



BUILDING STRONGER YOUTH-SERVING ORGANIZATIONS

THE CONNECTICUT OPPORTUNITY PROJECT'S
2021 ANNUAL REPORT





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“The ultimate success of the programs reaching the youth will not only turn the lives of the youth around, but the long-term success of these young people will benefit society as a whole as well.”

LETTER FROM THE CO-FOUNDER

I would like to share with you my passion for youth who are disengaged and disconnected, and how the Connecticut Opportunity Project (CTOP) came about.

More than a decade ago, I visited several public schools and met with school leaders and teachers. I began to help an alternative high school in Norwalk for a couple of years where I became acquainted with the students and learned how difficult their lives were. Many lived in a single parent home and their parent or grandparent had to work two jobs. Some of the students had to work or take care of their siblings. At their school, there were not enough social workers or special education teachers. In addition, there were not any afterschool sports or enrichment programs. Through my interactions and involvement in the school, it was apparent to me that the students were struggling because they lacked the right programs to engage and support them.

According to the report *Untapped Potential* that Dalio Education commissioned in 2016, there are 39,000 youth who are disengaged and disconnected in Connecticut. As a result of the report's findings, Andrew Ferguson and I created CTOP with the mission to help non-profit organizations who serve youth who are disengaged and disconnected. We started to meet with directors and staff of different youth-serving organizations across the state to find those organizations whose approaches were compatible with our vision for how to engage and help young people; eventually we selected several organizations for initial grant investments and to participate in CTOP's statewide learning community.

After a couple of years, we wanted to gauge the impact that CTOP was having with its partner organizations. It was at this time that we met David Hunter, who would eventually become the director of CTOP in July 2020. He advised us in many ways but what really resonated for me was that it is better to give larger unrestricted grants to fewer organizations for longer periods of time as it is difficult for these organizations to sustain themselves on a year-to-year basis. We realized that CTOP needed to become more focused and disciplined. We worked on our Theory of Change in order to develop a framework of our mission, goals, objectives, and outcomes; it sounds simple, but it took tremendous work.

Among the many things I learned from the grantees and the experts is that youth need mentors that they can relate to. Sometimes it can take up to two years to engage disengaged and disconnected young people on a consistent basis as they may come and go and come back again to the program. Programs that work with them may need up to four years to help prepare them for long-term success. The youth need soft skills that we take for granted, such as being on time for work, not missing work, and being consistent, and training in work relationships and communication. They need mentoring and direction in order to finish high school and to work on a plan for life after their secondary education.

With David's guidance I have come to the realization that social investing has more impact than the usual approach to grantmaking and that investing in the organizations rather than in the programs creates more impact. The work is labor intensive. The substantial financial and non-financial resources that are provided to CTOP's grantees enable the organizations to serve the youth in the best possible ways. The grantees as well as CTOP are held accountable for the outcomes of the youth in the programs. The ultimate success of the programs reaching the youth will not only turn the lives of the youth around, but the long-term success of these young people will benefit society as a whole as well.

Our hope for CTOP's future is to continue to build and maintain an exemplary initiative with top-notch expertise. CTOP sets parameters for excellence, and we hope that over time others doing this work will engage with us as partners and as a source for the latest research to inform the work of other youth-serving organizations. And we hope to continue working with partners to garner more support for CTOP and our grantees over time, building upon the work we are doing now with partners like the City of Hartford, the Hartford Foundation for Public Giving, and the Tow Foundation. If we keep our North Star and maintain focus on our mission, then we will always be able to continue to invest in grantees and the young people they serve.

I am happy to report that during this past year CTOP added three more grantees to its portfolio and hopefully our learnings will help us become better partners. The learning never stops.

With the impact of COVID, this past year and a half has been very challenging. Despite that, our partners have provided food, other basic necessities, and extra counseling to the youth and their families in addition to their usual programming. I am in awe and inspired by their care and dedication to the youth that many others leave behind.

