

**Testimony for March 3<sup>rd</sup> 2021 10AM Appropriations Committee Hearing**  
Justin Carbonella, President of the Connecticut Youth Services Association  
YSB Director for the City of Middletown

I am privileged to be speaking in front of you as the President of the Connecticut Youth Services Association, a volunteer organization serving the network of Youth Service Bureaus here in the state. While we focus generally on capacity building and advocacy, our most recent efforts include a multi-year anti-racism effort intended to examine the many facets of our work and beginning to revamp our data and evaluation system through an applied data lens.

But beyond that, we know the crucial role that YSBs have played in both the previous 12 months of an ongoing public health crisis ranging from assisting folks with basic needs and coordinating resources, to maintaining diversion services and youth development programs. But I also want to look forward and recognize the additionally important role of reinstalling community once we've cleared this initial challenge and look to return to "normal". We know there is a ton of work in front of us to reengage youth who have been lost in remote learning, to help address the multitude of traumas youth and families have experienced, and helping youth reacquaint themselves to being around so many people all at once (particularly as many note struggling with anxiety). YSBs are here for this work and prepared for the ramifications all of the above may have on youth behavior and to support them in holistic, community driven-ways that we hope prepare for immediate and long term success. We believe we can help be the different in the pandemic either being a short term pain point or a long lasting generational crisis with multiple ripples.

I'll also point out that our work isn't just in supporting youth as they struggle. In fact, what I love most about being a YSB director, is that we move from macro to micro, from systems coordination to direct service; and that service also extends out toward cultivating youth leadership in new and unique ways. In Middletown where I serve as the YSB Director, we believe in critically conscious youth development, where we seek to enable students to be agents of real community change as both system thinkers and system changers. We focus on giving youth meaningful roles and resources to examine issues that they face in school and in the community. We've focused on ensuring they have seats at community tables but also a table of their own to ensure that their priorities can be focused on.

But to do this work we need resources. As I've mentioned in previous hearings, I welcome the expanded role of YSBs and Diversion at it relates to over a decade of youth justice reform. But these youth and our members deserve the same investment of infrastructure that was present to do this work prior to the changes. For example, as truancy shifted from a court issue to a community issue, no funding shifted from state agencies to our members. That's no money for additional staff to expand caseloads, but beyond that, that's no programming dollars, slots for services that state partners had through contracts, and infrastructure around training to work with a vulnerable and complex new population. Even the state's Juvenile Review Boards is a partially funded model as around 50% of them receive any state support, with many of them getting less than \$20,000. This presents many YSBs with the challenge of having to find funding for diversion at the expense of youth development.

Part of the vision of keeping youth "in community" is also keeping them "in relationship" over time. Today you'll hear about once such example in Middletown from one of our students who started with us in diversion but has continued to be involved through a myriad of skill development and leadership

programs. It's an example of the promise and opportunity of diversion and more so the promise and opportunity of our youth...when we invest in them.