



**INVESTING IN  
WORKFORCE PATHWAYS  
TO TRANSFORM LIVES**

The Connecticut Opportunity Project's 2025 Annual Report



## TABLE OF CONTENTS

- |  |                                  |
|--|----------------------------------|
| 2 Mission                                    | 22 Pathways to Careers           |
| 3 Letter from CBIA                           | 24 Workforce Partnerships        |
| 5 Letter from Our Senior Portfolio Directors | 26 Gun Violence Problem Analysis |
| 6 Year in Review                             | 28 DataLinkCT                    |
| 8 Performance Report                         | 30 Looking Ahead                 |
| 12 Frontline Stories                         | 32 About CTOP                    |
| 20 Learning Agenda                           |                                  |



### MISSION

The Connecticut Opportunity Project's mission is to invest in and help strengthen youth-serving organizations in Connecticut so that they can work effectively, reliably, and sustainably with severely off-track or disconnected young people ages 14 to 26 to help them re-engage in and complete secondary education or credential, then transition successfully to a post-secondary pathway leading to satisfying employment at a living wage that supports their self-sufficiency.



# FROM CBIA

There is no greater threat to Connecticut's long-term economic prosperity than the state's labor shortage.

Over three-quarters of employers told CBIA's 2025 business survey that it was difficult to find and retain workers, with 27% – a plurality – saying the lack of skilled job applicants was the greatest barrier to growth.

The demand is there. Job openings in the state have increased 8.6% over pandemic levels. However, our labor force – the population of those working plus those looking for work – has grown just 1.2% over the same period, well below the national growth rate of 3.6%.

Addressing the labor shortage is all about realizing opportunity. It's about unlocking Connecticut's incredible potential, working together to make sure that everyone in this state – regardless of who they are and where they come from – has a pathway to pursue the career of their choice.

The nature of work and employee expectations are evolving rapidly, and employers must recognize that and adapt.

And yet, the doors to opportunity are shut for too many residents. Opportunity is the key to economic mobility. We must continue improving and implementing career pathways for women, immigrants, returning citizens, veterans, and those from underserved and often forgotten communities.

We need to fix the childcare system and provide more housing options. Let's ensure our education system equips tomorrow's workforce with the tools they need for success.

That's why CBIA, the state's largest business organization, is engaged on issues such as housing, childcare, and immigration. It's why we're working with a growing number of state agencies, foundations, and nonprofit organizations.

It's why we're collaborating and partnering with groups like Dalio Education and its Connecticut Opportunity Project (CTOP) initiative, helping amplify efforts to highlight and address the at-risk and disconnected youth crisis.

CTOP's efforts are so critical – giving voice to Connecticut's disconnected young people, strengthening workforce development programs across the state, and driving lasting, transformative change. We are grateful for the chance to support those efforts – Connecticut's future and especially the futures of our young people depend on the success of these programs and initiatives.

Collaboration and partnerships are the keys to solving our challenges and ensuring we provide the opportunities for all residents to pursue meaningful, rewarding lives and drive economic growth and prosperity.

Ingenuity and creativity are core components of Connecticut's DNA and we must lean into them to provide opportunities for all residents to pursue meaningful, rewarding lives and drive economic growth and prosperity that benefits our state and our young people.

*Chris DiPentima*

Chris DiPentima  
President and CEO, CBIA





## FROM OUR SENIOR PORTFOLIO DIRECTORS

Over the past year, as CTOP's work has continued to expand, we are now starting to see the years of hard work our partners have been investing in building their organizational capacity yield results for young people that are not only being sustained but also validated through external evaluation.

In 2024-25, 277 young people who were previously experiencing disconnection from school and work, or who were at the greatest risk of it, graduated from the programs of our grantee partner organizations, meaning that they had been successfully reconnected to education and employment. And our grantee partners maintained impressive long-term outcomes for young people this year, with 86% of young people who had graduated in the previous year maintaining education and employment at the 12-month mark following their program graduation.

With CTOP's support, two of our grantee partners with the most developed organizational capacities, Domus Kids and Our Piece of the Pie, engaged Child Trends to conduct implementation and outcomes evaluations of their programs. The recently completed outcomes evaluation for Domus Kids found that the delivery of face-to-face services in the Domus school engagement program is positively associated at the 95% confidence level with outcome attainment, even after controlling for differences in students' backgrounds and the barriers they had encountered – the strongest confirmation yet of the positive impact that CTOP's grantee partners are making in the lives of young people.

Meanwhile, CTOP continues to innovate through its research agenda. With funding and technical assistance from CTOP, the Boston Consulting Group completed a gun violence problem analysis for the City of New Haven, analyzing data from their police department to reveal key trends, including a considerable increase in the percentage of young people involved in gun violence. The research project also included a first-of-its-kind maturity assessment for New Haven's community violence interruption response system, benchmarking relative to effective practices across the country to inform where investments could improve effectiveness. The engagement also yielded an ecosystem map that captures New Haven's existing community violence intervention resources, and deliverables that make the economic case for how financial contributions to New Haven's Office of Violence Prevention (OVP) can reduce gun violence and improve well-being. Now published on the city's OVP website, New Haven leaders can use the recommendations for their strategic planning. CTOP is now facilitating parallel bodies of work in Hartford and Bridgeport, with the same goal of leveraging data to inform strategic planning that can drive down the community violence that impacts so many of CTOP's target population of young people.

We also continue to expand our portfolio of grantee partners. We are thrilled to be adding an eighth CTOP grantee partner, Manufacturing and Technical Community Hub (MATCH), a nonprofit launched in 2022 in New Haven that aims to create pathways to careers in the manufacturing industry for individuals with barriers to gainful employment. And as Dalio Education launches a new portfolio of work that makes co-investments alongside employers to build job training programs within their companies for CTOP's target population of young people, our team is working closely as consultants to bring CTOP's approach to bear in shaping the design and implementation of effective programming.

We are excited by this past year of work but even more so by the opportunities ahead. We invite you to stay updated on our work in the upcoming year through our website [ctoppportunityproject.org](https://ctoppportunityproject.org) and by following us at @ctoppportunity on X, formerly Twitter.

*Adhlere Coffy & Amanda Olberg*

Adhlere Coffy & Amanda Olberg  
Senior Portfolio Directors

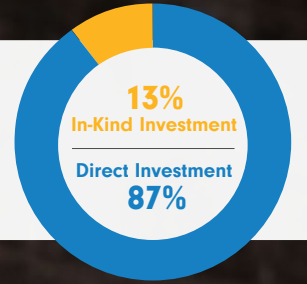
# YEAR IN REVIEW

## CTOP'S APPROACH

CTOP works alongside eight grantee partners to help strengthen their organizations and programs. We invest funding, coaching, and technical assistance to help our partners build the infrastructure required to deliver high-quality services that will meaningfully improve the lives of young people in our state, knowing that it takes years of dedicated effort to build the capacity needed to realize those outcomes.

