

SERVING DISCONNECTED YOUTH BETTER

THE CONNECTICUT OPPORTUNITY PROJECT'S
2022 ANNUAL REPORT



Dalio
Education



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“The Opportunity Project has shown an incredible commitment to young people needing the most intensive support, and their investments have played a critical role in building, growing, and sustaining partnerships that help those young people get on the path to meaningful employment.”

- Luke Bronin,
Mayor of Hartford

LETTER FROM THE CO-FOUNDER

Every year brings new hopes, challenges, lessons learned, and satisfactions with our accomplishments.

This year we are commissioning three studies that will give us much more precise data that will allow us to be even more effective. Coming to the realization that we need to go deeper with our research to better understand severely off-track and disconnected youth is part of our continuing growth.

The quote “the more I learn, the less I realize I know” by Socrates comes to mind as we learn that more research is needed to take us into the future to better understand the complexities of the lives of the youth we are working with.

I am hopeful that this research will bring out the faces and the humanity of this invisible population of young people and help to reveal the many layers of supports that are called for to tackle the issues they face. With everybody coming together to leverage our different skill sets and resources, we can support young people in getting back on-track, re-engaged in school and work, and visualizing the possibilities ahead of them.

With gratitude for the tremendous commitment from our team and the youth-serving organizations,

Barbara Dalio

Co-Founder, Connecticut Opportunity Project

LETTER FROM THE DIRECTOR

A year has passed since we published CTOP's first Annual Report and it is both exhilarating and humbling to take stock of what our grantee partners and team have accomplished together in the second year of CTOP's 10-year social investment strategy. CTOP's mission continues to be to invest in and help strengthen youth-serving organizations in Connecticut so they can work effectively, reliably, and sustainably with severely 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.

This past year has been a very busy and exciting one for CTOP, one where the overarching theme has been one of growth: in the programming and organizational capacities of our grantee partners, and within CTOP's team to support an expanded scope of work with additional operational capacities.

Turning first to our grantee partners, across the board they have improved their programming, especially for young people who are severely off-track or disconnected, by adopting and implementing evidence-informed practices such as the use of Cognitive Behavioral Theory, an approach grounded in brain science that has proven very helpful to young people who have been traumatized repeatedly and are living lives of very high and unremitting stress associated with the constant threat of violence and the need to be alert to protect oneself. These organizations also ground all their work in the provision of deeply caring adults, many of whom are credible messengers from the same background as the young people with whom they are working, who accept these young people unconditionally while at the same time holding them to high standards and having high expectations for their eventual success.

Last year we reported that our grantee partners in aggregate were providing 387 active slots to these youths, which means that 387 young people who fully met the criteria for being severely off-track and disconnected were getting the interventions, supports, and opportunities they needed to turn their lives around – and getting them at the right level of frequency and intensity. This year, as the chart in the body of this report will show, our grantee partners have continued to build their program capacities and together delivered 754 active slots (far exceeding our projection for the current year made in last year's report of 650).

Over the course of our work to date, we have learned that for young people who are disconnected, and particularly for those who are severely disconnected, there is a strong likelihood that they will experience involvement with the criminal justice system, often including incarceration – which results in a period of time that is lost as a possible opportunity for engagement in the kinds of programming that our grantee partners provide, along with a compounding of the barriers they face to rejoining society successfully. In response to this reality and so that we could make social investments that could support this subgroup of youth through to full employment, CTOP decided this year to extend upwards the upper age boundary for its target population from 22 to 26.

Looking to the year ahead, we will advance a research agenda comprised of three studies that will update our understanding of the realities faced by young people who are severely off-track and disconnected, and how nonprofit organizations and communities can work most effectively to support young people in achieving success. We also expect to add new grantee partners to our portfolio through investments that help to build pathways within Connecticut's largest cities for the most severely disconnected young people to ultimately reconnect to the workforce.

It is a humbling experience and a great privilege to work with and celebrate the achievements of our grantee partners. We encourage those interested in staying updated on our efforts in the year ahead to visit our website at ctopportunityproject.org and to follow us at [@ctopportunity](https://twitter.com/ctopportunity) on Twitter.

