



Testimony Presented Before the Appropriations Committee

Submitted By:

Joanne Sciulli, Executive Director, Solar Youth, Inc.

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H.B. No. 6824: The Governor's Proposed FY 2016-2017 Biennial Budget

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Good evening, Senator Bye, Representative Walker and members of the Appropriations Committee. My name is Joanne Sciulli and I am founder and Executive Director of Solar Youth located in New Haven, CT. For the last 15 years, Solar Youth has provided opportunities and supports to children who live in the neighborhoods of New Haven with some of the highest percentage of children in poverty in the state. Since 2000 we have reached over 4,000 children over the years, currently serving over 450 per year.

I am here today with youth who have been a part of Solar Youth for years, who can speak best about the value of the supports and opportunities they received. I am also here to express my deep concern over the potential reductions to funding to programs such as Solar Youth through the Youth Service Prevention grant program, as well as the State Department of Education. Solar Youth just completed a Strategic Plan where we look to expand our impact, serving more youth but also serving the youth we work with deeper. This includes adding supports that ensure that 100% of youth graduate from high school with a plan for college or career. This can only happen with continued and additional funding.

Attached are the testimonies of four of our youth, as well as information about Solar Youth.

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

Respectfully,

Joanne Sciulli
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Karoz Toney, age 16. Years in Solar Youth: 2

My name is Karoz Toney I'm a student at New Haven Academy and Gateway. Solar Youth is a getaway for me. It keeps me occupied when I'm not in school. It gives me an opportunity to spend time with young kids and to teach them about the environment, teamwork, and themselves. When I was younger I didn't grow up in a neighborhood with Solar Youth around. There was mostly violence and gang related activity. But once I moved to Westville Manor where Solar Youth is stationed, it gave me a new light and experience. My first time working with them, I was skeptical working with the children, but when I started the activities we planned with the kids, it was a fun experience. One experience I can remember was the time we hiked up to Lake Wintergreen in West Rock State Park. Having kids from the inner city hike, people would have thought it to be crazy. Well, it was the total opposite. When we made it to the lake, all the kids were super ecstatic. They were saying the lake was super blue and wondered if there were sharks in the water. It was one of the best experiences I had with the children.

I can't imagine life without Solar Youth. There wouldn't be an escape from the violence in the community and chaos from their family. If Solar Youth wasn't in numerous communities, kids that go to the programs wouldn't have anything to do or occupy their minds. And we all know what happens when kids are really bored - they look for trouble. And trouble can lead kids down the wrong path and in the world we are trying to put kids on the helpful path not the harmful path. Some of my friends don't have a place to escape to like I do. Their escape was the streets, which can lead to bad decisions that can lead to bad consequences due to irresponsible actions. **And lately Connecticut has been trying to decrease the violence, so what's a better way to do that in a small step is to keep Solar Youth going, so young children won't be consumed by the streets.** So please with every piece of affection that you guys have, please let Solar Youth continue at what they are best at and that's winning kids' hearts.

Taylor Pauls, age 17. Years in Solar Youth: 5

Hello, my name is Taylor Pauls. I am a high school student at Common Ground High School and an intern at Solar Youth, a non-profit organization in New Haven. I am currently in my 5th season of being an intern and since my encounter with this program began I have learned valuable social lessons, communications skills, and leadership skills. I remember a time when I was a Steward in one of the school based sites of Solar Youth; one of our Youth Summits themes was social inequality. We were divided into 3 groups representing high, middle or low income families and given just enough food that that group received. I was placed in the low income family group and we were given 2 crackers and 2 grapes that had to be evenly distributed among 6 people; whereas, the middle and high income families had food that they could eat comfortable and have more to go around. The activity taught me a valuable life skill to be aware that there is inequality in this world and that you are being naive if you do not realize this problem. I am so grateful that Solar Youth exposed me to different parts of the world that I was not used to seeing. Furthermore, I can say being in this program has improved my communications skills by teaching children about that environment and being an ambassador for Solar Youth at events where I have to speak to crowds. **I have become more confident in communicating in job shadows and planning out my E-portfolio defensive and senior projects, requirements for graduating in the Common Core Educational**

System. Moreover, leadership is a vital component to have for long life success and I feel that Solar Youth has nourished my leadership skills. For example, I learned to trust myself to take risks, trying out a new games or lesson I want to do during program; also giving me the courage to explore different opportunities that I am not used to. Solar Youth is a life changing program that gives the children in New Haven a safe place to go and have fun. I feel if I was not a part of Solar Youth as a Steward and Intern I would not have the motivation to become more than I can be.