## CTOP INVESTMENTS IN 2024-25

**\$7,842,000** Over eight grantee partners



## GRANTEE PARTNERS



## TARGET POPULATION

The young people who are part of CTOP's target population face structural, institutional, and other complex challenges. The conditions they experience as a function of pervasive systemic disparities can lead to the presentation of risk indicators, which CTOP uses to describe our target population and differentiate among sub-groups within it to ensure we invest in nonprofits serving the young people we intend to reach and best support our grantee partners in their work. The target population of youth that CTOP serves is young people ages 14 to 26 who are severely off-track or disconnected based on the following risk indicators:



**86% of the young people** graduating from our grantee partners' core programming maintained educational engagement or employment for at least 12 months.



**\$5.1 million dollar** investment over 4 years to Nuvance Health to create pathways to careers in healthcare.

**Severely off-track youth** are enrolled in high school but are at risk of dropping out, as indicated by chronic absenteeism, failure to earn credits in a timely way, and/or 2+ suspensions; and, they have been failed by the traditional high school environment to the extent that they need intensive additional supports to get back on track to graduate – whether provided within the traditional high school context or an alternative education setting – such as mentoring and comprehensive case management that incorporates trauma-informed practices.

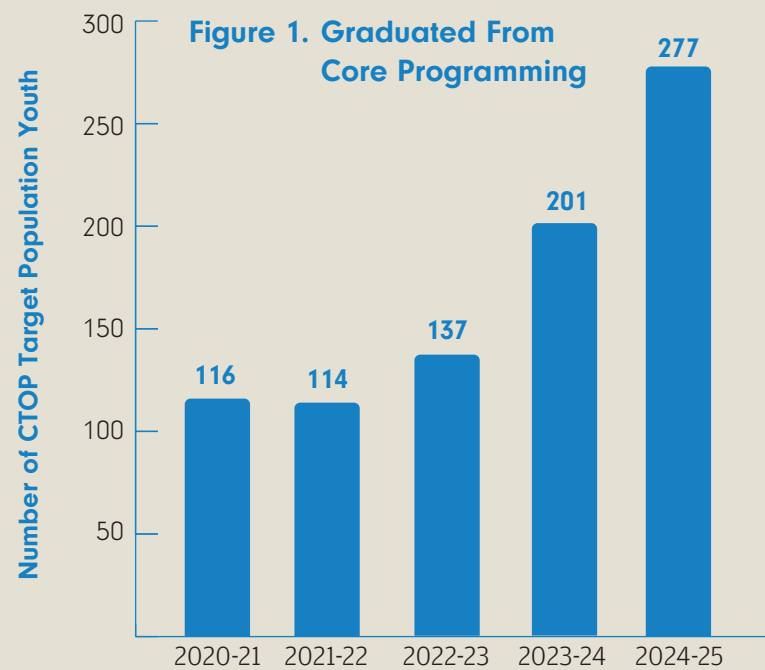
**Disconnected youth** do not have a high school diploma and are not enrolled in school or work; or, they do have a high school diploma but are not participating in the workforce in a sustained way. Additionally, disconnected youth have experienced one or more of the following traumatic life events: involvement with the juvenile or criminal justice system, previous involvement with the Department of Children and Families including placement in foster care, periods of homelessness, and perpetuating and/or being victimized by violence.

86% of the young people graduating from our grantee partners' core programming maintained educational engagement or employment for at least 12 months.



In CTOP's organizational development work with our grantee partners, our north star is to help young people change their lives by successfully reconnecting to education and gainful employment on a pathway to self-sufficiency. Before organizations can produce these outcomes for young people, they must first build their capacities and competencies to be able to do their work effectively, reliably, and sustainably, which requires an investment of organizational

time and effort measured in years, not weeks or months. As a result, while we do not expect partners to generate the kinds of long-term outcomes we ultimately care about in the first few years of our work together, we are starting to see those outcomes now and, with our partners whose organizational capacities and competencies are most developed, are beginning the journey to validate those outcomes via external evaluation.



## Succeeding in Education and Employment

CTOP's Key Performance Indicator (KPI) that provides the ultimate measure of our grantee partners' success, toward which CTOP has contributed and for which CTOP holds itself accountable in terms of monitoring its own performance, is the number of youth in CTOP's target population who are still actively engaged in school or employment 12 months following their graduation from a CTOP grantee partner's programming. In aggregate across our grantee partners, the number of young people attaining this critical milestone was 173 or 86% during the 2024-25 grant year.

For all of our grantee partners, their definition of program graduation requires that a young person has graduated high school, enrolled in post-secondary education, or secured employment, which means that CTOP's KPI that aggregates the number of young people graduating from our grantee partners' programming reflects not simply an output, but a critical outcome. In 2024-25, the number of young people graduating from our grantee partners' programming was 277, up from 201 last year.

## Highlights from External Evaluation

As two of CTOP's grantee partners with the most developed organizational capacities and competencies, Domus Kids and Our Piece of the Pie have launched implementation and outcomes evaluations with Child Trends, which is the leading research organization in the United States focused on improving the lives of children, youth, and families. Through these engagements, Domus and Our Piece of the Pie are leveraging the expertise of Child Trends to assess their readiness for external evaluation; take stock of the quality of the evidence base underlying the design of their program models; understand and improve the fidelity of their program implementation; and validate the outcomes they are delivering for young people. Child Trends is currently cleaning and organizing Our Piece of the Pie's data in preparation for their outcomes analysis and just completed the outcomes analysis for Domus.

In its outcomes analysis for Domus, Child Trends found that 60% of all students who ever enroll in the Domus school engagement program successfully exit and attain long-term outcomes one year later, maintaining post-secondary education and/or employment at the 12-month mark following program graduation. Child Trends further found that the delivery of face-to-face services in the Domus school engagement program is positively associated at the 95% confidence level with the following, with these associations persisting even after controlling for differences in students' backgrounds and the barriers they had encountered:

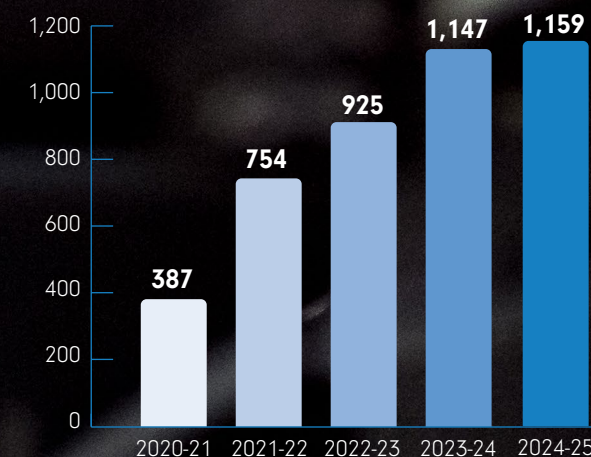
- Student attendance at school;
- Promotion to the next grade level;
- Successful program exit upon high school graduation; and
- The attainment of long-term outcomes a year following program graduation.



## What Are Young People Getting from their Programs?

In contrast to looking at the number of individuals served by a program – which is a widely-used metric in the social services sector that actually doesn't convey any meaningful information about the social value a nonprofit is helping to create via services delivered – CTOP uses a KPI called the active program slot. To be considered in an active program slot, a young person must 1) meet the program's target population enrollment criteria, and 2) receive the kinds and levels of services that the organization's theory of change identifies as necessary to ensure that the young person will truly benefit by ultimately attaining the program's long-term outcomes.