Barbara Dalio

Co-Founder, Connecticut Opportunity Project

LETTER FROM THE DIRECTOR

I am delighted and honored to introduce the first Annual Report of the Connecticut Opportunity Project (CTOP). Co-founded in 2016 by Barbara Dalio and Andrew Ferguson, and funded and operated by Dalio Education, CTOP has just completed the first year of its newly refined 10-year social investment strategy. CTOP's mission has evolved accordingly, and now is to invest in and help strengthen youth-serving organizations in Connecticut so they can work effectively, reliably, and sustainably with young people ages 14 to 22 who are disengaged or disconnected from school, work, or other pro-social institutions - in order to help them re-engage in and complete secondary education, then transition successfully to the pursuit of post-secondary education (such as a technical certification, military enlistment, or an academic degree) - with the ultimate goal that all young people will achieve satisfying employment that supports their agency and self-sufficiency.

CTOP chose three grantees in which to make substantial, multi-year investments beginning in 2019: COMPASS Youth Collaborative and Our Piece of the Pie in Hartford, and Domus Kids in Stamford. While doing so we developed a rigorous investment strategy in which we identified clear criteria for selecting grantees and a systematic approach to helping build their operational and programmatic capacities using general operating support grants. Core to this approach is the technical assistance and consultation we offer from carefully selected and highly regarded providers, our efforts to develop our own knowledge, skills, and capacities to do this work reliably and effectively, and the Key Performance Indicators we have developed and use to monitor and manage our efforts and their effects.

In aggregate these three grantees have, over the course of the past year, delivered 384 active service slots comprised of program positions occupied by disengaged and disconnected young people who are receiving the array of services needed to help them improve their lives and prospects, and notably are receiving them at the levels of frequency and duration that are necessary for them to benefit as intended.

This past year has been a very busy and exciting one for CTOP, and I am pleased to share some of the highlights with you. In addition to our three grantees that have made substantial progress in expanding and improving their youth-serving programs, we have also begun three new investments: in New Haven's Connecticut Violence Intervention Program (CTVIP) and Bridgeport's Regional Youth Adult Social Action Partnership's Youth Services Division (RYASAP) - both of which have specialized programming to reach the hardest to engage young people. In addition, we have made a large investment in bringing Roca's well evaluated Young Mothers' Program to Hartford, where it has begun to reach out to isolated and marginalized young women with few prospects for escaping poverty - and we have been joined by the City of Hartford, the Hartford Foundation for Public Giving, and the Tow Foundation in funding their work.

Looking forward, I expect in the course of the next two years that CTVIP and RYASAP will begin building up and building out their programming for disengaged and disconnected young people. With regard to our other grantees, over the course of the upcoming grant year we anticipate that COMPASS Youth Collaborative will continue to bring online active service slots; in addition, expansions and ongoing refinement of the programs being offered by Domus Kids and Our Piece of the Pie will grow significantly their number of active service slots; and finally, the Roca Young Mothers' program in Hartford will achieve substantial scale. In aggregate, therefore, we expect by June 30, 2022 that CTOP's grantees will have grown the number of active service slots for these young people to approximately 650.

It is a humbling experience and a great privilege to work with our grantees - and especially to support and celebrate the work of their dedicated, creative, and brave front-line staff members. In addition to reading more about our work over the past year in the pages that follow, we encourage those interested in staying updated on our efforts in the year ahead to visit our website at: www.ctopportunityproject.org.

David Hunter

Director, Connecticut Opportunity Project

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**YOUTH
BENEFITTED**

The target population of youth that CTOP serves is young people ages 14 to 22 who are disengaged or disconnected based on the following risk indicators:

- Disengaged youth are defined as those showing one or more indicators of being at risk of dropping out of high school, which include chronic absenteeism, 2+ course failures, and/or 2+ suspensions;
- Disconnected youth are defined as those who do not have a high school diploma and are not enrolled in school or work; also, those who do have a high school diploma but are not participating in the workforce. Additionally, disconnected youth have one or more of the following risk factors: involvement with the criminal justice system, previous involvement with the Department of Children and Families including placement in foster care, periods of homelessness, gang affiliation with associated violence (both perpetrating and being victimized by violence), and/or minimal involvement in pro-social relationships.