Corey Bethea, age 16. Years in Solar Youth: 6

Hello, my name is Corey Bethea. I am 16 years old, and attend high school at Eli Whitney in Hamden. When I was in middle school I first connected with Solar Youth - a program that empowers youth in New Haven to achieve a lifelong success by supporting their connection to the environment, their communities and each other. Each season we work with youth to identify problems in our community. Then we try to solve that problem. This is called a C-SAP (Community Service Action Project). All C-SAPs are different. Some were cleaning our neighborhoods and some were raising money for different causes. Through Solar Youth, I learned to care for my environment by being aware of the things I do, like littering. Solar Youth also works on building connections with others. With that skill I made a lot of friends. We also work on mindfulness, which means “paying attention on purpose.” We do this because we want to be mindful to each other at all times. **Mindfulness made me be aware of other people’s feelings and made me calmer and less stressed.**

I worked with Solar Youth when I was in 7th grade as a Leader in Training. Today I work as an intern with Citycology – a program for kids age 4 to 8. We teach them about the environment, build connections with each other, as well we teach them mindfulness. It’s really fun teaching young kids the things I learned, and showing them that they can make a difference in the world. Solar Youth made me a better person by helping me with my grades, helping me step up and become a leader, and make a positive difference in the lives of New Haven kids. Without Solar Youth I wouldn’t be here right now. I would never have gotten this lifelong success. Please continue to support Solar Youth so we can make a difference in the kids’ lives in New Haven. Just like they did for me.

Moet Charles, age 17. Years in Solar Youth: 10

My name is Moët Charles. I'm 17 years old, working as a CNA, and in college - all before I graduate high school in June. I've been in Solar Youth since I was 7 years old. I started off in the Steward Team after school program. When I was 12, I joined the Leaders in Training program where I learned how to become a professional. The college tours were the best memories of that program. I realized I wanted to go to college. Growing up in Solar Youth I always wanted to become an Intern. This past summer I worked as an intern at Solar Youth’s summer camp. **With Solar Youth, I learned how to communicate nonviolently, manage my money, be mindful and even became dependable as an employee.** Solar Youth was always there for me when I needed them. I grew up down the street from the office in Westville Manor [a public housing development in New Haven]. When I came back to Solar Youth it felt like coming back home and I never lost their support. I'm thankful they came into my life at a very young age.

FOR INFORMATION CALL

Joanne Sciulli, Executive Director (203) 387-4189 email: joanne@solaryouth.org



Testimony to CT State Appropriations Solar Youth, Inc.

March 5, 2015

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.

In order to have transformational impact on the lives of the youth we serve – those living in the New Haven neighborhoods with the highest rates of poverty, crime and health disparities – Solar Youth has created a menu of programs called the **Cycle of Stewardship** that allow youth to progressively build on experiences over time, gaining **critical personal and social competencies** and **professional skills** and **servicing as stewards to their communities and environment**.

SOLAR YOUTH PROGRAMS...

- Target youth with the fewest supports and resources to succeed
- Are offered year-round for youth from ages 4 to 18+
- Nurture personal and social competencies
- Provide rigorous professional training for teenagers
- Create the next generation of community and environmental stewards
- Give youth a boost in science class
- Are youth-driven
- **Are cost effective:** Solar Youth serves 450+ youth annually, all on an annual budget of \$700,000. In the coming year, with support from the State of Connecticut, Solar Youth expects to serve close to 600 youth as we expand programs to support 100% high school graduation and career/college planning.

Solar Youth saves Connecticut money:

- According to the recent report, "The Economic Value of Opportunity Youth," each youth who is neither in school nor employed "imposes – on average and compared to other youth – **an immediate taxpayer burden of \$13,900 per year and an immediate social burden of \$37,450 per year** (2011 dollars). When these "opportunity youth" reach 25, "he or she will subsequently impose **a future lifetime taxpayer burden of \$170,740 and a social burden of \$529,030.**"
- According to the Connecticut After School Network, "**every dollar invested in after school programs will save taxpayers approximately \$3**, not including the savings from reduced crime" and "**\$1.7 to \$2.3 million is saved** by putting one high-risk youth on the right path."

Quick Fact for SY

Youth Reached/year:
>450

Teenagers hired/year:
>50

Yearly Budget: \$700,000

Major Program Elements:

