

Good evening and thank you for the opportunity to speak this evening. I appreciate your efforts on this critical work. I am Kathleen Callahan, a resident of Stratford and the Director of Policy and Civic Engagement for the CT Cradle to Career Coalition.

Our collaborative, data-driven approach is rooted in collective impact, believing no single organization alone can create large-scale, lasting social change on its own. As we advance equitable outcomes for all of Connecticut's youth from cradle to career, we believe our children are our most vital investment.

Students are not individually, by themselves, at-risk or disconnected. Environmental factors, systems, and structures impact a wide range of health, networking and access to social and economic opportunities, and quality-of-life outcomes and risks along the path to emerging adulthood. The youth disconnection and disengagement that has attracted attention again recently, and gratefully, are symptoms of disconnected systems and underscores the importance of understanding an individual and their individual behavior by considering the multiple environmental contexts in which that person lives, learns, and acts.

Dalio Education's recently commissioned report, [*Connecticut's Unspoken Crisis: Getting Young People Back on Track*](#), captures this immediately in the Executive Summary: *Across our state, "factors such as poverty, racism, and trauma increase the likelihood that [these] young people will become disconnected from educational and employment systems as well as other major institutions."*

Cumulative adversity, particularly when endured during critical developmental stages, can significantly impede biopsychosocial functioning, and contributes to some of the most severe and enduring health issues in our country. Research links Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACEs) with nine out of the ten leading causes of death, chronic health conditions, and risky behaviors like substance misuse. This also encompasses various forms of environmental adversity, including racism, community violence, and food and housing insecurity. [*In Connecticut alone, the annual cost of ACEs is \\$174 billion*](#) due to direct medical spending, lost productivity, and impact to other systems such as child welfare and criminal justice.

Youth involved in the child welfare and juvenile justice systems are disproportionately members of racially and/or ethnically marginalized groups who live at or below the poverty line and have not had positive experiences or outcomes within traditional school settings. There are overlapping risk and protective factors and often these children and youth face involvement in both systems, with additional trauma inflicted by the systems.

Trauma, compromised family and social networks, neglect and abuse, lack of or access to community resources – all ACEs – are top risk factors. And protective factors? Partnerships and mentoring with adults, paid opportunities for internships and skills training, alternative high schools, early identification for educational interventions, and positioning both the youth and most impacted community as expert voices at the decision-making table, collaborative leaders... these are all part of the collective solution.

As a social worker, I have been involved with trauma-informed system and organizational change and sustainability. In the fall of 2019, I co-founded the Connecticut State Taskforce on ACEs and Resilience, CSTAR, a statewide vehicle to bring awareness about childhood adversity and expanding it from the individual view – within the household – to include community and environmental impact of adversity and therefore, expanding potential solutions.

While trauma-informed care directs us to shift from asking "*What is wrong with you?*" to "*What has happened to you?*" we know now we must go further to determine "[*What have we \(systems, political institutions, and organizations\) done to you?*](#)" Empowering youth as agents in the creation of their own well-being, the healing centered approach from the work of Dr. Shawn Ginwright asks, "*What is right with you?*"

[*Open Road: The Promise and Challenge of America's **Forgotten** Youth*](#) was published twelve years ago. Forgotten. The report uses this word from the title only twice more. Understandably, I suppose, because the report was a roadmap to opportunity for the youth and our country. Realization of these opportunities demands prioritizing appropriate funding.

It is past time for us to remember our responsibility to all our children. As we continue through multiple interconnected crises – the pandemic, systemic racism, climate change, wars and conflict, opioid overdoses, youth suicidality, punishing economic inequality, and a toxic, partisan, political divide that breeds distrust, hatred, and isolation – we cannot forget that this has been the only experience for our youngest residents.

Continuing up to this moment, tonight, these events are profoundly transforming the lives of American adults.

So how do we think the children – those youths disengaged and at risk of, or already, disconnecting – fare in the face of these rapid changes?

The Connecticut Cradle to Career Coalition represents five of the seven most populous cities in the state with close to [80,000 students enrolled in their public school districts](#) – 15 percent of the total state student enrollment.

Within our place-based community we collaborate on early childhood development, social emotional health, social justice, racial equity, parent and caregiver education, early literacy, health equity, school transitions, college and workforce readiness, afterschool programming, and more. Coalition members have well established relationships with the youth in their communities and have active leadership and advocacy programming with youth civic influencer training plans underway.