PERFORMANCE REPORT

Just as CTOP works with its grantees to help them achieve high levels of performance, quite naturally we hold ourselves to the same standard. In order to monitor our performance we have developed a set of Key Performance Indicators (KPIs). While the entire set of CTOP KPIs is available at www.ctopportunityproject.org/results/performance-indicators, in this Report we focus on the three KPIs that capture the social value our grantees are creating - toward which CTOP has contributed through the combination of our financial investments (general operating support grants) and non-financial supports (technical assistance and consultation).

These three KPIs are:



1. The number of CTOP target population youth enrolled in core programming in active service slots.

This KPI is essential as a proxy for the social value that grantees are creating in real time for CTOP's target population of young people. Program participants are only counted as occupying active service slots if they receive the appropriate kinds, quality, and dosage of services and supports needed to deliver positive long-term outcomes - as called for in the organization's theory of change. **This KPI tells us whether an organization is helping the young people it serves.**



2. The number of CTOP target population youth enrolled in core programming who graduate from the program successfully.

This is defined in terms of participating in the full range and duration of core services and attaining the functional gains (outcomes) that the program promises. Young people who leave before completing the full scope of programming and/or who fail to attain the program's outcomes clearly have not benefitted as intended and therefore are not included in this metric. **Thus, like the previous KPI, this KPI tells us how well a program is helping the young people it serves - and gives us an indication of whether in fact it may have helped them meaningfully.**

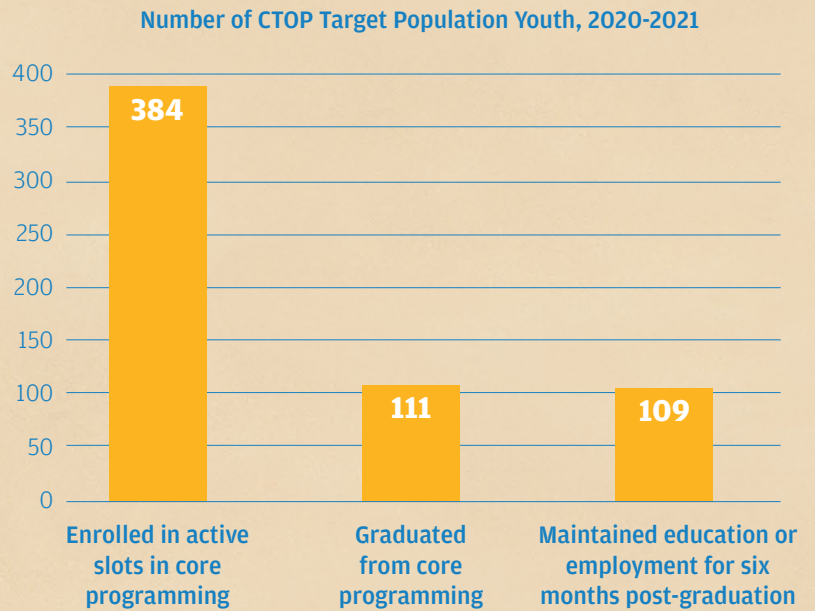


3. The number of CTOP target population youth who graduate and, for the following six months, are actively engaged in education or employment.

In the end, program participants who graduate a program successfully must go on to attain the long-term benefits (outcomes) it promises - or the program will not have much, if any, meaningful social value. **This KPI, therefore, tells us whether a program actually has helped the young people it serves.**

FIGURE 1 presents CTOP's KPI data covering July 1, 2020 to June 30, 2021, which is aggregated across all three of the grantees with whom we worked during this period.

With regard to the second and third KPIs, it is important to recognize that most of the core youth-serving programs of our grantees are designed to require multiple years of participation, and this reporting period only covers one year. So the relatively small numbers for these two KPIs reflects the limited opportunity (time frame) for program participants to have graduated from their programs or to have gone on to achieve six-month post-graduating outcomes. We fully expect these numbers to grow significantly over the coming years. And we also expect to extend the time for tracking long-term outcomes to a minimum of one year but ultimately to at least two.