Youth-led
Community Service
Action Projects

Exploration
of the urban and
natural environment

Training in
Nonviolent
Communication

Skills in
Mindfulness, conflict
resolution, & stress-
reduction

Employability skills for
teens as educators and
community
problem-solvers

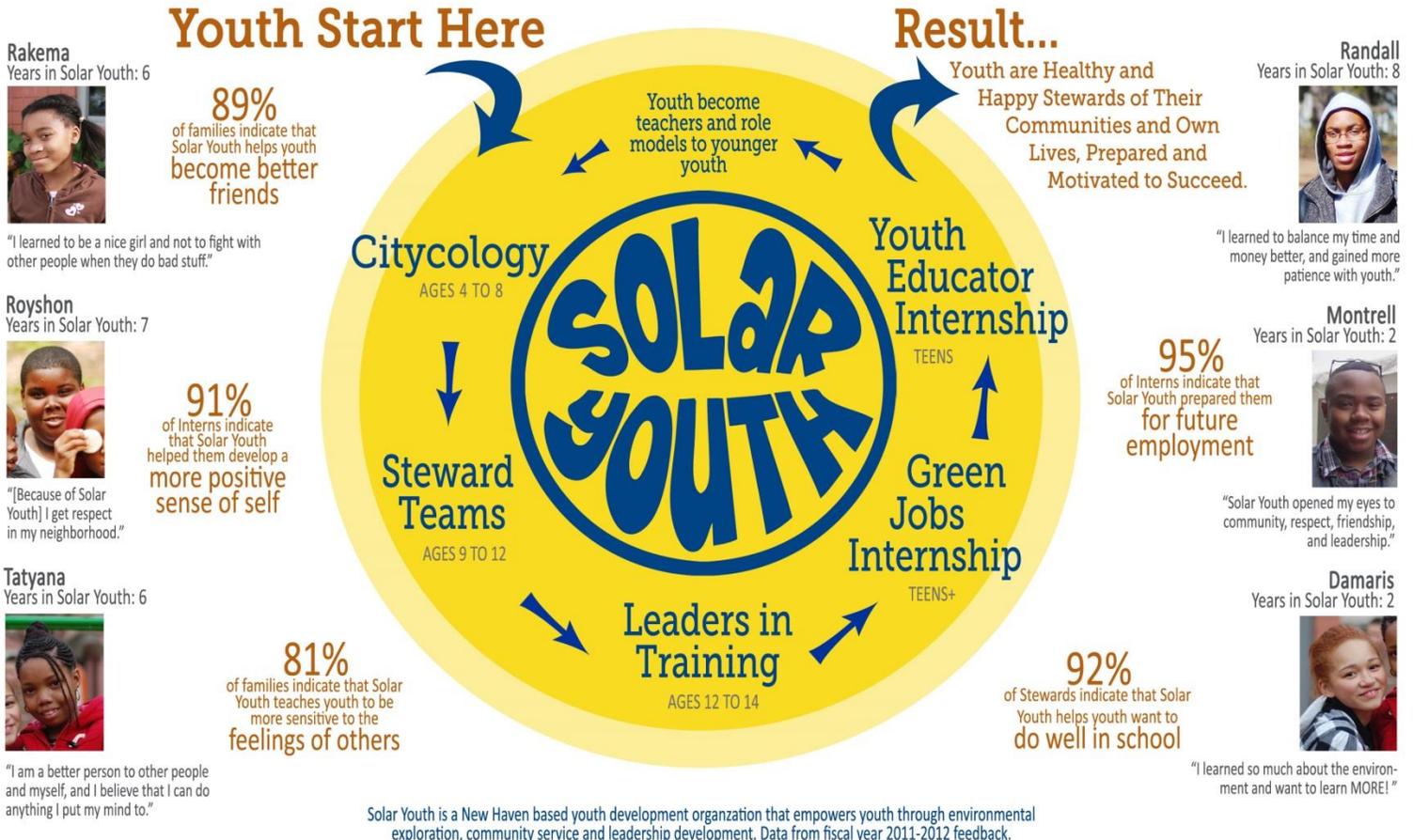
Please continue to support the Youth Service Prevention Program grants
as well as funding for Solar Youth's after-school programming
via the State Department of Education!

Solar Youth's Cycle of Stewardship

PROGRAMS: A young person's journey can start as early as age 4 and continue into adulthood. In the final phase, youth are seasoned leaders, serving as educators for younger children. The circle below shows the Cycle's menu of programs.

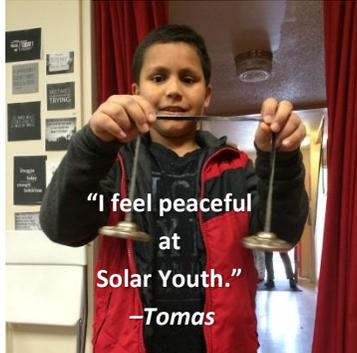
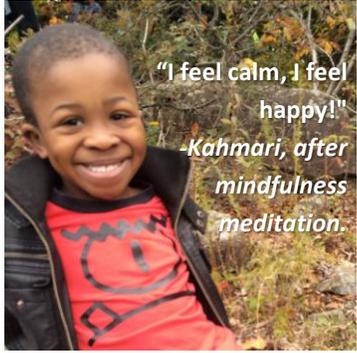
PRESENCE: Solar Youth nurtures young people through a consistent presence in their communities and lives. We build safe, consistent, loving relationships with youth throughout their childhood and adolescence.

PARTNERS: Youth have needs beyond our expertise. Through partnerships, Solar Youth provides supports and opportunities that go beyond what we alone can offer. As a result, the system of support is more efficient and effective.



95-100% of Families agreed that because of Solar Youth...

- ...my child is motivated to do well in school
- ...my child is more sensitive to the feelings of others
- ...my child is actively engaged in learning
- ...my child likes to help others



“I have two grand-kids in Solar Youth. TJ has been in Solar Youth for four years now and he has overcome his shy-ness. He learned to help others more. He is an honor student with help from Solar Youth. Tyjon just joined. He is doing very well in Solar Youth.”

-Elizabeth Yarbrough, Grandmother.

