youth were enrolled in SYELP from 18 towns, with 847 participants in Greater Hartford and neighboring communities receiving work experiences at 192 sites. Of the youth enrolled, 57 percent were Black/African American, and 38 percent were Hispanic/Latino. At the SYELP culminating event last summer, we heard about the impact of the internships from the youth themselves and their desire for other youth to have the experience. Four thousand youth applied to participate in SYELP with only about 1 in 4 could participate with the resources available. **We recommend additional funding be provided to support these programs.**

Hartford Foundation funding supported SYELP youth in identifying and building career pathways by supporting career navigators. SYELP is designed to provide a real-world opportunity to learn what it takes to hold a job and what is expected in the workplace. Each young person receives a paycheck for the hours they work. Providing youth with an income to help themselves and their families serves as an impactful youth engagement tool. Through the statewide Connecticut Youth Employment Program, CWP and a larger workforce development network bring internships to communities throughout the North Central Connecticut region and other communities across the state.

The Hartford Foundation also provides support to the [Hartford Youth Service Corps](#) and the lead agency administering the program, Our Piece of the Pie (OPP). In collaboration with the City of Hartford as well as philanthropy and state and local community partners, OPP works to reengage youth in education and employment through integrating service-learning projects and wraparound supports, targeting youth ages 16 to 24. This is a collaborative effort that provides a wide variety of services for youth to reconnect them to education and workforce development while enabling them to earn an income. The programs provide opportunities for residents to see young people as contributors to their community.

OPP's work with the Hartford Youth Services Corps also builds on a collaborative effort with the **City of Hartford, Dalio Education, and the Hartford Foundation** to support opportunity youth, individuals 16 to 24 who are currently disengaged from school or work. In addition to OPP, funding support is provided to COMPASS Youth Collaborative and Roca, Inc. 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.
- 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.

In 2023, the Foundation made an additional commitment to invest \$4 million to support this work.

We recommend that these and other organizations, including the Center for Children's Advocacy, which have extensive experience in working with opportunity youth, inform the expanded internship

opportunities outlined in the legislation. This can help ensure new programs are effective in reaching youth who have historically not had internship opportunities.

Dalio's recent report [Connecticut's Unspoken Crisis: Getting young people back on track](#), has drawn attention to one of the greatest challenges facing Connecticut, the tens of thousands of young people across the state in danger of becoming disconnected from school and the work place. This has devastating consequences for the present and future of Connecticut. There are major concentrations of at-risk and disconnected young people in the state's eight largest cities: Bridgeport, Hartford, New Haven, Waterbury, Stamford, Danbury, Norwalk, and New Britain.

Reviewing data across a five-year period (2017–2022), the research found that these cities have particularly high rates of youth who are disconnected from school and the workplace (36 percent versus 20 percent across the rest of Connecticut). In fact, these cities constitute 40% of all at-risk and 36% of all disconnected young people in the state, starkly illustrating the acute challenges facing its urban communities. Despite improvement in graduation rates and reduced incarceration counts, from 2015–2021, the number of disconnected young people has stayed between 62,000 and 73,000 (10–12 percent of 14- to 26- year-olds).

Without adequate support, these young people struggle to secure the skills to participate in the workforce and our recovering economy. We are grateful that this legislation recognizes the need to invest in workforce development opportunities for our youth who represent the future of our workforce and our state.

This past summer, the Foundation joined Capital Workforce Partners, the City of Hartford, United Way of Central and Northeastern CT, and other public-private funders, to develop plans to increase the talent pipeline. The newly created **Hartford Youth Career Navigation System** helps young adults investigate career options and achieve sustainable employment. The Foundation awarded the final matching funds to hire a Career Navigation System Coordinator, who will help manage a network of outreach workers, mentors, teachers, and case managers. We have seen where this additional guidance is critical in building career pathways that lead to gainful employment and long-term job retention.

Through the Hartford Foundation's investments in education and workforce development initiatives, we have seen firsthand how the interplay across race, gender and where people grow up can have in compounding youth disengagement. This is a matter of racial equity and increasing engagement and opportunities for disconnected youth. There is a critical need to support youth in building basic and professional skills while providing wraparound supports they need to be successful.

Through its work in support of Hartford's Community Schools and six of 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 increased connectedness to their school, leading to increased attendance, academic engagement, and persistence to graduation. As the General Assembly has acknowledged with its recent investments in mental health services for children and youth, young people face unprecedented challenges that make it more difficult to persist and achieve in the classroom.



We know that school districts are looking to engage in career pathways work starting in middle school and continuing through high school. Some districts are interested in partnering with nonprofits to start exposing their students earlier to vocational opportunities, which could include after-school and summer programs. **Expanding access to paid internships would be a powerful tool in keeping young people engaged and connected to school and building the future workforce. Strengthening connections to school districts also can help ensure that internships can infuse some basic academic supports that many students need.**

The Foundation has experience in working with the many dedicated nonprofit organizations serving at-risk youth. We encourage the state to develop strategies that enhance and complement effective programming already in place and to provide more supports and opportunities for youth.

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.