THIS YEAR IN REVIEW

At the beginning of each grant year, grantees work together with CTOP to set quarterly benchmarks for the year ahead in advancing capacity-building priorities in the areas of leadership, management, programming, financial health, and internal monitoring. These benchmarks are aligned to the grantee's developmental stage within CTOP's rubric for the stages of organizational development, and as a result, benchmarks will vary significantly across grantees. Yet common across all grantees is that working toward and achieving these benchmarks is a central focus of their work through CTOP. This section reports on key areas of capacity-building progress and learning for each grantee over the course of the 2020-21 grant year.



The mission of COMPASS Youth Collaborative is to connect with high-risk youth wherever they are in the City of Hartford.

COMPASS engages youth in relationships to provide supports and opportunities that help them become ready, willing, and able to succeed in education, employment, and life.

During the 2020-21 grant year, COMPASS advanced many organizational capacity-building priorities. COMPASS redefined its target population of youth, redesigned its program model to meet the needs of the new target population, and selected a new case management system to better monitor and manage youth progression. The devastating impact of the pandemic and the resulting community violence epidemic produced a significant increase in disconnected youth in Hartford. As a result, COMPASS shifted resources from school-based programming to community-based programming. Front line staff were trained to implement cognitive-behavioral skills in the community. Through relentless outreach, engagement, and intensive case management, COMPASS Peacebuilders get youth ready to receive additional counseling, education, employment, and life skills support that the organization will offer. COMPASS formally launched this new program model in September 2021.

“In addition to funding, CTOP provides valuable guidance and technical assistance to enable COMPASS to build organizational capacity to help us fulfill our mission.”

- Jackie Santiago,
Chief Executive Officer

The mission of Domus Kids, based in Stamford, is to build loving relationships with young people facing adversity, empowering them to pursue their path to self-sufficiency.

“When we talk about how much work it is, the CTOP team just says, ‘Yes, you gotta put the work in.’ They’re holding us accountable, and it’s making us a better organization. But it’s not easy.”

- Mike Duggan,
Executive Director

Domus serves young people ages 12 to 25 from Stamford who are disengaged or disconnected, with core programming that includes a school engagement program that engages disengaged youth in high school in intensive, interpersonal relationships as well as workforce development programming for young people who are disconnected from school and/or employment, including youth returning to the Stamford community following incarceration.

During the 2020-21 grant year, one of the organization’s many priorities was to continue to strengthen its two workforce development programs, Work & Learn Day and Invictus. Based on the evidence about what works to deliver long-term outcomes for disconnected youth, Domus made a commitment to launch a social enterprise to provide more employment experiences for youth that could be operated within the organization.

With more internally-operated employment opportunities for youth, Domus can best customize and integrate its program components to meet the needs of young people, particularly those who are the most disconnected, offering an environment where youth can experience setbacks and rebound, creating tighter feedback loops between work supervisors and youth development staff, and providing work supervisors trained to deliver cognitive-behavioral skills to youth. Over the course of the 2020-21 grant year, Domus built out a design for its social enterprise and secured its first contract for running a work crew, which launched in July of 2021, while also expanding its school engagement program to Stamford’s second comprehensive high school and training its leadership and most of its workforce development staff in a skills-based cognitive-behavioral curriculum termed “Thoughts, Emotions, and Behaviors,” with plans to train the remainder of its staff in the grant year ahead.



OPP Our Piece of the Pie Pathways TO CAREERS



Our Piece of the Pie®, Inc. (OPP®) has been serving the greater Hartford area for over 45 years. OPP leverages its resources and staff capability to achieve its mission of empowering youth with the key competencies needed to overcome barriers to succeed in education and employment.

Serving young people aged 14 to 24 who are disengaged, OPP offers education attainment and workforce readiness services through a program model that centers on relationship development to overcome the barriers young people face on their path to agency and self-sufficiency.

