

YOUTH & YOUNG ADULTS



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BACKGROUND

For decades, many young people in Hartford have grown up facing significant interconnected challenges, including intergenerational poverty, trauma, unstable home lives, and other adverse childhood experiences. In response to both longstanding and newer challenges, Hartford has significantly expanded city programming and services aimed at young people.

It is important to note that children and teens in Hartford receive support and services from many places — families and neighborhoods, Hartford Public Schools, the Hartford Public Library, and faith-based and community-based organizations of all sizes. The City of Hartford has long maintained a robust Early Learning Network, and has worked to maintain and support that network in numerous ways, including most recently through a coordinated campaign to encourage [enrollment in early learning centers](#), which have seen lower enrollment since the pandemic. In addition, the city has expanded its focus on literacy and language development, including through the establishment of the “Hartford Talks” initiative and the Dolly Parton Imagination Library, in partnership with Connecticut Children’s Medical Center.

During the Bronin administration, the City significantly expanded its work with older children, and in particular with disengaged and disconnected young people ages 14-24, and strengthened its partnerships with youth-serving community-based organizations. This report focuses on those more recent city-led initiatives and partnerships, which are mainly housed within one division of the Department of Families, Children, Youth, and Recreation.

SUPPORTING OPPORTUNITY YOUTH

A recent [report](#) by Dalio Education, one of Connecticut’s leading philanthropies focused on young people, highlighted the fact that in 2022 one in five young people in the state between the ages of fourteen and twenty six were either at risk or disconnected from school and work – and therefore designated as “Opportunity Youth.” That figure was above forty percent in Hartford, exacerbated further by the pandemic. Over the last eight years, the City has deepened its focus on supporting this group of young people:

HARTFORD YOUTH SERVICE CORPS: In Mayor Bronin’s first year, he raised philanthropic funding to create the Hartford Youth Service Corps (YSC), a new initiative housed at Our Piece of the Pie. The YSC gives young people ages sixteen to twenty-four, who are disconnected from school or work, the opportunity to earn a paycheck through year-round, part-time work improving their community, while at the same time connecting them to an extensive network of support, coaching and mentoring. The Youth Service Corps is by referral only, and a significant number of YSC members have been justice-involved, DCF-involved, housing insecure, or have faced multiple adverse experiences.

- The program was meant to fill a gap by serving young people who weren’t eligible for other types of programs. And as a paid program, it was conceived as a key stepping stone to full-time work and career development.
- Seven years later, the YSC has enrolled 1,975 young people, and 1,561 of those young people sustained their engagement with the program. Ninety one percent of participants demonstrated positive behavioral change and eighty nine percent completed career competency development training.

- Collectively, YSC members have earned \$6.9 million in wages.
- In terms of educational and career outcomes, 74% of YSC members who had previously dropped out of school re-enrolled in a diploma-granting program. And 71% of out-of-school youth with a diploma or GED secured unsubsidized employment.
- In 2023, YSC was awarded the inaugural Innovative Program Award by the National Youth Employment Coalition.
- **Funding:** The City recently secured \$2.2 million from a group of philanthropies and businesses led by Dalio Philanthropies, which will allow the program to expand and serve 500 young people over the next year. Overall, YSC has received funding from a range of philanthropies and businesses in addition to Dalio Philanthropies, including the Hartford Foundation for Public Giving, The Hartford, Travelers, Aetna, and grant support from the U.S. Department of Justice, U.S. Department of Labor, and the City of Hartford.