Figure 2. Number of Active Slots Delivered to CTOP Target Population Youth



In each year of implementing CTOP's social investment strategy, the number of active program slots that our grantee partners have produced, in aggregate, has continued to climb, reaching 1,159 in 2024-25 – even though only some of our grantee partners have reached the stage of organizational development where they are producing active program slots. The number of active program slots delivered in any given year continues to be significantly higher than the numbers of young people graduating from our grantee partners' programs and attaining long-term outcomes. These data align with our expectation that because of the extent and complexity of the barriers our young people face, they will often participate in programming for more than one year, which by definition means that only a fraction of youth enrolled in active program slots in any given year would be expected to have made the progress necessary to graduate in that year.

# FRONTLINE ) STORIES

To fulfill their missions of supporting young people to meaningfully reconnect to education and work, each of CTOP's grantee partners have an incredible team of frontline staff members who work tirelessly to engage young people and deliver critical services that ensure they build the skills and competencies needed to attain self-sufficiency. Through the deep, meaningful relationships they build with young people, frontline staff help them catalyze long-term behavior change. In recognition of their impact and to learn from their insights, this section tells the stories of these frontline staff professionals and the difference they make for individuals and communities.

In 2025, StreetSafe Bridgeport engaged in over **80 hours** of redesign workshops with the CTOP team to launch an outcomes-producing program in 2026 and build their capacity to deliver it.

With an emphasis on safety, StreetSafe professionals with lived experience guide young adults in Bridgeport to improve emotional regulation and prosocial skills to attain self-sufficiency through education, trades, and career development.



"We come up with ideas about how we can make the work better. We're doing it for the kids at the end of the day." Over the last year, Troy Owens, an Outreach Worker at Catalyst CT's StreetSafe Bridgeport, and other team members have been working with CTOP to redesign their program to more effectively serve young people involved in community violence in Bridgeport.

As StreetSafe's target population narrowed in focus to Bridgeport's hardest-to-reach young people facing the greatest challenges, Troy's perspective and experience as an Outreach Worker was crucial. "CTOP actually asked me for my ideas, and to share my experiences. My confidence shifted because now, I feel more capable sharing my ideas and how this change is affecting the program and how I'm going to make it better."

Troy's strategy in engaging young people evolved as he learned more in the workshops and as his confidence in his own expertise grew. He says, "I knew I would have to take a different approach with the different population, because... they're not willing yet to trust and establish rapport [with me]. But with relentless outreach, I keep tracking them down; they don't come around at first. It's hard, but it is worth it in the end when you actually make that connection."

"Now, the way I plan [is different]." Troy adds, reflecting on how the redesign has informed his tactics when he connects with young people on his caseload. "I go back to my notes to see what happened in our last interaction, then I meet them where they're at. Based on that, I work on a certain skill and think about what can I do today with this kid that's going to benefit him in his life presently."

"Before I used to do things for the kids. Now, I'm doing it with more intention on teaching them how to be independent on their own," he continues. "It's like I'm giving them a helping hand, but I'm also giving them these skills or direction on how they can be doing this for themselves." As a result, Troy's young people are not only building trust with him but building skills that will help them succeed in work and school on their own.

"I feel like we are building a stronger foundation from the bottom up," Troy says as he thinks about his team's work over the last year. "We've been doing the work, but [CTOP] laid the structure down for us and helped us build other components that will strengthen what we already do for our young people."



When a gunshot victim opens their eyes in one of Hartford's three hospitals, they will most likely see Larry "Love" Johnson at their bedside. Larry is the Director of Crisis and Hospital Response at COMPASS Youth Collaborative, where he and his team respond 24 hours a day to support young victims of violent crimes in the emergency room. The immediate aftermath is the most critical window of time to improve outcomes for victims and reduce retaliation within the community.

Larry and his team act as liaisons between the victim, their family, and hospital staff to ensure trauma-informed care during the most challenging moments of a survivor's life. He says, "Immediately after the hospital calls, we're inside the emergency department, meeting with the family that's gathered at the hospital, with the hospital staff - guards, nurses, surgeons - to build a plan with them as far as how to support that person that's inside the emergency department. We're also watching the crowd for anything that could be heightened, outside in the emergency department parking lot."

COMPASS's peaceful presence at the hospital de-escalates the crowd to mitigate the possibility of retaliation, interrupting the spread of violence and keeping Hartford safer. But, as Larry puts it,

his primary job in these moments is "doing the best I can to keep you calm as you're being treated inside the hospital, being present, and advocating for you."

His work doesn't stop at a young person's bedside. Within 24 hours of the shooting, Larry and his team meet with the City of Hartford, Hartford Public Schools, and other key city stakeholders to gather information about who the victim is, what their needs are, and whether anyone else is at risk. With that knowledge, the COMPASS team creates a tailored plan to support the survivor's basic needs like clean clothes, food, utilities, and a functional lock on the door, as well as inform any further de-escalation work they may need to do in the community.

They also partner with UConn Family Medicine to conduct follow-up wellness visits, assisting with wound care and bandage changes to support healing. In the months that follow, Larry and his team continue to meet regularly with the survivor to meet basic needs, build nonviolent coping skills, and offer mental health support. If the young person is in the age range that COMPASS serves and high enough risk, COMPASS enrolls the young person in the COMPASS Peacebuilder Program.

Ultimately, Larry says, "I wanna do all I can to help you, keep you safe, and help you get well and be with you so that at some point in time, you'll turn around and give that back to our community."

### Hartford, CT



COMPASS Youth Collaborative interrupts violence in the City of Hartford by building transformative relationships with youth at the center of the violence. COMPASS Peacebuilders provide youth the tools to create sustained behavior change and transition successfully to adulthood.

In the 2024-25 grant year, the Crisis Team responded to 62 hospital calls and after discharge, connected with victims **947 times.**



Connecticut Violence Intervention and Prevention (CTVIP) 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 the highest-risk youths and the institutions that impact their lives in the Greater New Haven area.



67% of CTVIP staff share lived experience with participants, which provides an entry point for relationship building with participants as well as living proof of the possibility and potential impact of turning their lives around.

"I see a lot of me in them. And I always tell these young kids all the time, I am you. I came from where you came from."

Tyrone "Tiger" Whittaker grew up in New Haven where he found himself on the wrong path as a teenager. "I share with [young people on my caseload] my past experiences. I went to prison when I was 17 years old, and I was 47 when I came home. Let's do a math question. How many years did I serve in prison? And you could see the young kid's eyes get big." Tiger leverages his story as a credible messenger with young people at CTVIP to build trusting relationships that help pull them away from violence.

As he puts it, "Being a credible messenger is someone who has both the trust of the community and the capacity to influence positive change." Tiger connects with the highest-risk youth in the Elm City, helping them to recognize their trauma, understand its impact on their decisions, and break cycles of violence.

