

Testimony for March 3rd 2021 10AM Appropriations Committee Hearing

Sonya Hadley, Student

Dear Chairwoman Walker, Chairwoman Osten, and members of the committee,

My name is Sonya Hadley. I am a resident of Middletown, CT and want to share my experience with why Youth Service Bureaus are vital to our communities. I grew up in Middletown and have worked closely with our local YSB since my first year of high school. Now I'm a second year in college and know more clearly than ever how important YSBs are to helping our communities thrive.

YSBs have the important role of both proactively building and cultivating youth voice and development and also providing care and support for young people during times of struggle. I've had the opportunity to work on both sides of this continuum and have seen the positive and life changing results both can have.

Personally, growing up, Middletown's YSB has changed the course of my life, cultivated my leadership skills, and given me experiences that have helped me as I begin to transition into adulthood. Through programs like our Mayoral Youth Cabinet, I have been able to work on issues that are important to me -- including racial justice, restorative justice, youth advocacy, and school reform. I have been able to participate in and lead trainings, speak at conferences, meet with local officials, and amplify the voice of young people in many spaces where, despite the issues at hand directly affecting young people, youth voices were otherwise absent.

I was first trained in restorative justice when I was a freshman in high school and have been involved closely ever since. Now I have come back to work with our YSB to expand restorative justice in our community. Restorative justice is vital. It is not only a better and much more effective way to respond to harm but also helps to strengthen and build relationships in our community that truly allow people, and especially our young people, to be seen and heard. I wish RJ processes had been available to the loved ones I saw go through the harms of the system.

As someone who has been heavily involved in community work since I was in middle school and who has now worked extensively with organizations both here and across the country, I know how important the YSB has been to my growth and understanding of myself as a young person, my community, and the world. The YSB supported my development, taught me the importance of community work, and gave me opportunities that continue to shape my life today.

We need to invest in positive development, and give young people the space, the trust, and the platform to flourish and thrive. We need to start listening and seeing our young people who are in struggle and addressing their needs at the root instead of investing in punishment systems that we know do not work. Youth Service Bureau's are the site where all of these things can and are becoming true. YSBs deserve robust funding to be able to meet the expansiveness of the work that they are called to do. Young people can be and are strong advocates, but we need support in our development to get to that point. When our young people and families are thriving, our entire communities can thrive.