

Testimony by Donna Cathey: Vice President of Integrated Programs/Our Piece of the Pie®, OPP®

Re: Legislature to maintain funding for youth employment initiative

Good Evening, Senator Harp, Representative Geragosian and members of the Appropriations Committee. I'm Donna Cathey, Vice President of Integrated Programs for Our Piece of the Pie® in Hartford and thank you for the opportunity to testify before you this evening. Our Piece of the Pie is a youth services agency with a 30-year proven track record of helping youth become successful, economically independent adults here in Connecticut.

While all of us are feeling the pain of these difficult economic times, young people, especially those in Connecticut's inner cities, are feeling this pain more acutely. Even before this economic downturn, young people were experiencing the lowest employment level in 60 years. The numbers are sobering. The Center for Labor Market Studies at Northeastern University estimates that youth accounted for 60% of the 1.2 million job losses reported during the past year. There is an estimated 4.5 million youth under the age of 25 who are out of school and out of work. According to the Bureau of Labor Statistics, the current unemployment rate for teens nationwide is 20.8 percent. We have an important role to play in assuring that young people are part of the recovery and rebuilding of the state's economy and infrastructure.

It is vital that our youth are prepared for the workforce of tomorrow. In Connecticut, our population of young people has decreased dramatically. Young people are fleeing Connecticut in big numbers.

To personalize these numbers, many youth who come to OPP's doors seeking opportunity, have to be turned away due to demand far exceeding supply. Last year more than 5,000 young people statewide benefited from a \$5 million in state funding, but thousands were turned away.

Last year at OPP, the state's \$1000 investment per slot was directly connected to Hartford youth in the form of stipend and wages. Summer Youth Employment dollars awarded to OPP, provided youth with an opportunity to earn between \$750 to \$918 for the summer; which in turn, fueled the local consumer markets like banking, retail, hospitality and transportation. It is important to me that you know your dollars are being directed where they will have the most impact directly to Hartford youth and to the state's economy in these difficult economic times. Agency's like OPP are committed to work tirelessly to continue developing and leveraging dollars to support full program funding levels

While it may be impossible to accommodate all of the young job seekers in these difficult economic times, I am asking you to maintain funding for youth employment initiatives in this budget cycle. Under the Governor's proposed two-year budget, all funding for these programs would be eliminated.

There is a proven and effective infrastructure in place. Eliminating funding would decimate any investments the state has made in helping our youth become valuable members of the workforce.

In order to address this shortfall in the employment pipeline, OPP has designed a youth development program model that matches the needs of our youth with the needs of employers. To that end, we are working closely with Capital Workforce Partners to prepare our youth for positions in High Demand Careers for the region. Through this initiative, we are partnering with Connecticut's leading industries to train Connecticut workers to grow and compete in the global economy.

The core of our comprehensive service approach is called *Pathways to Success*. Youth can enter OPP programs at any age between 14 and 24 and stay connected with our staff for as long as it takes for them to achieve their individual goals. Our most fundamental principle is that the long-term education and employment outcomes we seek for all of the youth we work with are the same ~ and our consistent communication with them confirms that we believe they are capable of achieving their goals:

- In terms of **education**, we expect them to obtain a vocational certification or to graduate from a 2 or 4 year college program. 94 OPP youth achieved this outcome last year.
- In terms of **employment**, we expect them to move into full-time, unsubsidized employment, military service or national service. 153 OPP youth achieved this long-term outcome last year.

We are building the future workforce and need the state's help. An investment in our youth is the greatest investment in the future of our state. We don't want to have to turn young, motivated people away. We don't want to put them out on the streets. We want to help them become successful, economically independent adults who stay in Connecticut, have meaningful jobs, own homes and pay taxes.

Please help us reverse the trend and connect youth and young adults to a pathway to success here in Connecticut.

Thank you for this opportunity to present testimony and I'll be happy to answer any questions you may have.