

March 26, 2024

Dear Members of the CCM 119K Commission,

Thank you for your work to address the crisis of disconnected youth in our state. As a social worker and nonprofit leader who has worked in Fairfield County for nearly 30 years on issues impacting youth, I also urge you to move beyond the development of data systems and raising awareness of the problem through annual reports that spotlight challenges.

For communities impacted by the challenges highlighted in the recent report, and the systems working to address these issues, it is anything but an unspoken crisis. In Norwalk, it is very much spoken about and in fact the very issue we have been raising red flags about for several years. We have been talking to elected officials, lawmakers, community partners, philanthropy, the business sector, education systems, and youth who are themselves among the disconnected population, to share the dire reality that in Norwalk, 28% of our youth, amounting to 1,114 individuals are currently disconnected. Amongst this group, a particularly alarming trend is the presence of 242 newly disconnected youth. As we have been publicizing, an average of 29% of the last five graduating classes from Norwalk Public Schools (2018-2022), representing approximately 220 graduates each year, have not enrolled in 2 or 4-year degree colleges or universities. This statistic sheds light on a significant portion of our youth who face barriers to accessing higher education opportunities and job training opportunities that connect them to livable wage career pathways. What's particularly alarming is that 80% of these non-enrolled students are individuals of color. In large part due to a persistent request from Norwalk ACTS, the State Department of Education recently built and released new postsecondary labor and earnings data dashboards. Earlier this month, DOE Chief Performance Officer, Ajit Gopalakrishnan, came to Norwalk to share the results with the community. At the end of the presentation, he shared his thoughts on having the data and evidence we need to go and do the work, suggesting that at some point we need to stop collecting data that tells us what we know and get down to work.

We were happy to see one of the recommendations in the Unspoken Crisis report was to establish cross-sector coalitions and partnerships using a collective impact framework. That is exactly what we are doing in Norwalk and in many other cities around our great state including Bridgeport, Danbury, Stamford, and Waterbury. But our systems change partnerships and nonprofit organizations are perpetually overburdened and under resourced. I would argue that another crisis is the mounting stress and strain on these systems that have been carrying the burden of these kinds of issues for far too long with far too few resources.

In Norwalk, the engagement of cross-sector partners that has been developed over the past two years lays the groundwork for a collaborative plan that will begin to shift the systems necessary to put people young people on a path to economic mobility. The plan is informed by the past two years of workforce development conversations, local data analysis, research on other best practice models across the country, and the helpful data coming out of our local work as well as reports such as *Getting Young People Back on Track*. But collaborative plans require resources to move from plans to implementation. It is time for public and private sources of revenue to come together to work alongside partners supporting disconnected youth in communities to address these challenges collaboratively.

I urge this group to think about how we can use the same collective impact approach to leverage resources and support the work necessary to bring Connecticut's disconnected youth number to zero.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in blue ink that reads "Jennifer D. Barahona". The signature is fluid and cursive, with a long, sweeping underline that extends to the left.

Jennifer Barahona, LCSW
Chief Executive Officer
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