David Hunter

Director, Connecticut Opportunity Project



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 inequities 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:

- **Severely off-track youth** are enrolled in high school but show one or more indicators of being at risk of dropping out, including 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 perpetrating and/or being victimized by violence.

PERFORMANCE REPORT

The results our grantee partners have produced for severely off-track and disconnected youth in Connecticut over this past year are a testament to their incredible hard work and organizational growth. The three Key Performance Indicators (KPIs)¹ outlined below best capture these results in the form of the social value grantees have created - toward which CTOP has contributed, and for which CTOP holds itself accountable in terms of monitoring its own performance:



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

This KPI is critical 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 meet the program's enrollment criteria and receive the appropriate kinds and levels 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 KPI is defined in terms of participating in the full range and duration of core services and attaining the outcomes that the program has committed to delivering. 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 created much, if any, meaningful social value. [This KPI, therefore, tells us whether a program actually has helped the young people it serves.](#)

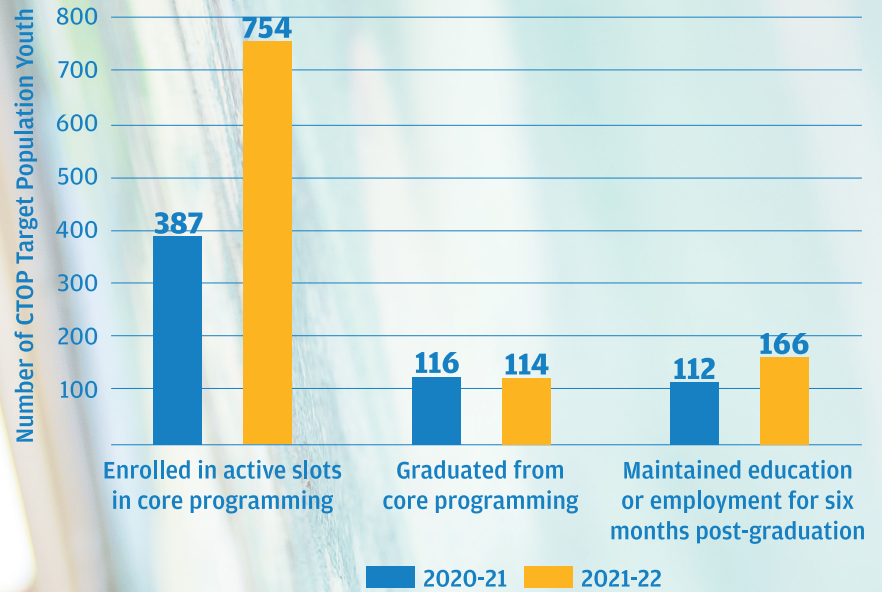
We are particularly energized by the number of active service slots our grantees were able to deliver this year, which exceeded our initial expectations - jumping from 387 last year to 754 in 2022, and surpassing our projection made last year for 2022 by over 100. These increases are especially promising because they happened even while some grantee partners have not yet reached a stage of organizational development where their program participants would count towards these outcomes - and moreover, that they happened in the context of the Covid 19 pandemic, which exacerbated the very conditions necessitating these programs in the first place and substantially increased the challenge and complexity associated with the work our grantees do.

¹ The full set of CTOP's KPIs is available at www.ctopportunityproject.org/results/performance-indicators.

Figure 1 shows CTOP's KPI data covering July 1, 2020 to June 30, 2022, which is aggregated across all of the grantees with whom CTOP worked during this period.

With regard to the second and third KPIs, we will note 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 for our three newest grantees (CTVIP, RYASAP, and Roca HYMP) and two years for our initial cohort of grantees. Therefore, the relatively small numbers for these two KPIs reflect in part the relatively limited window of time that program participants have had to progress through and graduate from their programs, or to subsequently go on to achieve six-month post-graduating outcomes. In the years to come, we expect these numbers to increase steadily.

Figure 1: Building Youth Outcomes through Service Delivery



“ [My family advocate] helped show me that things take time, it doesn't happen overnight, and I have to trust myself... ”

- Domus youth





2022 IN REVIEW

At the beginning of each grant year, grantees work together with their respective CTOP Portfolio Director 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 for each grantee will vary significantly. 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 2021-22 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 them in relationships to provide supports and opportunities that help them become ready, willing, and able to succeed in education, employment, and life.