He says, "It's a process of earning the trust of a young individual that can take maybe a year, or it could take two years...you gotta be reliable, you gotta be able to advocate for this young man and show him that you're going to fight for his

survival." And then, Tiger says, a young person will start to open up.

Tiger remembers working with a young man who was referred to him because he was stealing cars and rebelling in school. "When we first started working together, he stole another car. I went to court with him, and we had a conversation. I let him know that this gotta be it. You gotta change your life or you get into an age where it's not gonna be juvenile no more, it's gonna be prison. And then, within 6 months, this young man's grades began to change." Now, that young man is on a path to self-sufficiency. He graduated from high school, secured a full-time job, and is taking classes at Gateway Community College. And he still checks in with Tiger regularly.

As Tiger reflects on his life and the lives of the young people he's impacted, he says, "You can start out one way, but at the end of the day, we want to get you to the point where you can strive and be successful without worrying about being in the school-to-prison pipeline."

"I was a Domus student at 13 years old," says Margaret Giron, "with two amazing Family Advocates who were honest, supportive, kind, and showed me unconditional love. Since then, I've wanted to be a Family Advocate."

Margaret achieved her goal, becoming a Family Advocate with the Domus Knights School Engagement Program at Stamford High, where she engages 9th graders with school attendance rates between 50% and 85%, or a history of suspension, arrest, or other behavior challenges in school. Over four years, Margaret engages students in intensive, interpersonal relationships to help them build the skills needed to graduate and succeed in post-secondary environments.

Domus staff use the *Thoughts, Emotions, and Behaviors (TEB)* curriculum, which teaches cognitive behavioral skills to help young people regulate emotions and handle challenges. To support new staff in delivering TEB skills effectively, they participate in weekly training and coaching sessions during their first 10 months that equip them with competencies to teach TEB skills to youth. Then, all staff receive ongoing, bi-weekly supervision with Domus's Clinical Director to discuss how to leverage TEB skills to support young people on their caseloads.

For Margaret, that means she checks in with her students every morning to ensure they arrive at school and feel confident for the day. "Almost every day I use 'charge up' with my students," she says about one of the five core TEB skills. She learns TikTok dances as a relatable, tangible way to help students internalize the skill. "We take a breather, put on music, and dance. It shifts their energy, then they feel good and go to class. I remind them they can do this anytime without me."

"If a student needs to speak with a teacher and they don't feel comfortable or confident enough, we turn it into a ladder," Margaret continues, explaining "face fears," which is another TEB skill. "If talking to a teacher alone is 100% uncomfortable, then emailing them is 80%, talking with me in the room is 50%, and if I do the talking while they watch, that's 0% - they're comfortable with that. So, then the next time something is going on, you already did it with me so now it's your turn. Let's go up the ladder of discomfort instead of down."

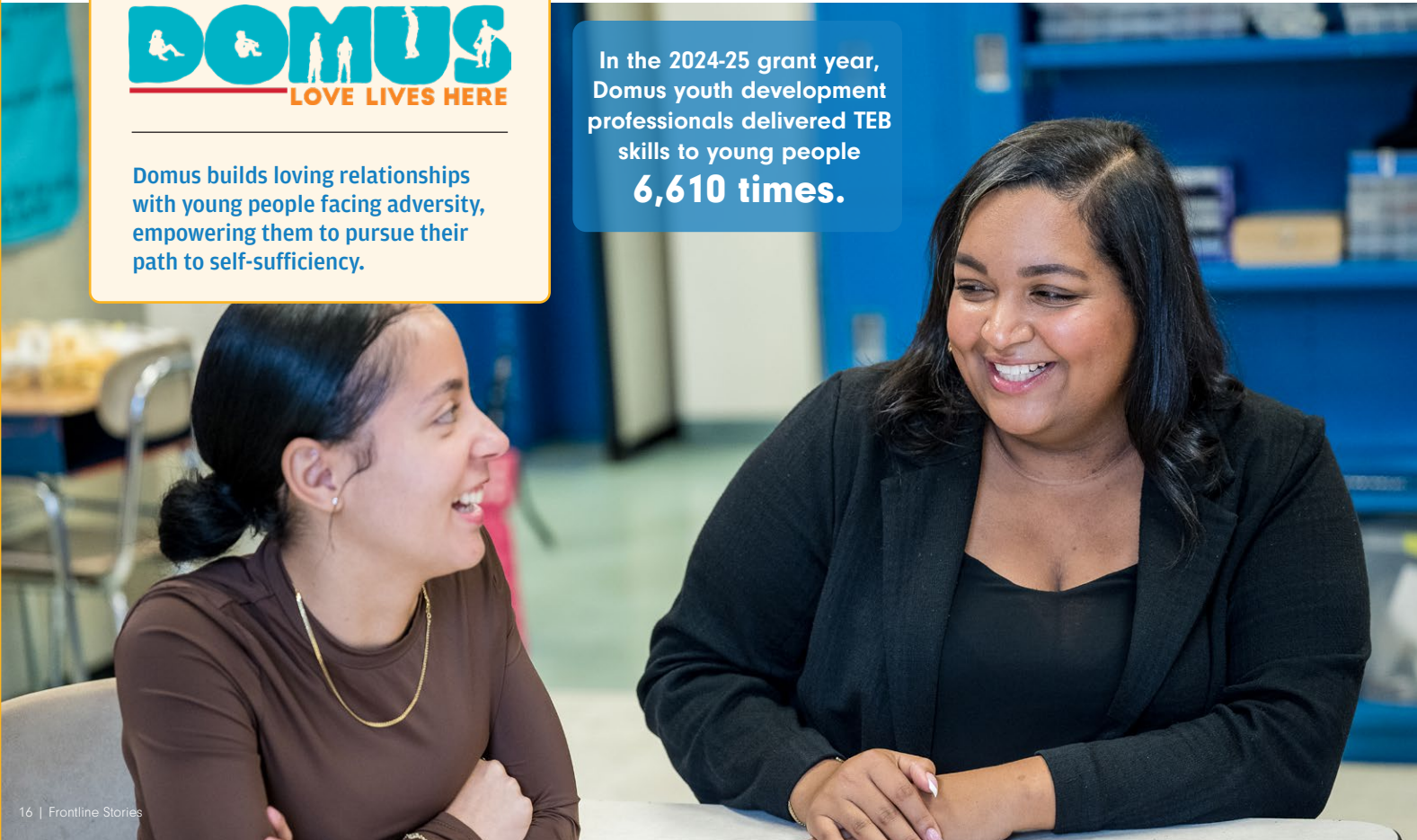
In a role where trust is everything, Margaret builds skills by showing up every day without judgment. "It's about consistency, compassion, and being someone they can count on," she says. "I want to make students feel how my Family Advocates made me feel - seen and heard."

### Stamford, CT



Domus builds loving relationships with young people facing adversity, empowering them to pursue their path to self-sufficiency.

In the 2024-25 grant year, Domus youth development professionals delivered TEB skills to young people **6,610 times.**



Forge City Works serves people in the Hartford community who have barriers to employment by providing job training in the food and hospitality industry to help them achieve sustainable careers.