\$10 MILLION FOR OPPORTUNITY YOUTH: In 2021 the City secured more than \$10 million in philanthropic funding from Dalio Education and the Hartford Foundation for Public Giving to expand support for initiatives serving opportunity youth, including:

- A significant expansion for COMPASS Peacebuilders, a community violence intervention organization, allowing them to hire more violence interrupters.
- A new initiative by ROCA, a national youth-serving organization that brought a program focused on engaging young women and young mothers to Hartford. ROCA specifically works with young women who have a history of trauma, justice-involvement, and exposure to violence. Its work in Hartford involves providing trauma-informed wraparound services, crisis response, parenting education, connection to employment, and assistance navigating services across multiple systems.
- In the first two years of ROCA's engagement in Hartford, it made thousands of attempts to engage the highest-risk young women, and served 100 young women — including 77 mothers — for at least 18 months. None of the women served were (re)incarcerated, despite the fact that 69% of them had prior arrests. Nearly all of them demonstrated improved behavioral health.
- Additional funding for the YSC, allowing it to serve an additional 100 young people.



HARTFORD OPPORTUNITY YOUTH COLLABORATIVE

(HOYC): The HOYC was created a decade ago to bring together City government, the school system, service providers, and philanthropies to build career pipelines and set young people on the path to successful adulthood. In recent years, the HOYC began to focus on the crisis of absenteeism within the Hartford Public Schools, as well as on breaking down barriers to data sharing among youth providers. At the most recent meeting of the HOYC, the group discussed the need to refocus and refine its mission, and to determine whether the group should service as a) merely a forum to share information, best-practices, and trends; b) a coordinating body to ensure that gaps in youth service needs are filled, and to avoid unnecessary duplication; or c) to continue to pursue a more robust role of coordinating services for individual young people who are disengaged and disconnected, on the model of the Coordinated Access Network.

- **Data Sharing:** Data sharing between service providers, state government, and school systems has long been challenging in Hartford and across the country due to well-intentioned privacy laws. That lack of data sharing prevents those stakeholders from working together in a seamless way to identify and support the needs of young people.

YOUTH SAFETY AND JUSTICE INITIATIVES

Young people who have been involved in the criminal justice system, or who have been victims of violence, need high-touch, specialized support. Only coordinated, compassionate care can prevent them from becoming involved in cycles of violence that have ramifications for their own lives, their families, and the city as a whole.

The prior section covers some of the City's support for organizations like COMPASS and ROCA, which both have a role to play supporting justice-involved young people. There are several other initiatives to be aware of:

RAPID RESPONSE PROTOCOL: In 2018, Hartford's Chief Operating Officer began developing a coordinated crisis response plan for victims of gun violence who were under 25 years old. That plan brought together law enforcement, social services, state officials, and the school system, as appropriate, to identify the young person's immediate needs and to try and address systemic challenges that might affect their life going forward. That turned into the City's Rapid Response Protocol, which is led by the Department of Families, Youth, Children, and Recreation's Youth Services Bureau (YSB), with support from the Office of Community Safety and Wellness.

- The program came about after repeated instances where one agency or community group would know about a young person in crisis, and at risk of being a victim or perpetrator of violence — but either did not or could not marshal broader resources to intervene.
- Since being formalized, the program has responded to 237 incidents of violence involving a young person, and has begun following the 5-5-5 model: meeting the family within 5 hours of the incident bedside at the hospital, offering a home visit within 5 days of first contact, and following up within 5 weeks to ensure outstanding needs are being met. Those needs could include trauma-informed counseling and support, housing assistance, transportation, basic needs, or whatever else a family might need. Recently, these response efforts have been further refined to provide a more individualized response to youth victims of violence and their families, which may mean coordinating services and meeting with families sooner and more frequently than the 5-5-5-model.
- **Funding:** The operation of the Protocol is funded through staff salaries, largely through the General Fund.

OPP'S BEHIND THE WALL NAVIGATOR PROGRAM: The City uses its General Fund to support Our Piece of the Pie's Behind the Walls Navigator Program, which works with returning citizens between the ages of 18-25 who are nearing their release dates, trying to ensure they receive pre-release services that smooth their transition. The program operates at York, Manson, and Osborn Correctional Institutions and the Hartford Correctional Center. Pre-release services include everything from assistance accessing benefits to intensive supports for mental health and substance abuse.

