

Good evening Sen. Abraham, Rep Rosario, and members of the Appropriations Committee. It is my honor to speak on behalf of the state's Youth Services Bureaus, both as the President of the Connecticut Youth Services Association and as the director of the Middletown Youth Services Bureau.

The Middletown community and our YSB has welcomed the state's juvenile justice reforms over the last several years. Changes to raise the age of juvenile offenders from 15 to 17 and to direct young people in crisis away from the court system and towards YSBs serve our state's best economic and youth centered interests. We deeply believe that we should be doing everything we can to bring young people closer to us, especially as they begin to struggle. To that end we focus our efforts to be restorative, defining justice as being when the youth's, the victim's, and the community's needs are all met and by providing a process that is centered around developing and maintaining relationships for the long haul.

With that said, through the adjustments we've made in staffing and budgets, we've seen our "diversion" caseload (which includes our JRB) move from 27 in 2016/17 to nearly 100 in this past year. This increase is tied directly to the philosophy of the community based diversion system plan (passed into law last session) and developing creative ways to engage families and youth earlier on.

But this progress has come at a cost both to our department and our community. To build the capacity for our caseload to quadruple we needed to make sacrifices internally. In Middletown, that meant defunding our youth worker and its associated programming. One of the biggest loses this has created is our work around the 40 Developmental Assets, a community-wide prevention framework that has changed lives in Middletown. Notably in the 10 years we've been focused on this work, we've seen

- *12 month drug* use decreased by 81%;
- *30 day alcohol* use decreased by 43%;
- *12 month antisocial behavior* decreased by 33%, and
- *Violent behavior across 12 months* decreased by 32%.

With less attention put on community-wide efforts and coordination, we run the risk of losing our progress at preventing risky behaviors. It has also meant that innovative programs like our Youth in Government program that appoints youth to local boards and commissions and our Mayoral Youth Cabinet have either shuttered or been significantly scaled down. In total 10 or more youth development or tertiary prevention programs have been shuttered. This not only hurts our young people as a whole, but also creates struggles in staying engaged with youth in our diversion system when we don't have internal offerings to refer them to; hurting our model of transferring from diversion to youth development.

The reality is this, over the last 10 years our state funding in Middletown through the State Department of Education has been cut 20% and sits at around \$25,000. Beyond that, critical JRB funding was eliminated and not included in the Governor's budget, and the reforms to remove status offenses from courts was also done so without funding, leaving us no programmatic or infrastructure resources beyond just a caseworker to supported their complex and on-going needs.

Middletown's YSB, along with YSBs across the state of Connecticut, are primed to merge our youth development work with diversion efforts to create an effective and innovative system to serve youth at all ends of their development. But to live up to that potential we need the state to invest in us, so we can fully invest in them.