**FORGE CITY WORKS**  
Hartford, CT

In the 2024-25 grant year, **76% of graduates** of Forge City Works' program sustained continuous employment for 12 months.

"Work can be stressful, especially for our trainees who either have not had a job before, or have never really been able to keep one," says Logan Carruba, Lead Case Manager at Forge City Works in Hartford. As part of their job training program, he coaches and supports trainees with navigating the barriers they face in life while managing the stresses of work as they progress through a program that is designed to increasingly mirror a real-world job experience.

"They didn't have people to tell them how to act at a job. All those like unspoken rules, like how to communicate with your coworkers, what to say, what not to say...that's where my classes and one-on-one case management meetings come in."

Logan teaches classes on soft skills and cognitive behavioral techniques and provides coaching in the application of those skills as young people progress through the Forge City Works program, helping them to improve their reliability, communication, and teamwork as well as strengthen their emotional regulation to appropriately respond to pressure and demands in the workplace.

During case management, he "provides [trainees] with the space and the opportunity

to talk and go over things. And I think it helps that I'm their teacher and I'm the person that's with them at the beginning stages, but I'm not their trainer and I'm not their boss over there at the restaurant...I'm one step removed, so it's a safe space to be able to talk to someone who knows about the places they're working and the people that they're working with."

Trainees are also learning essential culinary competencies through kitchen labs - safety and sanitation, knife cuts, baking, roasting, sautéing, and more - before they move to shadow shifts and then internships at one of Forge City Works' culinary social enterprises.

"Because of the soft skills we teach, our program is more than just a job. It helps [trainees] learn useful skills, language, and tools they might not have heard before," Logan explains. "We are a learning environment and a work setting in the same space and they get paid for it all. They can learn something then that same day or next week go onto shift and practice it at the same time."

As Logan reflects on his work with trainees at Forge City Works, he says, "I've seen people overcome their struggles and conquer their goals. They get jobs and, more importantly, start on career paths that they love."

When asked why her work at Our Piece of the Pie (OPP) in Hartford matters, Tajah Ryder's eyes well with tears of pride. "A couple days ago, I moved my first young person into college," she says. Tajah is a Life Skills Specialist in the LAUNCH Program, a collaboration with the Department of Children and Families (DCF). She provides mentorship, guidance, and goal setting to young people on her caseload to advance their personal, academic, and workforce readiness.

"I've been working with her for about three years." Tajah says, "She was very quiet, kind of shy, and would just observe things. Eventually, she started engaging in the life skills workshops, connecting with me, and then I was able to understand her interests. She definitely created a bond with me and our staff. And we slowly encouraged her to engage with her peers, because she would tend to be a little introverted, and then, she just blossomed."

Tajah built an individualized plan for this young woman, as she does for all the young people on her caseload at OPP, to provide academic support, post-secondary exploration, job readiness training, and internships aligned with her interests.

Then, together, they set goals, built timelines, and structured steps to accomplish them. She says, "I'm a partner in creating that plan, letting them be in the driver's seat to narrate what that story is to get those goals met. For my young people in foster care, I think they've been very used to the system speaking for them, and it's very important that they feel empowered to narrate their own story and to be the social change agents they need in their own lives."

With Tajah's support, that young woman "went from just quietly observing in the leadership board meetings to running our statewide meetings for the DCF Commissioner and running the statewide youth summits. She told me that a few years back, she didn't see herself even going to college." Now, DCF is funding a full scholarship for the young woman to attend the University of New Haven to pursue her dream of working in criminal justice.

Tajah reflects on this transformative relationship, saying, "Seeing her build her confidence, watching her excitement, watching her just feel so proud of these opportunities that are coming to her fills me with so much joy. She's like, 'I don't know why people keep asking me to host this and lead this.' And I say, 'You know exactly why, because you're a natural-born leader.'"



In the 2024-25 grant year, Roca youth workers made **12,536 relentless outreach attempts.**

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.



"Relentless outreach is nonstop," explains Taylor Spyros, a Senior Youth Worker at Roca Inc's Hartford Young Women's Program. "If you slam the door in my face a hundred times, I'm still going to show up that 101st time."

Taylor works with Hartford's highest risk young women, many of whom are mothers, who are caught in cycles of trauma and violence. She builds transformative relationships, teaches cognitive behavioral skills to help them better regulate their emotions, and guides them toward safer, more stable futures. But first, she and Roca's other youth workers need to convince their young people to even be part of Roca's program in the first place.

"A lot of our girls, they might avoid us. They might not answer you." Taylor says. "But relentless outreach means calling them, calling their schools, maybe parents, friends. I'll go into the community, knock on doors, neighbors' doors, ask if they've seen her. I'm trying to find her to show that we are a support, and we're here to help in any way."

Relentless outreach often starts with helping young people meet their basic needs. "I'm bringing care packages, like hygiene bags or diapers, to girls we're trying to get into the program," she says. "Once you get past that, you build that transformational relationship and it's

like they'll talk to you about anything. They'll call you anytime of the day, like, 'Hey, I just want to chat. I need support. I just want to vent right now.'"

Once there is trust, Taylor leverages it to guide a young woman to make positive changes. "Having those tough conversations comes with transformational relationships. It's more like you could get to the nitty gritty and really talk about what's going on and face the adversity that the girls are going through. Telling them, 'Hey, we need to make some changes. And that's what I'm here to help you with,'" she says.

In these conversations, Taylor uses cognitive behavioral techniques to help young people reflect, process, and make better decisions. "We teach the girls brain science and about trauma, and we show them, we can rewire our brains. The CBT skills definitely help slow their cycles and let them think before they act."

"It's definitely a journey to get there," Taylor says with a smile, thinking about one young woman in particular. "Lots of ups and downs. Lots of tough conversations. Lots of screaming, crying... but I think that because I was relentless with her, I didn't give up on her, and I was always there for her, it created a transformational relationship."

Hartford, CT



Our Piece of the Pie®, Inc. (OPP®) empowers youth with the key competencies needed to overcome barriers and succeed in education, employment, and life.

**74% of eligible young people** enrolled in post-secondary education after completing OPP's program in the 2024-2205 grant year.



# LEARNING AGENDA

A continued strength of CTOP's approach to capacity building is its practice of leveraging the expertise of our community network to support the development of new skills and competencies for grantee partners' staff. Over the last year, CTOP hosted the annual Grantee Partner Convening and organized three other different cross-cohort workshop series.

## Grantee Partner Convening

With nearly 60 participants across all seven grantee partner organizations, the theme of this year's convening was preparing young people for the workforce. The day began with a Problem of Practice protocol, for which organizational leaders courageously identified adaptive challenges to discuss with a small group of individuals across different organizations. The protocol supports the group to analyze the problem by asking probing questions, exploring different perspectives, and collaboratively brainstorming paths forward for the presenter. Grantee partners also shared successes through peer learning workshops, spotlighting areas of growth and effective practices from which others could learn. To end the day, Kathryn Hauser, award-winning journalist and news anchor for WTNH, moderated a panel conversation that included leaders from Nuvance Health, part of Northwell Health, and O&G Industries as well as young people, focused on how nonprofits and employers can partner together to create career pathways for young people.