CARE COORDINATION FOR JUSTICE-INVOLVED

YOUTH: The City formed a partnership with the State of Connecticut's Court Support Services Division (CSSD) to help prevent justice-involved young people from recidivating — and to connect them to services that will help them succeed. This program is specifically focused on justice-involved youth with a history of illegal firearm charges. Through the partnership, CSSD refers specific young people under probation to the City's Department of Families, Children, Youth, and Recreation, which then develops an individualized care coordination plan, working with the school system and community-based organizations like the Center for Children's Advocacy, Our Piece of the Pie, and others. This partnership is the first of its kind in Connecticut. This program is currently underway and outcome data is not yet available.

- **Funding:** The City won a \$1.4 million grant from the U.S. Department of Justice's Office of Juvenile Justice Delinquency Prevention for this initiative, which it paired with \$500,000 in General Funds.

EXPANDING RECREATIONAL PROGRAMMING

Hartford has worked to expand access to low-and-no cost recreational programming for children throughout the city, both through the Department of Families, Children, Youth, and Recreation, and in partnership with local organizations. Those initiatives include:

EXPANDING YOUTH SPORTS: In 2021, the City began partnering with Active City's Hartford Youth Sports Collaborative to fund free, citywide youth sports programs for Hartford children ages 5 to 14. In its first two years, approximately 6,000 children played baseball, basketball, football, soccer, and track and field thanks to a group of youth-serving organizations who came together under the Hartford Youth Sports Collaborative banner. The partnership included activating Hartford Public Schools facilities, in addition to City-run spaces. This free sports programming has continued since then.

- **Funding:** In 2021, Hartford committed \$900,000 to this program using American Rescue Plan funding for a three-year period, through 2024.

INCREASING HOURS AT CITY RECREATION FACILITIES: The City of Hartford's FY24 budget funds an expansion of hours at City recreation facilities, allowing for the doubling of general recreation hours at the Parker and Arroyo Recreational Centers, tripling hours at Metzner Recreation Center, and expanded weekend and aquatic

hours at applicable recreational sites as well. This expansion diversifies and builds on sports and recreation programming the City has provided for many years.

- **Funding:** This expansion was funded through the regular budget process, as part of the General Fund allocation to the Department of Families, Children, Youth, and Recreation.

ASSESSMENT OF RECREATIONAL PROGRAMMING: In early 2023, the City received an independent assessment of its recreational offerings to identify areas for improvement and to conduct peer benchmarking. The assessment found that Hartford compares favorably in terms of the breadth of services offered compared to larger municipalities in Connecticut and cities across the country. It also identified several areas for improvement, including adding full-time staff to the City's recreation division, expanding utilization of the MyREC scheduling software, and adding specific "pay to participate" programs (given that current programming is free).

