Testimony Presented Before the Appropriations Committee
Submitted By:

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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 Development Officer for Solar Youth, Inc. located in New Haven, CT.

This isn’t my first time presenting in front of you all and it won’t be my last. Despite where my future takes me I will always be a supporter of Solar Youth. If you want to know what impact Solar Youth truly has on New Haven, then just look at me, and I am only 1 of tons of youth that can speak to the importance of this program.

We are indeed in a moment of crisis as an organization due to recent governmental funding cuts, yet we continuing to serve and empower. At the same time we hope to make an ambitious jump to serve MORE youth in a DEEPER way, we face challenges raising resources to sustain. Despite our success in increasing revenue from individuals and finding several new sources of funds, we have an enormous challenge ahead to fill the gap. Reliable funding will ensure we can keep our commitment to the community and run our programs with more predictability.

We provide our youth with the tools they need to be resilient and to be successful in life. How do I know this? Because I grew up in the housing development down the hill from our main office. I experienced the same challenges our youth face each day. Without Solar Youth being present in my early years, I don’t think that I would be the same woman I am 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 them 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.

On the surface, on social media and our website, you see the joy and excitement of youth exploring the outdoors and learning about their environment. But there is more to Solar Youth than just that. Solar Youth lays the foundation and provides the tools for our youth to be successful and success is defined by 4 indicators: (1) Our youth are able to have positive relationships, (2) be physically and mentally healthy, (3) are stewards of their community, and (4) become economically self-sufficient.
Solar Youth’s vision includes not only building on our current core programs, but also continuing to provide opportunities for teens and enhancing our 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. To best serve the community and for us to expand and maximize the amount of youth we can serve we need reliable consistent financial support. This can only happen with continued and additional funding.

Attached is additional 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. Indeed, the future of the State depends on it.

Respectfully,

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FOR INFORMATION CALL
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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.\(^1\) 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 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.**

**What does this look like in numbers?**

By 2025,

- We double the number of youth we serve (from 150 to 300) – with greatest increase in **TEENS.**
- We increase the number of programs and opportunities for support for youth, ensuring on-

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\(^1\) Clive R. Belfield, “The Economic Value of Opportunity Youth” January 2012
going, long-term connection.
- Our budget increases from $670,000 in 2018 to $1 million.

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

By 2025,
- 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 19 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 Services Prevention grants as well as funding for Solar Youth’s after-school programming!