COMPASS launched a redesigned program model in September 2021 to engage the youth they serve who are trapped in a cycle of violence and related trauma, often as the victims or drivers of violence. Through crisis intervention, relentless outreach to engage young people, and transformational relationships, COMPASS Peacebuilders are continually working with their young people on cognitive behavioral skills that help them start to think differently and, over time, change their behavior in ways that allow them to engage more productively in education and work.

Over the past year, COMPASS also began building out the array of supporting services it offers to help its young people succeed, such as clinical sessions with licensed social workers, and also prioritized the development and launch of a new Case Management System. Through this new data platform, COMPASS Peacebuilders can track and manage all of their youth intake, interactions, and outcomes, which allows them with the support of program managers to use data on a daily basis to drive their work with the youth on their caseload, including via a mobile app their team created for Peacebuilders to use while working out in the community.

“The gift of having CTOP as a funder is that they are more than just funders; they are partners. The Portfolio Directors provide technical assistance and support to help COMPASS leadership navigate challenges, increase organizational effectiveness, and achieve our goals. CTOP has made me a better leader and my team more effective.”

- Jackie Santiago Nazario,
Chief Executive Officer



Connecticut Violence Intervention Program (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.

“Our work at CTVIP focuses on providing direct intervention and behavioral change support to those at risk of violence in our community. I am elated beyond words that CTOP has invested their time and energy in our local program and has remained engaged. This collaboration makes us a better program, and equipped to make our community better.”

- Leonard Jahad,
Executive Director

Reflected in the significant growth in the skillset and professional development of staff, CTVIP has focused nearly exclusively on organizational learning over the past year to help amplify the ongoing delivery of services to young people. They maximized these gains by seizing opportunities to train their full staff in cognitive behavioral theory with the Roca Impact Institute while also engaging in financial management training with BDO-FMA and a Board development series with Bill Ryan. As Executive Director, Leonard Jahad promoted a learning orientation across the organization and exemplified this commitment to learning in his approach to capacity building - actively internalizing and translating content he encountered into concrete organizational knowledge that could later be leveraged once the appropriate resources were put in place. With the core competencies for organizational development established and a growing team in place to undertake the work, including a Programs Manager and Operations Manager, CTVIP will now look to implement what they have learned with the intention of facilitating meaningful organizational growth over the next year.