**98%**

of participants agreed that the convening helps their teams to improve their work.



## PDLC Refresher Workshops

Last year, CTOP piloted a Professional Development and Learning Community (PDLC) series that supported recently promoted mid-level managers at our grantee partner organizations to build skills and competencies needed to succeed in their new new supervisory roles. This year, CTOP facilitated refresher workshops for the cohort focused on application. Participants came to these sessions with real examples of challenges from their day-to-day work, and with the CTOP team's support, they engaged in role plays of these scenarios to prepare to execute coaching and management conversations with their supervisees.

**92%**

of participants found both workshops very relevant to their professional development needs.

## Program Model Workshops

Three of CTOP's grantee partners - COMPASS Youth Collaborative, CTVIP, and Catalyst CT's StreetSafe Bridgeport - work with the highest-risk young people in our state who are experiencing the most severe forms of disconnection including involvement in community violence. To support the relatively more nascent programs, COMPASS Youth Collaborative hosted CTVIP and StreetSafe for a series of workshops to learn about COMPASS's theory of change and program design along with how they use data to drive positive outcomes. With coaching from CTOP, the CTVIP and StreetSafe teams worked with the COMPASS team to apply their learnings in refining their own programs, staffing structures, and supervision systems.

**100%**

of organizations rated these cross-cohort learning collaborations as helpful or very helpful.

## Project Management Workshop

CTOP designed and delivered a training in project management, enhancing the ability of participants to plan, execute, and manage projects. During the workshop, participants identified key milestones and timelines for upcoming projects, created communications and stakeholder management plans, and drafted risk registers to better anticipate and mitigate potential challenges. After the workshop, CTOP's Portfolio Associates, Emily Bonzagni and Zari Havercome, provided one-on-one coaching to a subset of participants to support the planning and successful execution of their projects while strengthening organizational systems for effectively managing projects.

**100%**

of participants reported feeling prepared or very prepared to manage projects at their organizations.

The CTOP team will continue to be responsive to the learning needs of our grantee partners, developing more opportunities for them to learn and grow alongside and from one another in the year ahead.

## Reflecting on Pathways to Careers

Last year, CTOP launched Pathways to Careers (P2C) – a new strategic framework designed to help young people who are severely disconnected from education and employment reconnect not just to jobs, but to meaningful career paths that promise upward mobility for themselves and their families.

In its inaugural year, the P2C framework supported the development of two partnerships: one between COMPASS Youth Collaborative and Forge City Works, and the second between Roca Hartford and Forge City Works. These partnerships were designed to create a seamless continuum of programming across two organizations, where COMPASS and Roca deliver their specialized services such as relentless outreach, crisis response, initial cognitive behavioral skill development, and foundational building of employment skills to cultivate a young person’s readiness

to transition successfully into Forge City Works’ robust job training program, where young people continue to build the hard and soft skills needed to succeed in sustainable careers.

In the first year of piloting these partnerships, the organizations aligned on shared indicators of a young person’s readiness for referral to the pathway and planned how to integrate program activities and work together as partners to support youth along their full journeys. With CTOP’s coaching, the organizations met regularly to reflect on youths’ progression and plan for additional supports, as well as to step back, assess, and improve the design of their partnership. As a result, young people are now successfully moving through the pathway, graduating from Forge City Works with hands-on culinary skills, ready for their careers.

**His mood is different, his attitude is different.**

Rahean didn’t have enough credits to graduate from high school, but at Forge City Works he thrived – earning 100% reliability scores, and suddenly Jayce, his Peacebuilder at COMPASS, says, “His mood is different, his attitude is different.” From baking to espresso bar to serving and back of house, Rahean mastered each training station at Forge City Works’ social enterprises and qualified for an internship position as a line cook at Fire x Forge.

“Forge City Works has been her opportunity to really blossom, I’ve seen different phases of her and in this one she is really striving to succeed. Before she lacked self-motivation and confidence and Forge has given her structure and made her realize she has more potential than she knew,” says Andrea, a youth worker at Roca Hartford about Alice\* who entered their P2C Partnership with Forge City Works.

\*Alice is a pseudonym

**Forge has given her structure and made her realize she has more potential than she knew.**



**A New Partnership**




Our Piece of the Pie.

This year, CTOP applied lessons learned from its first pilots to support the design of a new P2C partnership between COMPASS and Our Piece of the Pie (OPP). Unlike previous P2C partnerships, OPP offers a wide range of paid career pathways as a large multi-service organization, including in-house social enterprises, service-learning projects, and certification programs and credentials in industries such as IT, healthcare, construction, transportation, security, and manufacturing.

Differentiating this design series was that in contrast to the limited experience that previous P2C partners had working together, COMPASS and OPP had a history of informal partnership and shared youth. Given that context and the complexity of designing for multiple career pathways within OPP, the CTOP team implemented the following enhancements to design and piloting to improve clarity and alignment:

- Engaged a broader group of staff from both organizations in the co-design process to ensure responsiveness to on-the-ground realities and facilitate buy-in.

- Extended the design phase to support more relationship building and trust development as well as account for the range of career pathways at OPP.
- Created formal training for frontline staff not involved in design sessions so that all program team members, from outreach workers to team leads and directors, had a shared understanding of the pathway’s purpose, process, and expectations.

This P2C partnership is already streamlining operations and improving communication and collaboration between COMPASS and OPP, including enabling more consistent and responsive supports for the more than 25 young people already dually enrolled as they move through the pathway, creating more opportunities for young people to access careers that lead to long-term success and self-sufficiency.



## Academy for Career Readiness at NuVance Health

This year, Dalio Education and NuVance Health, part of Northwell Health, partnered to launch the Academy for Career Readiness, a new initiative designed to prepare young people experiencing disconnection in Norwalk for meaningful careers in healthcare. With a focus on youth ages 18-26 who are not enrolled in high school and unemployed, the Academy will help young people navigate barriers while helping to address the critical shortage of healthcare workers in Connecticut.

The Dalio Education and CTOP team is applying frameworks, practices, and lessons learned from our work with CTOP's seven grantee partners to design and implement the Academy for Career Readiness as a multi-year pathway where participants are paid to develop technical and professional skills necessary to succeed in the healthcare workforce.

The program begins with one-on-one case management meetings to assess and address basic needs, with Domus Kids as the partner provider of these initial services. Once young people are stabilized, they progress to classroom-based job readiness programming, and begin practicing hard and soft skills while cycling through shadow shifts of different career pathways at Norwalk Hospital. Based on their workforce training and immersive experience, participants select a career specialization they want to pursue.

Throughout the program, case managers continue to support participants in overcoming barriers to employment such as

transportation, childcare, housing, and food insecurity. Then once employed on a path to self-sufficiency, participants receive ongoing support in career counseling, as well as in accessing internal mobility pathways and continuing education with tuition assistance.

**How will young people be recruited and supported?** In partnership with CTOP Grantee Partner Domus Kids, NuVance Health identifies and enrolls participants while providing continuous case management and support services.