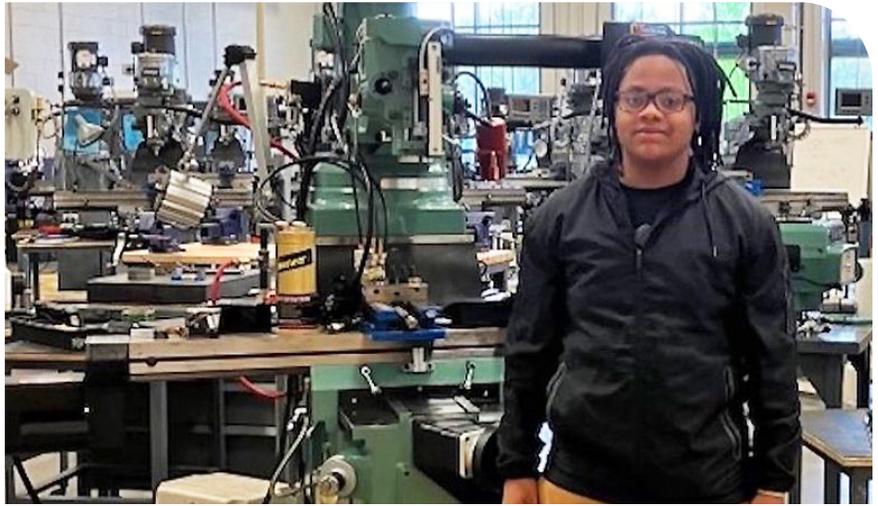
INVESTING IN COMMUNITY-BASED ORGANIZATIONS

HARTFORD UNITY GRANTS: The City of Hartford allocated approximately \$5 million from the American Rescue Plan to launch the Hartford UNITY initiative, aimed at helping heal, recover, and reconnect young people in the wake of the pandemic by expanding youth recreation, employment, enrichment, and other support services. Currently in its third year, the program has mostly provided grants of up to \$50,000 to youth-serving organizations of all sizes to help them expand their services. Nearly 30,000 young people under the age of 25 have benefited.

- **Technical Assistance:** Many youth-serving organizations in Hartford have limited staff, and so as part of the Unity Grants program, the Department of Children, Families,

Youth, Recreation offered these organizations free training on how to run effective programs.

- **Funding:** To date, \$4.9 million has been awarded to dozens of community-based organizations per year, each year. FY24, to allow the Boys & Girls Clubs of Hartford to serve more young people. This funding was intended, in part, to support the reopening of the Northwest Boys and Girls Club, which was built in 1964 as part of the Bowles Park (now Willow Creek) housing development. Nearly a third of Hartford's youth population lives in the neighborhood, and this funding will allow the Club to reopen and serve more than 1,000 young people every year.



SUPPORTING THE BOYS & GIRLS CLUBS: The Boys & Girls Clubs of Hartford (BGCH) are one of the largest youth service providers in the City, serving approximately 8,000 young people every year. The City has helped the BGCH expand in Hartford and strengthen their operations in a number of significant ways:

- **New South End Boys & Girls Club:** In 2018, the City began working with the BGCH to identify a site and raise funds for a new facility in the South End – an area of Hartford that they had identified as a priority to serve. The City gifted BGCH 3.3 acres of City-owned land at the site of the old Burr school on Ledyard Street. The City also helped BGCH raise more than \$20 million for the construction of the facility. It now serves more than 1,500 young people.
- **Operational Funding to Enable Reopening of the Northwest Boys & Girls Club:** The City dedicated \$1.5 million in funding over three years, through FY24, to allow the Boys & Girls Clubs of Hartford to serve more young people. This funding was intended, in part, to support the reopening of the Northwest Boys and Girls Club, which was built in 1964 as part of the Bowles Park (now Willow Creek) housing development. Nearly a third of Hartford’s youth population lives in the neighborhood, and this funding will allow the Club to reopen and serve more than 1,000 young people every year.

HARTFORD PROMISE: In 2015, the Hartford Promise program was established to remove financial barriers to college for Hartford students, and has since helped more than 1,000 Hartford students attend and succeed in college.

While Hartford Promise has been funded almost entirely with philanthropic funds, in 2021, the city committed \$1 million general fund dollars to encourage additional private commitments and promote the financial sustainability of the program.

- **Promise Fellows Program:** Mayor Bronin also created the Hartford Promise Fellows program, which for the last two years has provided paid summer internship opportunities for Promise Scholars in the Mayor’s office, working closely with his staff. The goal is to expose young people to their local government and encourage them to pursue careers in public service.

PROMISE NEIGHBORHOODS GRANT – NORTH

HARTFORD ASCEND PIPELINE: In 2021, the City partnered with Connecticut Children’s Medical Center to apply for and win the Department of Education’s Promise Neighborhoods Grant, one of the largest federal grant programs aimed at supporting children. Building on the Promise Zone designation the City earned in 2015, the grant is aimed at implementing strategies that help children progress through every stage of life, from cradle to career — and improve developmental outcomes for children living in distressed communities. Connecticut Children’s led the application process and is now administering the program, which is called the North Hartford Ascend Pipeline.