Utilizing the bevy of resources made available to the organization, OPP spent the 2020-21 year building the operational framework for their refined strategic plan, theory of change, and program models for each service area. OPP restructured its workforce development program creating a tiered model that allows for the hard skill progression of young people reinforced with strong communication and financial literacy competency development. The education program was redesigned to be youth-centered and driven by demonstrated proficiency in core skills through courses that adapt to the individual needs of each young person by utilizing intensive case management. And, although grounded in state mandated competencies for each grade to ensure accreditation, the program utilizes rapid class cycles to keep young people engaged in the course work and actively involved in the school. The youth development service area has concentrated its efforts on absorbing the conceptual framework of Thoughts, Emotions, and Behaviors (TEB) provided by Program for Research in Implementation and Dissemination of Evidence-Based Treatments (PRIDE) to develop an entirely evidence-based approach to relationship development and case management for their target population. Lastly, OPP bolstered this three-pronged approach by implementing both a rigorous intake process and a retention and long-term engagement program that are powered by a data system that enables the program to continue to serve its core population while monitoring its ability maintain high quality and effectiveness.

“Having a strategic thought partner in CTOP has allowed us not only to assess our organizational capacity in a meaningful way, but to develop strategies for how to improve. You couldn’t buy that. Especially for someone to support it resource-wise is just unheard of.”

- Hector Rivera,
Chief Executive Officer

THE YEAR AHEAD

During the 2020-21 grant year, CTOP completed due diligence efforts with three new grantee candidates and committed to long-term investments in these organizations. These organizations include Connecticut Violence Intervention Program (CTVIP) in New Haven and the Youth Services Division of the Regional Youth Adult Social Action Partnership (RYASAP) in Bridgeport, both of which have specialized programming to reach the hardest to engage young people. CTOP also made a large investment to bring Roca's well-evaluated Young Mothers' Program to Hartford. As CTOP continues the capacity-building work with our initial cohort of grantees in the year ahead, we look forward with excitement to the opportunity to begin working alongside these three new grantees as well.



CONNECTICUT VIOLENCE INTERVENTION PROGRAM

Connecticut Violence Intervention Program is a group of trusted, trained community members that disrupt, prevent, and stop the spread of violence which results in trauma through crisis intervention and proactive relationships with high risk youth and the institutions that impact their lives in the Greater New Haven area. Connecticut Violence Intervention Program serves the highest risk youth in the community, and works to intervene in circumstances that could possibly lead to gun violence and possible retaliation.

“My conversations with the CTOP team have helped me rethink the great work that I do in the community and reframe not only my efforts but also the organizational structure of my agency. I quickly found that added resources and CTOP training will lend to not only the great work that we do at CTVIP, but also to sustain and value the staff doing the difficult work. We are grateful for their support which will lead to safer communities.”

- Leonard Jahad, Executive Director



REGIONAL YOUTH ADULT SOCIAL ACTION PARTNERSHIP

Operating as a multi-service organization supporting youth and young adults throughout Greater Bridgeport, Regional Youth Adult Social Action Partnership (RYASAP) offers a variety of wrap-around supports to its clients and the community. From violence interruption through StreetSafe, to court diversionary programs through the Juvenile Review Board and Mediation, to advocacy for justice involved youth and those living with mental illness and substance misuse through the Connecticut Justice Alliance and The Hub, to developing the next generation of leaders and building capacity in local nonprofits through Public Allies and Prevention Corps, RYASAP identifies those needs within the community and strategically selects or creates programming to address those needs. Combining these services with strong governmental and community relationships with trusted individuals and credible messengers allows RYASAP to anchor itself in contributing both systems change advocacy and direct-action support.

“Our work with the CTOP team provided a great opportunity to advance our thinking in a deep and thoughtful way with the added benefit of empowering staff members and providing an opportunity to bond. Our engagement has had the bonus impact of reenergizing our Board and our opportunity for impact and change on our communities has never been stronger.”