**What skills and experiences will prepare participants for success?** The program integrates professional competencies from the National Association of College and Employers like communication, reliability, and teamwork, as well as technical skill development with hands-on training in high-demand healthcare roles.

**How will impact be measured?** The Academy aims to provide full-time employment with potential for career growth, while building a sustainable pipeline for the healthcare workforce.

By aligning the expertise of public, private, and philanthropic partners, the Academy will demonstrate how cross-sector collaboration can create real, measurable outcomes for young people who have been chronically underserved when intentionally designed to meet their specific needs, while strengthening the healthcare system that is vital to Connecticut's future.



NuVance Health is joining Northwell



investment from Dalio Education over four years.



young people to receive support services and a path to gainful employment in the first three years.



of comprehensive support including case management, basic needs planning, wraparound services, mentorship, and career counseling.



### Pathway Specialization Areas:

- Patient Care Technician
- Environmental Services Associate
- Patient Services Transporter
- Patient Access Liaison
- Unit Secretary
- Medical Practice Patient Representative



# NEW HAVEN GUN VIOLENCE PROBLEM ANALYSIS

In furtherance of our research agenda, CTOP has been providing capacity building support to Connecticut municipalities to analyze gun violence data in support of strengthening their Offices of Violence Prevention (OVPs) and creating operational plans to reduce the gun violence that impacts CTOP's target population in their cities. This section highlights New Haven's analysis, which is furthest along to date.

With technical assistance from Boston Consulting Group (BCG), CTOP worked with the City of New Haven to conduct a gun violence problem analysis using data from the New Haven Police Department from 2019 to 2024. To support the development of Connecticut's first municipal OVP, this analysis, alongside city-wide ecosystem mapping and a benchmarking study of high-functioning OVPs nationwide, will help New Haven improve its community violence intervention infrastructure. This improved system will

aid New Haven's OVP with implementing programs that can drive down community violence and make the Elm City's young people safer. To maintain this progress into the future, New Haven is using the data and tools developed with BCG to create a five-year strategic plan that will enable the city to provide more effective services, enhance collaboration with community-based organizations and City stakeholders, and expand the utilization of data for decision making to better support victims of gun violence, prevent individuals from using firearms to harm others, and reduce recidivism across high-risk populations.

Additionally, the research team presented to the New Haven Community Advisory Board on multiple occasions to gather their input and feedback, since any quantitative analysis is only as meaningful as its ability to represent the lived experiences of residents of New Haven.

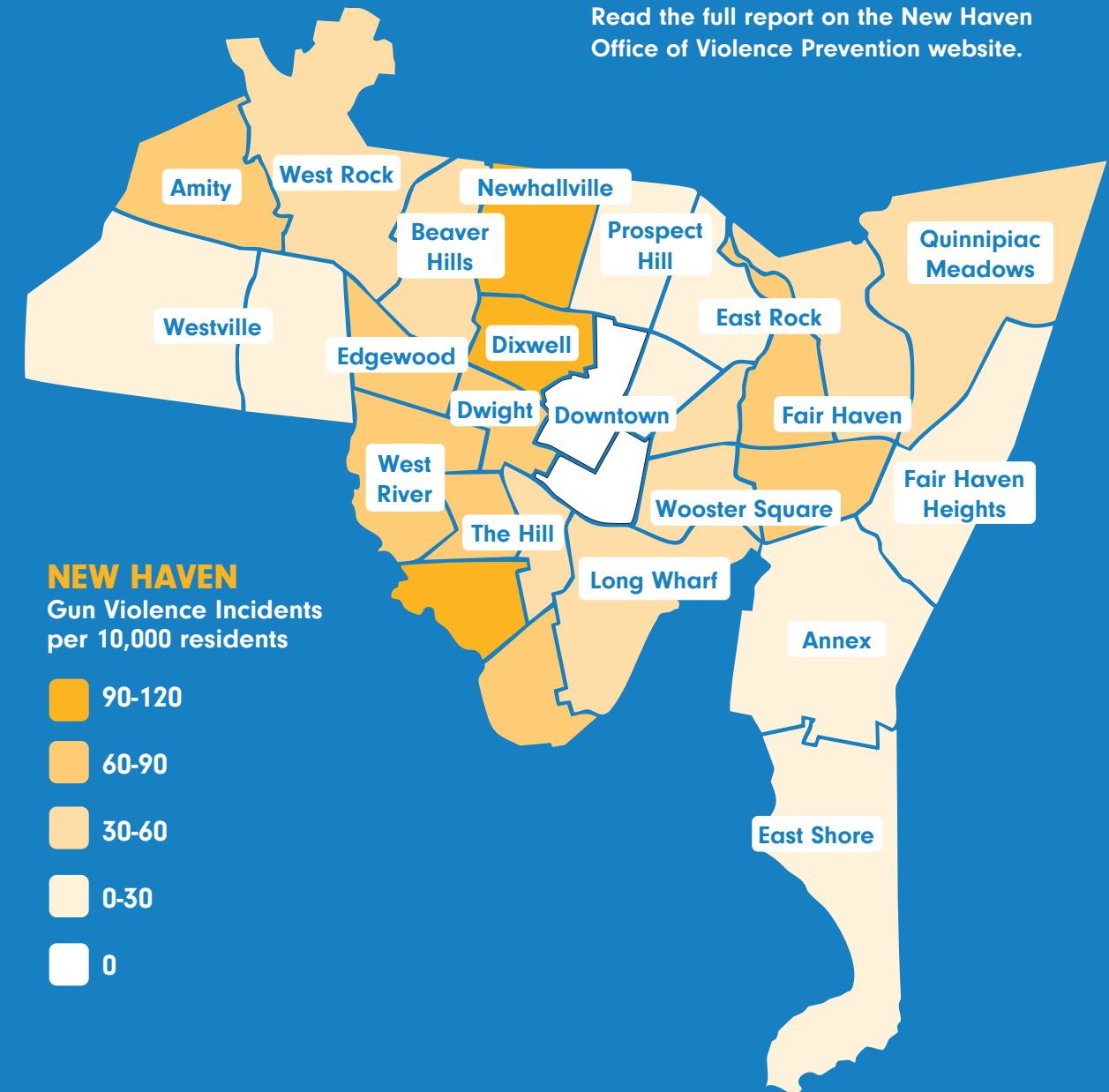
## Based on the data, several key trends emerged:

- Despite making up only 4% of Connecticut's population, New Haven accounted for 20% of the state's firearm homicides and 25% of Connecticut's nonfatal shootings.
- Gun violence peaks in the summer months, particularly among young people. 46% of teenage-involved incidents occurred between May and August.
- In 2024, 49% of victims of gun violence were under 24 years old, which is an increase year over year.
- Neighborhoods with more gun violence experience worse social determinants of health including lower median incomes, higher suspension and chronic absenteeism rates, lower likelihood of graduation, reduced life expectancy, lower access to health insurance, and reduced sleep.

