



**Testimony Presented Before the Appropriations Committee
Submitted By:**

Candace Wright, Program Director, Solar Youth, Inc.

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Good evening, Senator, Representative Walker and members of the Appropriations Committee. My name is Candace Wright and I am the Program Director for Solar Youth, Inc. located in New Haven, CT.

Now in its 21st year of operation, Solar Youth provides opportunities and supports for the youth of New Haven that live in some of our city's most challenging neighborhoods. Currently, we serve over 150 youth per year through the cycle of programing we offer for youth starting at age 5 through 18+.

I have been part of the Solar Youth team for the past 12 years. I truly believe that Solar Youth has developed a fantastic model to help support youth on their journey of life long success.

A major part of my interest and commitment to supporting youth and families in New Haven has to with my own upbringing. I grew up in a neighborhood where Solar Youth provides programs and have witnessed how Solar Youth positively impacts the community. Now as a parent of two, I have an even deeper respect and appreciation for the work of the organization.

I have seen so many children start the program at a young age, "graduate" to the next level, eventually become a SY intern in high school and then go on to achieve success. For some success is graduating from H.S. and getting a local job. For others it's enrolling in college or the military on their journey to independence and adulthood. The important thing is that Solar Youth helps at-risk youth grow in so many important ways so that they are set up for success in life.

Solar Youth helps youth develop the skills needed to be a confident problem solver in their community, the perspective to appreciate and view New Haven for its potential, and the motivation to learn fundamental skills of life in such creative and different ways. Through Solar Youth, youth are exposed to new opportunities and learning experiences that help them see their own potential and possibilities.

Solar Youth's curriculum teaches environmental education, provides adventures that allow youth to experience the beauty of nature and gives them meaningful experiences they otherwise would never receive. But Solar Youth is more than

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that. It lays the foundation for our youth to be able to have positive relationships, be physically and mentally healthy, and become economically self-sufficient. We achieve this by using the environment, mindfulness practices, and non-violent communication as teaching tools.

Solar Youth has an ambitious vision of not only building on our current core programs, but also expanding opportunities for teens and building a layer of support for youth to (1) help them address crisis; (2) ensure graduation from high school; and (3) graduate with a concrete plan for college and/or career. In order for us to expand and maximize the amount of youth we are able to serve we need the financial support. This can only happen with continued and additional funding.

Attached is information about Solar Youth and Youth testimony.

I respectfully urge the Appropriations Committee to pass a budget that funds youth development programs that support our most at-risk youth in the state.

Sincerely,

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FOR INFORMATION CALL

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Testimony to CT State Appropriations Solar Youth, Inc.

February 24, 2021

Please support continued funding for Solar Youth!

Solar Youth's mission is to **empower young people** to **achieve lifelong success** through connection to the environment, their communities and each other.

Nearly 400 New Haven youth fail to graduate high school each year. Each one will cost society over \$1 million in lost productivity and social burden over a lifetime.¹ This translates to hundreds of millions of dollars in long-term economic burden added to our community each year. Additionally, each child that encounters the adverse experiences associated with poverty is at risk for developmental problems that impact them for the rest of their lives.

Over the past twenty years, Solar Youth has built a track record as one of New Haven's most promising solutions for empowering low-income youth. Working in two of New Haven's hardest-hit neighborhoods—Westville Manor and Eastview Terrace—Solar Youth delivers long-term mentoring, education and support services to children starting at age 5 and continuing through high school.

While we are pleased with our impact, **we know we must do more to break the cycle of poverty for youth and we need your help.** In addition to building on our current core programs, we seek to expand opportunities for teens as well as build a new system of support for youth to (1) help them address crisis; (2) ensure graduation from high school; and (3) graduate with a concrete plan for college and/or career.

"Solar Youth [is] constantly finding ways to stay connected with their youth. I have taken all of the lessons that I've learned in SY and applied them to my everyday life."

¹ Clive R. Belfield, "The Economic Value of Opportunity Youth" January 2012

In programs customized for different age cohorts, Solar Youth creates opportunity for inner-city youth to explore the natural world in their neighborhoods and beyond. In the process, they learn core concepts of **stewardship, leadership, nonviolent communication and mindfulness**. Programs are at no cost to families, and take place during and after school, on weekends and holidays, and throughout the summer.

We are confident that this expansion of services and supports will be seen nationally as a model of how to empower our nation's most at-risk youth to confront the challenges of poverty and achieve lifelong success.

"Because of Solar Youth, I know more about the environment, I can solve problems, and I know how to be a better friend."

What does this look like in numbers?

By 2025,

- We double the number of youth we serve (from 150 to 300) – with greatest increase in TEENS.
- We increase the number of programs and opportunities for support for youth, ensuring on-going, long-term connection.
- Our budget increases from \$750,000 in 2020 to \$1.5million.

What does this look like for youth and families?

By 2025,

- Over 100 Solar Youth stewards will graduate from high school with a plan for the future.
- All will be armed with skills in **leadership, problem-solving, nonviolent communication and mindfulness** that they carry through the rest of their lives.

Our vision is BOLD and AMBITIOUS! It is based on 21 years of BUILDING SKILLS for success, AND also what we NEED TO DO MORE OF to truly break the cycle of poverty. **In addition to the environmental exploration we are most known for, Solar Youth builds the skills for youth to enjoy a life of economic self-sufficiency, healthy relationships, and commitment to problem-solving in their communities.**

This growth can only happen if friends of Solar Youth like you continue to invest in our work.

Please continue to support Solar Youth's out-of-school programming via Judicial Branch Youth Prevention funding!

