

CT Conference of Municipalities
119K Commission
April 30, 2024 Public Hearing
Mansfield, CT

Testimony regarding Disconnected Youth

Submitted by: Kristin Hempel, Director of Adult and Community Programs at EASTCONN

My name is Kristin Hempel. I am the Director of Adult and Community Programs at EASTCONN, am on the Board of Directors for CAACE, the Connecticut Association for Adult and Continuing Education, and am a member of the Opportunity Youth Advocacy Committee with Campaign for a Working CT.

I am here before you today to express my strong support of H.B. 5213 and to draw attention to the needs in our rural communities, particularly the northeast corner.

We often talk about northeastern Connecticut as the Quiet Corner – a region known for its rugged terrain, independent spirit, Victorian homes, spacious farms and beautiful country skies that offer unfiltered views of the constellations.

For young people, however, our part of the state is quickly becoming the Forgotten Corner. It's happening before our eyes, on our watch. We can't afford to stay quiet any longer. We have an obligation to act, and to act immediately.

If you grow up here, you are more likely to become disconnected from "para-social" institutions – school, work, job training, the military – than are young people from most other places in Connecticut. The hole of despair here can be quite deep, and bootstrap-pulling won't help.

According to the recently published Dalio Education report, between 20-30% of young people (aged 14-26) in Stafford, Lebanon, Pomfret, Brooklyn, Canterbury, Scotland, Chaplin, Sprague, Griswold and Voluntown are considered to be "disconnected."

That percentage jumps to 30-40% in Plainfield, Killingly, Sterling, Putnam, Thompson, Hampton and Ashford. In Windham, our largest community (containing the borough of Willimantic), more than 40% of youth experience disconnection.

Evan grew up in Killingly. While his life was far from easy and he struggled in school, Evan's kind nature and commitment to those around him, kept him volunteering with developmentally disabled young adults even after he had satisfied the court required hours. Determined to get his life on the right track, he started adult education and got a job, but a serious fall injury and continued personal setbacks, slowed his progress toward his goal. Slowed, but did not stop it. No, with the support of Opportunity Youth programming, he kept chipping away at it, eventually earning his GED and starting his own business where he now employs others still volunteering to help others who need a hand or a different path.

Hannet, 19, moved from Maryland to Killingly when she was 10. As her mother navigated through a troubled marriage, her family fell into temporary homelessness. Eventually, the family could afford a home in Plainfield, where Hannet and her three siblings felt a sense of stability and comfort.

Belonging to a tight-knit family with a single parent, however, has required Hannet to take on responsibilities beyond her years, caring for her younger siblings and supporting her mother in any way she can. Hannet recognizes the sacrifices her mom has made and wants to honor her by succeeding in school and pursuing her dreams.

There's a term for young folks like Dan and Hannet – Opportunity Youth – and there are programs to serve them. We at EASTCONN, one of the six Regional Educational Service Centers (RESCs) statewide – know this population well. Through our partnership with The Eastern CT Workforce Investment Board's youth workforce pipeline programs and Youth Employment Program, delivered in collaboration with high schools and youth service providers, our programs enable at-risk and disconnected youth to explore career pathways, develop the job readiness skills employers covet, and gain the work experience that has been shown to increase lifelong earnings.

Our programs make a long-term difference in the lives of the youth and the communities around them. Last year, 93% of Opportunity Youth who participated in our regional employment and training program achieved an attendance record of 80% or better, while 95% returned to school or found jobs.

Still, we need a commitment from our lawmakers in Hartford to do whatever it takes – right now – while we still can.

We've been quiet far too long. Let's do something about this – for Evan, Hannet and thousands of other young people – and let's start right now. They need us.

Kristin Hempel
Director of Adult and Community Programs
EASTCONN

376 Hartford Tpk, Hampton, CT 06247

o: (860) 455-1562

Khempel@eastconn.org