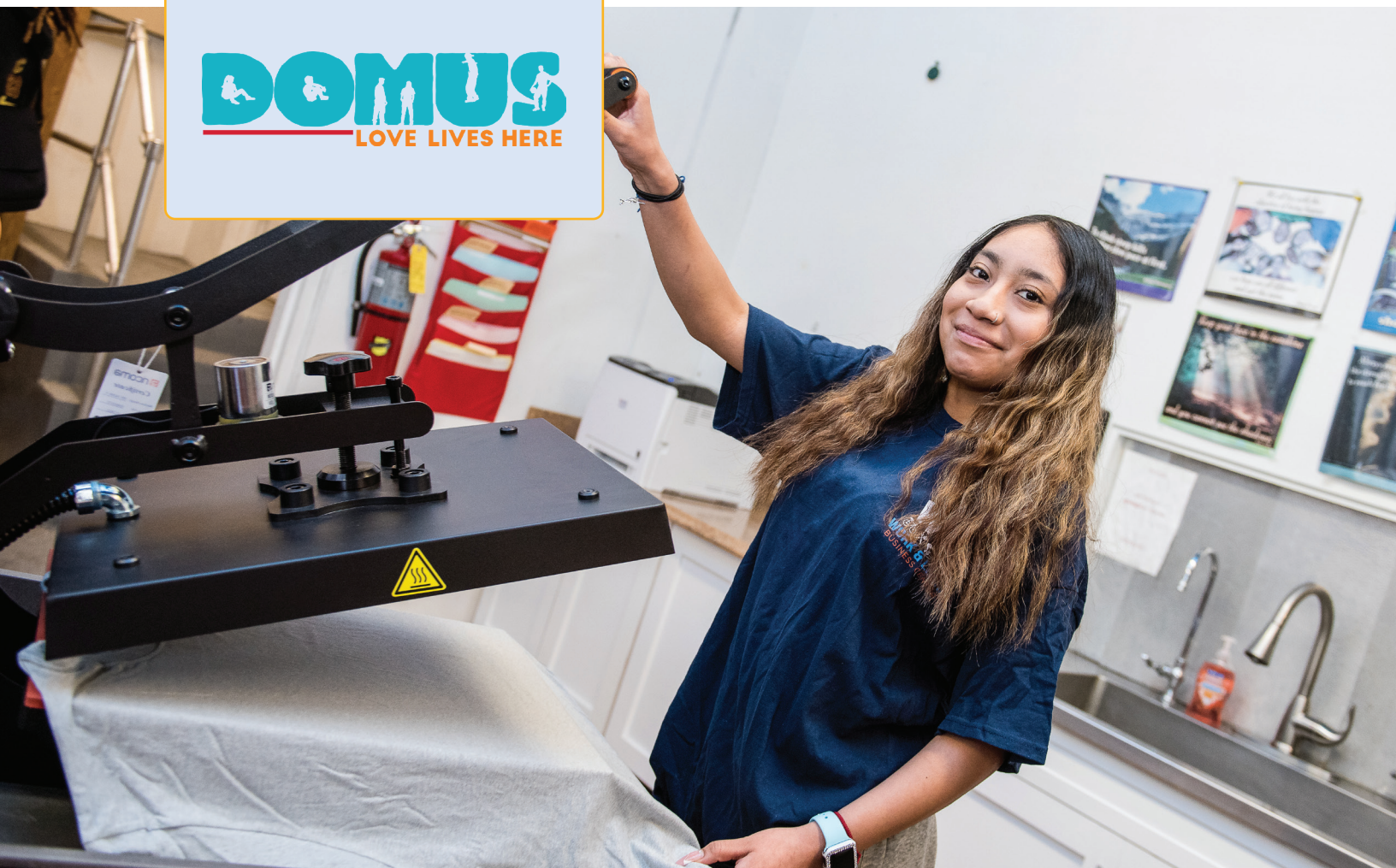
Domus builds loving relationships with young people facing adversity, empowering them to pursue their path to self-sufficiency.

“Being part of CTOP has helped me to grow exponentially as an Executive Director and has helped every member of the Domus staff to be better. The program has enabled me to see data and its value in a whole new way and is taking Domus to a new level of data-driven work. We are eternally grateful for the partnership.”

- Mike Duggan,
Executive Director

Over the past year, Domus completed training of its full staff in a skills-based cognitive-behavioral curriculum with Community Psychiatry PRIDE, allowing the organization to infuse the delivery of these skills across all of its programming to better support the youth they serve in improving their emotional regulation. Domus also launched and expanded its internally-operated social enterprises, which provide young people with paid experience working with Domus as their employer in a variety of contexts, ranging from building maintenance to culinary and customer services. Through this kind of transitional work experience, youth can practice and cultivate with the support of Domus staff the emotional regulation skills and corresponding behaviors that will help them to succeed in education and employment. Additionally, Domus continued to build out its school-based programming, adding a grade level at one of the two comprehensive high schools in Stamford, where it is based, while expanding the program to the district's alternative high school.

Domus also achieved a major milestone this year by delivering active service slots to 85% of the young people enrolled in its core programming, meaning that these youth received over the course of the year the dosage of services that the organization's theory of change says is required for them to ultimately achieve positive, long-term outcomes as a result of being served by Domus.





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

Under the leadership of Hector Rivera in his first year as CEO, OPP has succeeded in continuing its organizational development through dedicated effort and effective executive management. OPP refined their workforce development programming to better track youth progress and use performance management to create care coordination teams that monitor participant progression through the program resulting in improved employment outcomes. OPP has worked to translate the cognitive-behavioral skills its full staff has learned through training with Community Psychiatry PRIDE into organizational norms and practices that will serve as the primary vehicles for fostering stronger culture and staff engagement. The continuation of program documentation and process refinement has led to more effective supervision and programmatic decision-making by program directors, improved efficiency, and additional innovations in service delivery. Lastly, the addition of critical staff, both to fill vacancies and add vital organizational capacity, has given OPP the resources and expertise to position itself for concrete organizational development during the next grant year.