## As a result of this analysis, the City of New Haven and the New Haven Police Department committed to these recommendations:

- Provide supports like housing, mental health, childcare, employment, education, and basic needs to victims of gun violence by expanding the Victim Services Support Network.
- Increase life coaching and use of credible messengers for young people at risk of gun violence.
- Provide reentry preparation for currently incarcerated individuals and increase employment and housing services for those returning from incarceration at risk for gun violence.
- Partner with local and state agencies to ensure data collection and sharing is aligned with the New Haven Community and OVP needs.

Read the full report on the New Haven Office of Violence Prevention website.



# DATALINKCT UPDATE CONNECTICUT'S UNSPOKEN CRISIS

Last year, the Connecticut Legislature passed HB5437, which mandated the state to annually report on youth experiencing disconnection to the legislature. Connecticut's longitudinal data system, formerly P20WIN, now DataLinkCT, combines datasets from 15 agencies to examine how individuals navigate education pathways into the workforce while utilizing supportive services. Furthering its mission of creating sustainable systems, CTOP and Dalio Education engaged Boston Consulting Group (BCG) to build the capacity of the DataLinkCT system to be able replicate the data analysis in our report, *Connecticut's Unspoken Crisis: Getting Young People Back on Track*, every year.

Senior Portfolio Director and data scientist Adhlere Coffy facilitated monthly meetings with DataLinkCT and BCG to replicate the report, this time with the State leading the development process. In a rapid research sprint, BCG and Dalio Education, through CTOP, supported the DataLinkCT team in moving from research questions to finalized report in fewer months than it took to just compile data for the original report published in 2023.

As a first-of-its-kind analysis of specific populations using the State's longitudinal data system, CTOP and Dalio Education hope that this new approach to quantitatively examining the effects of statewide services will drive decision-making that benefits vulnerable young people who would otherwise fall through the cracks.



## Key Findings from the 2025 Report compared to CT's Unspoken Crisis

↓ 7,000

7,000 (~10%) fewer young people were moderately or severely disconnected in Connecticut, compared to the first report, bringing the total to ~57,000 young people.

↓ 6,000

6,000 (~10%) fewer young people were at risk in Connecticut, compared to the first report, bringing the total to ~49,000 young people.

This variation in counts of young people across successive years demonstrates the need to focus on trends in population dynamics instead of focusing on data from a single year. These analyses must be combined with an examination of policies, programs, or legislation enacted during the period that may be contributing significantly to the observed changes.

The full 2025 Disconnected and At-Risk Youth Report is available on DataLinkCT's website.

# LOOKING AHEAD

Next year, the Connecticut Opportunity Project will continue our core capacity building work with grantees, as well as engage key workforce partners and municipalities to build programs that create more pathways to self-sufficiency for young people who are severely off-track and experiencing disconnection in our state.

## CBT with Community Psychiatry PRIDE

Next year, CTOP will be partnering with clinicians at Community Psychiatry PRIDE at Massachusetts General Hospital to train our team and grantee partners' staff in the *Thoughts, Emotions, and Behaviors (TEB)* curriculum. This cognitive behavioral skill curriculum was developed for non-clinicians to teach young people the skills needed to better regulate their emotions, build resiliency, and interrupt negative thought and behavior cycles. By the end of the 10-month training and coaching series, each organization will have the internal capacity to deliver the TEB curriculum with fidelity. And in parallel to the training and coaching program, select members from each organization will become certified to coach and develop staff to deliver TEB continuously.

## Gun Violence Problem Analyses

To expand on the New Haven Gun Violence Problem Analysis work, CTOP and Boston Consulting Group will provide technical assistance and capacity building support to Hartford and Bridgeport to support those municipal governments and police departments in analyzing their gun violence data and using it to build out the infrastructure of their respective Offices of Violence Prevention, reduce gun violence in their cities, and provide coordinated services for victims. The resulting strategic plans will be developed and published in 2026.

## Building Capacity at Manufacturing and Technical Community Hub (MATCH)



Through CTOP, Dalio Education will invest in MATCH in New Haven to build out its workforce training program and create stronger career pathways in manufacturing for young people in CTOP's target population. MATCH equips participants with essential technical skills like shop math, precision measuring, welding, blueprint reading, and how to use hand and power tools, while also helping them build critical soft skills in reliability, communication, and teamwork. Throughout the program, the MATCH team supports their participants through one-on-one case management and job coaching to overcome obstacles, develop a resume, and prepare for interviews so that they can secure high-quality jobs in the manufacturing industry that promise opportunities for upward mobility.

Over the summer and fall of 2025, CTOP facilitated a series of workshops with the MATCH team focused on developing an operational theory of change. Through this process, MATCH refined its mission statement, clearly defined its target population, articulated the program's outcomes, and established the high-level staffing plan that will be required to implement their theory of change over the next several years.





# ABOUT CTOP

CTOP is founded, 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 off-track or disconnected young people ages 14 to 26 in order to help them re-engage in and complete secondary education or a credential, then transition successfully to a post-secondary pathway leading to satisfying employment at a living wage that supports their self-sufficiency.

## CTOP PROGRAM TEAM



**Emily Bonzagni**  
Portfolio Associate



**Adhlere Coffy**  
Senior Portfolio Director



**Barbara Dalio**  
Co-Founder



**Zari Havercome**  
Portfolio Associate



**Bob Flynn**  
Director of Workforce Initiatives



**Dinorah Martinez**  
Executive Assistant



**Samantha Miller**  
Portfolio Director



**Amanda Olberg**  
Senior Portfolio Director



**Rosa Ortiz**  
Chief of Staff

### CTOP INVESTMENTS FOR THE 2024-25 FISCAL YEAR



Cohort	Organization	Investment Amount
Cohort 1	COMPASS Youth Collaborative	\$1,022,000
	Domus Kids	\$1,040,000
	Our Piece of the Pie	\$1,020,000
Cohort 2	CT Violence Intervention and Prevention	\$770,000
	Catalyst CT (formerly Regional Youth Adult Social Action Partnership)	\$770,000
	Roca Hartford Young Women’s Program	\$1,010,000
Cohort 3	Forge City Works	\$1,150,000
Cohort 4	MATCH	\$60,000
<b>In-Kind Investments</b>		<b>\$1,000,000+</b>
<b>Total Investments</b>		<b>\$7,842,000</b>

As a social investment fund of Dalio Education, CTOP makes multi-year general operating support grants with funding level determined based on an organization’s developmental stage and budget size. CTOP also provides access to additional resources for capacity building as indicated by developmental progression, including in-kind investments in the form of consultation with CTOP’s team and technical assistance from CTOP’s network of vendors as well as restricted grants for targeted purposes. Some restricted grants are made via matching funds that leverage investments from other private and public funders.



Founded by Barbara Dalio, Dalio Education partners with educators, schools, non-profit organizations, and communities across Connecticut to drive positive youth outcomes by elevating the impact of research and data.

Dalio Education created the Connecticut Opportunity Project as a social investment fund to invest in and help strengthen non-profit organizations in Connecticut serving youth who are severely off-track or disconnected from school and employment.

[www.ctopportunityproject.org](http://www.ctopportunityproject.org)

 [@ctopportunity](https://twitter.com/ctopportunity)

