

**Testimony to the Appropriations Committee on March 3rd 2021 at 10am.
Ani Zakarian, Middletown YSB Student Volunteer**

Dear Chairwomen Walker, Chairwomen Osten and members of the committee.

Thank you for hearing from me today. My name is Ani Zakarian. I am currently a senior at Middletown High School and a member of the Mayoral Youth Cabinet in conjunction with the Youth Services Bureau in Middletown. I have been a member of the Mayoral Youth Cabinet for five years now, going back to my 8th grade year, and it has been the most transformative thing I've been involved with thus far and instrumental in my development as a high school student now preparing for college.

I have been able to have opportunities offered to me that no other place has been able to provide. Along with various other teenagers, I have been able to work closely with high ranking city officials, including the Mayor, around issues we felt deserved attention and change.

For instance we've worked across multiple administrations to begin the process of improving ways our Police Department could best support and build relationships with city youth which includes adopting training and policies for police in our town as it pertains to students and in specifically youth of color. This included me being one of the first if not only "youth" to actually attend the state's Police and Youth training. We also researched national best practices around relationship building, restorative justice, and trauma and mental health supports.

I have been able to serve on the Human Relations Commission, through our city's Youth in Government program our YSB created, and got to participate in the first ever Anti-Racism report in Middletown's history.

As a high school sophomore, I was able to address my community on stage with two other MYC members to not only stand up against racism after Charlottesville, but remind them that youth need to be included in these issues and not shielded from them.

Beyond that, I've also been able to work closely with Wesleyan University to create a free youth led movie screening event that we hold every summer as well as host our own youth summit that created a list of priorities that helps guide our local YSB's work and how others can best support our youth.

All of these opportunities and many more have directly come from my involvement with youth services. With my time on the Mayoral Youth Cabinet coming to an end, it is incredibly important to dedicate myself to its preservation in any way I can. I am not the only person whose experience with MYC has led to them becoming a more well rounded young citizen ready to contribute to society and it is necessary that other youth get the proper tools, resources and funding to have the same experience I did.

As we begin to head to a more rehabilitative and restorative Connecticut, Youth Service Bureaus will become increasingly more important in maintaining and implementing restorative justice processes in our communities.

I hope you will continue to value youth voices, input and activism and support and advocate for youth programing such as Youth Service Bureaus all over the state for a better Connecticut.

Thank you for your time!