- Marc Donald, Executive Director



ROCA YOUNG MOTHERS' PROGRAM

Roca's mission is to be a relentless force in disrupting incarceration, poverty, and racism by engaging the young adults, police, and systems at the center of urban violence in relationships to address trauma, find hope, and drive change. Roca's Young Mothers' Program serves young women ages 16 to 24 who are not ready, willing, or able to be in other programs and are so high-risk that everyone has given up on them. Roca works with them relentlessly over four years to build transformational relationships, create safety and stability, and teach life-saving cognitive-behavioral skills to help them heal from trauma, reduce risk behaviors, find and maintain economic stability, and be the best mothers they can.

“Roca is honored to be a CTOP grantee and serve 250 to 300 high-risk young women in Hartford over the next four years. We are excited to work with our participants to help them become resilient and find stability and hope, and with the systems they are involved in to collaboratively reduce urban violence, improve outcomes for young people, and break intergenerational cycles for their children.”

- Sunindiya Bhalla,
Executive Vice President of Women & 2Gen

ABOUT CTOP

CTOP is funded and operated by Dalio Education. CTOP's mission is to invest in and help strengthen youth-serving organizations in Connecticut so they can work effectively, reliably, and sustainably with young people ages 14 to 22 who are disengaged or disconnected from school, work, or other pro-social institutions - in order to help them re-engage in and complete secondary education, then transition successfully to the pursuit of post-secondary education (such as a technical certification, military enlistment, or an academic degree) - with the ultimate goal that all young people will achieve satisfying employment that supports their agency and self-sufficiency.

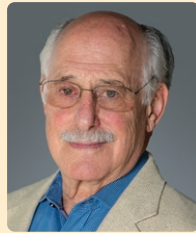
CTOP PROGRAM TEAM



Barbara Dalio
Co-Founder



Andrew Ferguson
Co-Founder



David Hunter
Director



Adhlere Coffy
Portfolio Director



Amanda Olberg
Portfolio Director



Aimee Rincon
Portfolio Director

CTOP ADVISORY BOARD



Sam Cobbs
Chief Executive Officer of Tipping Point Community and former Chief Executive Officer of First Place for Youth



Gordon Berlin
Research Professor at Georgetown University and former President of MDRC



Carol Thompson Cole
President and Chief Executive Officer, Venture Philanthropy Partners

INVESTMENTS FOR THE 2021 FISCAL YEAR

Cohort 1

COMPASS Youth Collaborative	\$1,110,000
Domus Kids	\$1,000,000
Our Piece of the Pie	\$1,024,375

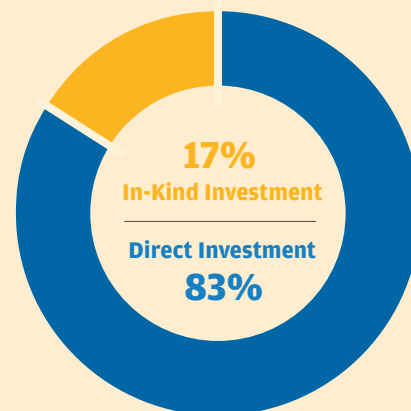
Cohort 2

Connecticut Violence Intervention Program	\$210,000
Regional Youth Adult Social Action Partnership	\$560,000
Roca Young Mothers' Program	\$915,000
Roca Impact Institute	\$120,000

Total Direct Grant Investments \$4,939,375

In-Kind Investments \$1,000,000+

Total Investments \$6,000,000+





Learn more at
www.ctopportunityproject.org



CTOP's mission is to invest in and help strengthen youth-serving organizations in Connecticut so they can work effectively, reliably, and sustainably with young people ages 14 to 22 who are disengaged or disconnected from school, work, or other pro-social institutions - in order to help them re-engage in and complete secondary education, then transition successfully to the pursuit of post-secondary education (such as a technical certification, military enlistment, or an academic degree) - with the ultimate goal that all young people will achieve satisfying employment that supports their agency and self-sufficiency.

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