



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

**Jaleesa Freeman, Investment and Partnerships Officer, Solar Youth, Inc.**

**Public Hearing Date: February 16, 2016**

**H.B. No. 6824: The Governor's Proposed FY 2017-2018 Biennial Budget**

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Good evening, Senator Bye, Representative Walker and members of the Appropriations Committee. My name is Jaleesa Freeman and I am the Investment and Partnerships Officer for Solar Youth, Inc. located in New Haven, CT.

For the past 15 years, Solar Youth has provided opportunities and supports for the youth of New Haven that live in some of New Haven's most challenging neighborhoods. Currently, we serve over 450 youth per year through the cycle of programming we offer for youth starting at age 4 through 18+.

I have joined you all today to provide concrete evidence to support the statement that Solar Youth is making a difference for the youth of New Haven. I truly believe that Solar Youth has developed the perfect model to help support youth on their journey of life long success.

I know a young woman who grew up in the New Haven Public housing development where Solar Youth provided programming. She was introduced to Solar Youth one day after school; she was approached by a woman who was so excited about the great opportunity she was offering. Hesitantly, the girl accepted the offer to join this program, and she didn't know it then but that exact moment was going to be one of the biggest determining factors in her success as an adult.

Fast forward 16 years and this young woman has become one the biggest advocates for the work that Solar Youth does. Solar youth has exposed her to a beautifully different world hidden in the troubles, conflicts, and obstacles that your average inner city youth faces on a daily basis. Providing her with the skills to be a confident problem solver in her community, the perspective to appreciate and view New Haven for its potential, teaching her the fundamental skills of life in such a creative and different way. Solar Youth provided her with the tools she need to become a successful woman.

How do I know all of this to be true? Because that young woman stands before you today. I am the woman that you see because Solar Youth has been a part of my life since I was 10-years-old. Because of our long term relationship I was able to return to Solar Youth for support during every critical moment in my life. Now a successful college graduate from New Haven, CT, I have returned to Solar Youth to ensure that we are able to provide this same experience for all of the youth in New Haven.

Solar youth does a great job of developing a curriculum that teaches environmental education, leading adventures that allow youth to experience the beauty of nature, and exposing them to activities they otherwise would never have the opportunity to experience, but Solar Youth is more than that. It lays the foundation for our youth to



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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 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. 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.

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,

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## **Prince, 9. Years in Solar Youth: 1.5**

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Hi, my name is Prince Davenport, I am 9 years old and I am in 4<sup>th</sup> grade, I am the second oldest so I'm a little brother, but a big brother too. I really like being a part of Solar Youth because science is my favorite subject and I really enjoy all of the awesome projects we do at Solar Youth. Some examples are the park cleanup and learning about water pollution with Fred the fake fish. My sister and I are also musicians, we both play violin, and I also play drums. At Solar Youth we use music as a way for us to express how we feel about problems in the environment and how to fix them. I like the song we helped write about CSAP, our Community Service Action Project. Another thing I like is that we are able to explore our neighborhood and community through field trips. My favorite trip was the Rock to Rock bike ride for Earth Day because it was fun to ride with friends and my sisters. We were able to ride our bikes from one side of New Haven to the other. I was able to see the whole city and now I can help my mom with directions. It was a good way to get exercise and I was so proud I was able to do it. I felt like a champion, like I feel when I fence and I win. I really like the hikes and camping trips too. It helps me forget I'm in the city and makes me feel like I'm free and I enjoy the open space around me. I am going to stay in Solar Youth as I get older too. When I finish college, maybe Yale, I want to start my own program helping kids in the community. Then, I guess I will have to come to my sister Princess and ask for money for my program. Hopefully, she'll say Yes!

## **Princess, 10. Years in Solar Youth: 1.5**

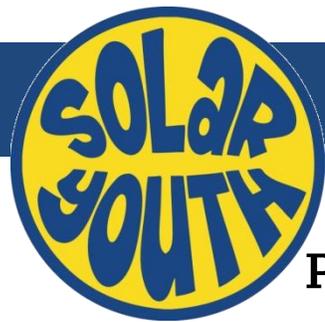
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My name is Princess Davenport and I am 10 years old, I am the oldest of five (children). I'm in 5th grade and I got all A+s in school. I am really glad that I am a part of Solar Youth. It's a really cool program that my brother and little sisters and I really like. We live in a neighborhood that has some bad things happen often, but we always feel safe going to Solar Youth. We get to meet other kids from the neighborhood and do fun things together and help take care of the neighborhood. I really like animals and nature, {I go horseback riding but my mom won't let us have a pet}. When I go to Solar Youth I get to learn about the animals and different types of plants and trees in my neighborhood plus ways we can keep them safe. I hope to be a part of Solar Youth forever. I have a few more years to go until I can be an intern, then I will be able to help with the younger kids, by then my baby brother will be in Solar Youth. Right now he's only two, and when he comes to our awards show he loves to eat the pizza, but he's not a member yet. I hope that when I am a teenager not only will I be able to continue to help out with the younger kids, but I can continue to learn and grow too. The things that we do now are very important at Solar Youth we not only learn about but we take action on problems in the community like pollution and taking care of our environment. My siblings and I go to a STEM school and we make some really fun things like robots, maybe if we could do things like that at Solar Youth we could build robots to pick up the trash instead of us doing it. I hope that we will be able to get more money to be able to make this already great program even better. I know that I am going to go to college. One day I hope that I can sit where you are and I will be able to help kids like us by giving money for great programs like Solar Youth where we can have fun learning and doing good things for our environment.

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### **FOR INFORMATION CALL**

**Joanne Sciulli, Executive Director (203) 387-4189 email: [joanne@solar youth.org](mailto:joanne@solar youth.org)**



# Testimony to CT State Appropriations Solar Youth, Inc.

February 16, 2016

## 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.<sup>1</sup> 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.

*"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."*

### Solar Youth 3.0

Over the past fifteen years, Solar Youth has built a track record as one of New Haven's most promising solutions for empowering low-income youth. Working in three of New Haven's hardest-hit neighborhoods—Westville Manor, West Hills, and Newhallville—Solar Youth delivers long-term mentoring, education and support services to children starting at age 4 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.** We have an ambitious vision for our future – what we refer to as Solar Youth 3.0. 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.

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 2020,

- We double the number of youth we serve (from 250 to 500) – with greatest increase in TEENS.
- We increase the number of programs and opportunities for support for youth, ensuring on-going, long-term connection.

<sup>1</sup> Clive R. Belfield, "The Economic Value of Opportunity Youth" January 2012

- Our budget increases from \$700,000 in 2015 to \$1.5million.

## What does this look like for youth and families?

By 2020,

- Over 100 Solar Youth stewards will graduate 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 15 years of BUILDINGSKILLS 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 the Youth Service Prevention Program grants as well as funding for Solar Youth's after-school programming via the State Department of Education!**