“As a result of our partnership with CTOP, Our Piece of the Pie has developed and begun to implement our business plan to ensure that we can fully maximize our organizational capacity and operationalize our Theory of Change. CTOP offers access to industry experts, encourages other strategic partnerships, and provides the resources to support the journey.”

- Hector Rivera,
Chief Executive Officer

Regional Youth Adult Social Action Partnership (RYASAP) works to ensure the safe and healthy development of youth, young adults, and families by actively engaging organizations, public officials, and community leaders around issues that matter most to the community.

RYASAP embarked on its capacity-building journey with the commitment to developing a business plan that will guide the activities to promote its evolution into a high-impact multi-service organization. The business plan charts the course of growth through deliberate action that RYASAP will take to boost core operations, improve resource utilization, and provide staff with the internal supports needed to drive organizational outcomes. In furtherance of bolstering internal operations, RYASAP worked with BDO-FMA to both deliver comprehensive financial management training to its staff and restructure the financial accounting system to improve decision-making and strategic planning.

Programmatically, RYASAP has focused its efforts on the training of its staff in cognitive behavioral theory, leading to the identification of core elements that can be integrated into their violence intervention program. The capstone of this widespread organizational improvement was a diligent commitment to supporting the maturity of organizational leadership with specific attention paid to empowering the Board in its stewardship and oversight of RYASAP's organizational improvement over time. The combination of these efforts has positioned RYASAP to coordinate its activities across multiple programs and dozens of staff to create a unified organization with a cohesive approach to driving change in the community it serves.

“Our engagement with CTOP has enabled us to look at our work strategically for long-term impact and invest in developing our people, our systems, and our processes to continually grow as an organization. Through this partnership we've been able to shift our thinking and plan our operational activities with greater intent and effectiveness.”

- Marc Donald,
Executive Director





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 has been working with critical risk young women and their children at the center of poverty and urban violence across Massachusetts for over a decade, employing a high-touch, trauma-informed approach based on sustained engagement over time and utilizing cognitive behavioral theory-based skill building to promote sustainable behavior change and break cycles of poverty and violence. After achieving positive outcomes in Massachusetts and following months of planning, Roca opened its doors to young women and children in Hartford in October 2021. In their nine months of program operations, the Roca Hartford Young Mothers Program (RHYMP) has received 92 referrals. To ensure that the program serves the most critical-risk young women and their children, every referral is relentlessly pursued to document eligibility and risk factors. Of the 92 referred, RHYMP ended the year with 50 young women who met the risk criteria and were actively engaged in intensive programming, 70% of whom were engaged in intentional contact with staff at least twice a week. Data tracking and performance management are built into the model to ensure that RHYMP is achieving its goals.

RHYMP knows that it is impossible to do this work alone and purposefully engages and partners with community and systems leaders to provide comprehensive support to young women and their children. This year, RHYMP’s engaged institutions work has resulted in coordination and collaborations with agencies such as the Department of Children and Families, probation, nonprofit organizations, the Hartford Police Department, and local high schools.

“With the support of CTOP, Roca has opened its doors to young women and mothers in crisis, serving over 50 participants ages 14 to 24 with over 60 young children ages 0 to 5 in its first year of operations in Hartford, who are often unseen and unreached, increasingly impacted by violence and instability, and for whom Roca is a last resort.”

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





THE YEAR AHEAD

As CTOP looks to the future, we are deepening our commitment to severely off-track and disconnected youth. Specifically, we will leverage the following initiatives to drive strategic investments focused on getting the hardest to reach young people across Connecticut on a path to gainful employment.

Six years after the publication of *Untapped Potential*, which detailed the barriers faced by off-track and disconnected youth across Connecticut, CTOP is launching the next phase of our Research Agenda to gain more insight into the experiences of such young people between the ages of 14 and 26 and to learn more about how to best re-engage them - with the goal that this research will inform and advance the work that CTOP, its grantee partners, and other organizations across our state are doing to put these young people on a post-secondary path that positively alters the trajectory of their lives.

