Testimony Presented Before the Appropriations Committee
Submitted By:

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H.B. No. 5005: The Governor's Proposed FY 2020-2021 Biennial Budget

Good evening, Senator, Representative Walker and members of the Appropriations Committee. My name is Nicole Dunnaville and I am the Empowerment Coordinator for Solar Youth, Inc. located in New Haven, CT.

For the past 20 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 150 youth per year through the cycle of programing we offer for youth starting at age 5 through 18+.

I have joined you all today to bring to life how 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.

First I’d like to tell you about a young girl who grew up in a New Haven neighborhood where Solar Youth provided programs. She was introduced to the organization during the summer of 2002 where she became a participant in their summer camp. The young girl was very shy and this was the first time that she attended a program like this. She was hesitant to go, but her parents encouraged her to give it a try. This program took this young girl out of her comfort zone and she did not see the value until later in life.

Eighteen years later, this young girl is now an adult and one of the biggest advocates for the work that Solar Youth has been doing for 20 years! Solar Youth provided her with the skills needed to be a confident problem solver in her community, the perspective to appreciate and view New Haven for its potential, and taught her the fundamental skills of life in such a creative and different way. Solar Youth exposed her to new opportunities and learning experiences that empowered her and has helped her succeed.

How do I know this to be true? Because that young woman stands before you today. I am that girl. Solar Youth has been a part of my life every step of the way since those first days of summer camp. From graduations to job placement, Solar Youth staff has always supported me and helped me see my potential in every way possible.
I am thrilled to have returned to Solar Youth as the Empowerment Coordinator, where I can be that same support system for other young people that I had received for so many years.

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 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 layer 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 and two Youth testimonies.

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

Respectfully,

Nicole Dunnaville
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Curtisy, 10 Years in Solar Youth

Good evening. My name is Curtisy McGill. I am 15 years old and a sophomore at James Hillhouse Highschool in New Haven.

In the public housing development where I live, it’s easy for youth to get involved in negative activities. I see it every day. Growing up in these surroundings, I feel so lucky to have been involved with Solar Youth nearly my whole life. Over the past 10 years I have thankfully been a part of every program they offer. Starting at age 5, I participated in the Citycology summer program. At age 9 I moved up to the Steward Team and more recently, was an intern in the Green Jobs Youth Development Program. Solar Youth is really like a second home. No matter where you are in your life, you can count on Solar Youth to be there to support you.

I am excited to say that this season I have been hired to serve as a Youth Educator Intern where I will now be working alongside staff members to engage and lead the younger participants.

Solar Youth is a very important and consistent presence in our neighborhood and supports youth and families in so many ways. It is a safe place for all ages to come together and be ourselves. With a focus on education and community action, it has made my family more aware of environmental changes and how individuals can make a difference.

Along with being a Youth Educator Intern at Solar Youth, I am also involved with the Empowerment Program Ms. Nicole runs. I am able to come talk to her privately about anything and she helps me with school, life and preparing for my future.

The Empowerment Team at Solar Youth is making me more aware of the type of life that I want to live as I get older, what I might like to pursue, and how I can make that happen for myself. I feel very fortunate to have Solar Youth in my life.

Through my experiences at Solar Youth, I have learned how to be punctual and plan ahead; how to be more in control of my feelings and more aware that what I say and do have consequences.

I care more about the residents that live in my area and are closer to them than I ever had been before. I am aware of the many challenging issues surrounding my community, and I know what needs to be fixed and addressed. If it weren't for Solar Youth I’d probably have no direction for my future or motivation to succeed in school.

Thank you for listening and I hope that you consider our request to continue funding Solar Youth.
Hello,
My name is Zarquis Sanders, I am 17 years old, and I have been involved with Solar Youth since the spring of 2016. My experience has been with the Green Jobs Youth Development program and I have been actively involved in events and training they provide. Solar Youth has had a great impact on my neighborhood, my family and my friends by helping us become more self-aware and respectful of the community in which we live. It offers kids and teens something constructive to do and celebrates the hard work and dedication that the neighborhood kids put in to improve their community.

A recent project that I got to be a part of through Solar Youth included a petition that my group started to get trash cans placed throughout the neighborhood to help cut down on the litter. We walked around our neighborhood, knocking on doors and were able to get three full pages of signatures which we then submitted to Mayor Harp’s office. This is something that my team and I were truly proud of. If it weren’t for Solar Youth, I wouldn’t really care about keeping my community clean and I certainly wouldn’t know how to organize a group for action.

Solar Youth has shown me I can be so much more than I already know I can be. This program has helped me with personal growth, has helped me improve my speaking skills and has taught me how to advocate for myself. I have also learned that there is always someone out there I can help and there is always someone out there I can call on for support.

While Solar Youth is known for its ties to the environment, there is a bigger part that is so critical. They help youth with our overall development towards success. Along with being in the Green Jobs program, I am also a member of the Empowerment Team. One story that I would like to share is that our Empowerment Coordinator, Nicole, helped me go on a HBCU college tour trip in New York! There I learned about several colleges that I was interested in and as a result, I applied to the University of Savannah.

Solar Youth offers vital programs that helps build great futures for the kids in my community and I hope that it continues to do this for many years to come!
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. 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.

Over the past twenty years, Solar Youth has built a track record as one of New Haven’s most promising solutions for empowering low-income youth. Working in two of New Haven’s hardest-hit neighborhoods—Westville Manor and Eastview Terrace—Solar Youth delivers long-term mentoring, education and support services to children starting at age 5 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. 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.

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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-going, long-term connection.
- Our budget increases from $750,000 in 2020 to $1.5 million.

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

By 2025,

- Over 100 Solar Youth stewards will graduate from 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 20 years of BUILDING SKILLS 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 Solar Youth’s out-of-school programming via Judicial Branch Youth Prevention funding!**