- **Funding:** \$30 million over five years, with \$34 million in in-kind support from a wide range of community organizations and government agencies. The City’s Department of Families, Children, Youth, and Recreation is providing about \$25 million of that in-kind support with initiatives in several categories, including funding technical assistance from the William Julius Wilson Institute of the Harlem Children’s Zone, advancing the potential rehabilitation of the former Simpson-Waverly School, and more.
- **Current Status:** The Department of Education designated the first 18-24 months for planning, including building trust and advancing community engagement. That work has been ongoing and included standing up a series of working groups for Community and Family Engagement, Data and Evaluation, Family Navigation System Building, and Partner Engagement.
- **Next Steps:** In 2024, the implementation team led by Connecticut Children’s plans to begin building the pipeline that connects families to helpful resources in a coordinated way. That will also involve collecting data to measure the impact of these connections on families and children.



RECOMMENDATIONS

This report has summarized several new City initiatives in key areas of focus for youth and young adults. The City also has several longtime, successful programs aimed at supporting young children in particular.

As we get further from the pandemic, the need to focus on young people of all ages will not recede. It should continue to be a top City priority. There are a number of specific challenges on the horizon:

- **SUPPORTING MIDDLE SCHOOL-AGED YOUTH:** Over the last two years, the Surgeon General's advisories on youth mental health and on social media have put in stark relief how much support young people – and middle schoolers in particular – need. The City, the school system, and their many partners will have to increase our collective focus on this issue, particularly on vulnerable groups like homeless youth and LGBTQ+ youth.
- **STAFF RECRUITMENT, RETENTION, AND TRAINING:** There are well-recognized staffing shortages in lifeguards and recreation staff in cities across the country. Those shortages exist in Hartford, but there are also shortages in specialized positions that serve justice-involved youth. The City has established a partnership with COMPASS Peacebuilders to mentor Hartford youth who were formerly justice involved. The City will need to work in partnership with COMPASS to address staffing shortages in this critical program.
- **FURTHER STRENGTHEN CITYWIDE RECREATIONAL PROGRAMMING:** The City's partnership with the Hartford Youth Sports Collaborative was a big step forward in expanding access to free recreation for children, and the recent expansion of funding and hours at recreation centers will also make more recreation options available to young people. Those initiatives are part of the Department of Families, Children, Youth, and Recreation's ongoing commitment to expand recreation options. However, there remains a need for continued expansion of options and access, particularly in the arts.

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RECOMMENDATIONS CONT.

- **CONTINUE EFFORTS TO IMPROVE DATA SHARING:** As referenced earlier, improving data-sharing between youth-serving organizations, whether they're public, private, or non-profit entities, continues to be a barrier to identifying young people in need of additional support. The incoming administration should continue working to make progress on this issue, including by advocating for appropriate changes in state law governing the sharing of student information by school districts.

- **PRIORITIZE THE MOST SUCCESSFUL PROGRAMS AS ARPA FUNDING ENDS:** As ARPA funding comes to an end, the incoming administration will have to grapple with how to fill funding gaps in youth-serving programs. It will not be possible, with existing resources, to sustain all of the interventions and efforts established in recent years, and it will be important to allocate the more limited resources on the basis of demonstrated program effectiveness and urgency of need.

- **REVIEW AND REFINE THE HOYC MISSION AND OPERATING MODEL:** The Hartford Opportunity Youth Collaborative provides an opportunity to coordinate among the many organizations serving disengaged and disconnected young people in Hartford. Following the disruptions of the pandemic, it is important to review and clarify the mission of the HOYC, as outlined in the report above. To the extent that a decision is made to continue to pursue a more robust role of coordinating services for individual young people who are disengaged and disconnected, on the model of the Coordinated Access Network, it will be necessary a) to solve the problem of data sharing and b) to identify additional resources for staff support.