Our commissioned research projects include:

Quantitative research to update *Untapped Potential*.

We commissioned Boston Consulting Group to conduct a new study of Connecticut's young people to report on the demographics and risk factors of youth between the ages of 14 to 26 who are disconnected from school or work or may become so. We hope this study results in a clear statewide understanding of the realities faced by young people who are off-track or disconnected; and contributes toward a renewed urgency for working collaboratively to help all young people achieve success.



Qualitative research to understand the lived experiences of young people who are disconnected.

We commissioned Community Science to undertake a robust qualitative research effort that utilizes culturally responsive inquiry through individual interviews and focus groups to illuminate the experiences of young people in their own voices. We hope this project will advance our collective understanding of the actual needs of young people - and thereby strengthen the ability of program design, service delivery, and advocacy to meet those requirements.



National landscape scan of the evidence base of effectiveness for achieving meaningful outcomes with disconnected young people.

We commissioned MDRC to conduct a thorough review of all research and evaluation findings that identify the program elements and practices that are effective in helping disconnected young people across the country improve their lives, in an undertaking that will also examine and differentiate among different sub-groups of disconnected youth. We hope this project will inform the design and implementation of evidence-informed programming for our target population.



Each of these research topics is substantial on its own, but we envision that together they will be more than the sum of their parts and meaningfully accelerate the work that CTOP, its grantee partners, and others are doing to connect youth who are disconnected to opportunities that ultimately lead to satisfying employment at a living wage that supports their self-sufficiency. We expect to do this in the following ways:

- Continue supporting our current portfolio of grantee partners through a combination of multi-year financial investments consisting of unrestricted grant dollars and additional non-financial support in the form of technical assistance and consultation as they continue to strengthen the work they are doing to engage severely off-track and disconnected youth in Connecticut;
- Pursue new strategic investments that will encourage and connect youth-serving organizations to create a continuum of programming that can prepare severely disconnected young adults for meaningful employment; and
- Explore opportunities to invest in even more nascent efforts than we have to date, where the talent, passion, and credibility exists to create and build up on an accelerated timeline an organization providing evidence-based programming to severely disconnected young adults.

We at CTOP are in absolute agreement with our grantee partners that more can be done to expand opportunities for severely off-track and disconnected youth, and together we will meet this opportunity with immense enthusiasm.

ABOUT CTOP

CTOP is founded, funded, and operated by Dario 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 severely 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.

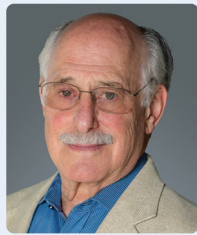
CTOP PROGRAM TEAM



Barbara Dario
Co-Founder



Andrew Ferguson
Co-Founder



David Hunter
Director



Adhlere Coffy
Portfolio Director



Samantha Miller
Portfolio Director



Amanda Olberg
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 2021-22

Cohort 1

COMPASS Youth Collaborative	\$1,000,000
Domus Kids	\$1,050,000
Our Piece of the Pie	\$1,050,000

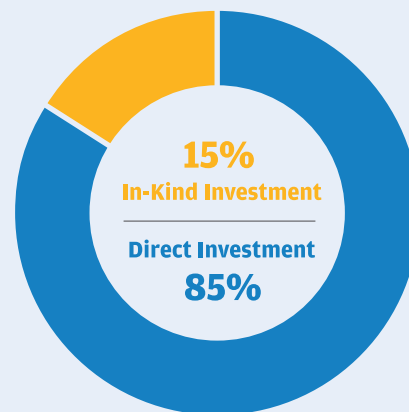
Cohort 2

Connecticut Violence Intervention Program	\$300,000
Regional Youth Adult Social Action Partnership	\$1,050,000
Roca Hartford Young Mothers Program	\$1,000,000
Roca Impact Institute	\$50,000

Total Direct Grant Investments \$5,500,000

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

Total Investments \$6,500,000+





“Through its thoughtful and comprehensive approach to capacity building, the Opportunity Project is helping its grantees strengthen their own organizations, and in turn increasing their impact on the young people they serve throughout the community as well.”

- Sam Cobbs, Chief Executive Officer,
Tipping Point Community



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www.ctopportunityproject.org

