

CONNECTICUT  
**JUSTICE**  
ALLIANCE

State of Youth Justice Report  
2024-2025

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# Overview

## Organizational Priorities

### About Us

[CTJA](#) is a statewide youth-adult partnership that has been working for the past 20 years to end the criminalization of youth. CTJA uses advocacy, policy, and organizing tools to protect the rights, futures, and well-being of potentially, currently, and formerly incarcerated youth under the age of 25.

CTJA's ultimate goal is to end the process of sending youth to prison and prison-like environments. These are harmful ([link](#)) and do not meaningfully increase public safety in the long term. With a removal, comes an addition, which arises from investment. RAID symbolizes how communities and youth have been [RAIDed](#) of resources, investment, and quality of life. CTJA's organizational priorities are driven by the experts: Justice Advisors and young people in Connecticut.

**Reform:** Center those with lived experience in the policy-making process.

**Abolish:** End the incarceration of youth and expand investments to support tailored needs for effective rehabilitation.

**Invest:** Address the root causes of crime and end the spending of tax dollars on ineffective, harmful, and inhumane practices.

**Divert:** Make our communities just and safe for all by diverting young people from the legal system ultimately repairing harm that was done, and healing people and entire communities.



# Legislative Priorities for 2025

Data from the Judicial Branch's Court Support Services Division and the Department of Correction shows that Connecticut is failing to meet the needs of its young people.

Children, regardless of their zip code — which often dictates access to services such as education, food, jobs, and transportation — should have equitable opportunities. Yet, youth are frequently described with negative terms like “disadvantaged,” “marginalized,” “disconnected,” “underserved,” and “minority.” These deficit-based labels not only diminish young people’s sense of worth and agency but also place the burden of overcoming systemic barriers—deep-seated in racism—squarely on their shoulders.

Connecticut, a state with the largest wealth gap and one of the few states that still houses children in adult prisons, has been shown to [violate civil rights](#). It is critical that when the struggles, choices, and lives of young people are discussed, they are directly involved in these conversations. Additionally, the dialogue must address the societal factors and systemic issues that lead to the arrest and incarceration of youth, particularly Black and brown children.

Connecticut’s leaders, starting with Gov. Lamont, must acknowledge their role in the declining well-being of the state’s young people. The time has come to shift from deficit-based language to strength-based words that inspire power, positivity, and action.

# Raise the Age

## Priorities for 2025

### **Raise the Minimum Age of Arrest from 10 to 14**

Research indicates that the human brain continues to develop until around age 25. Recognizing this, it's essential to understand that youth who are arrested face developmental setbacks. By raising the minimum age of arrest from 10 to 14, we align legal practices with neurological science, allowing young people to remain in environments that support their psychological and emotional growth. Incarcerating children interrupts their development and exacerbates behavioral and mental health issues. This change in statute would follow one made in 2021, where the minimum age of arrest was raised from 7 years old to 10 years old. This new shift will keep young people in supportive, community based, settings as needed where they will be able to heal, grow, and rehabilitate effectively, rather than being penalized and punished. These interventions are ones that ultimately limit young people in career and education opportunities, and ultimately, their future.



# Remove Youth Under 18 from the Department of Correction

In order to achieve justice and safety for all, youth under the age of 25 must be removed from prison and prison-like environments. It has been shown nationally, and locally in Connecticut, that prison is an ineffective tool in correcting behavior and having the meaningful impact that those who are proponents of incarceration hope it would. Often, it is said that victims of crime support the punishment of those that harmed them, recent surveys show that this is not universal to all who have been harmed by a person. To achieve this, Connecticut must ensure that the needs of young people are

accurately identified and assessed. This involves fully funding a continuum of care that supports the least restrictive settings possible with the goal being community based care and intervention. By focusing on community-based solutions Connecticut will be in alignment with recommendations from the Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention. This approach not only aids in their rehabilitation but also fosters a more supportive environment for their growth and reintegration into society.





# Ban Chemical Agents

Used on Youth in the Custody of the Department of Correction

While we work to remove children from adult prison, the conditions of their confinement must be addressed in a meaningful way. One way to do this is to end the use of chemical agents on youth, under the age of 18, inside of Manson Youth Institution and York Correctional Institution. To protect the well-being of youth, and those working within the system, we advocate for this ban. These substances can have severe long-term effects on young people's physical and mental health. This policy shift does not stand to only remove 'tools' from Correctional Officers, rather CTJA proposes that all staff within the Department of Corrections are trained, mandated, and supported in utilizing the effective tool of advanced de-escalation and comprehensive training that emphasizes non-violent conflict resolution. By prioritizing safe and supportive interventions for both young people and those that choose to work with them daily behind the prison walls, CT will be able to achieve better outcomes for all of our children.



CTJA is dedicated to ensuring that our Justice Advisors, ranging from ages 16-30, develop leadership and workforce skills applicable after their 2-year term with us. The first year focuses on learning and legislative session preparation and participation. The second year emphasizes advanced engagement and applying their knowledge. We aim to support JAs in furthering their career and professional pathways with the goal of achieving permanent employment in their field of interest.

JAs play a crucial role in the work of CTJA, offering invaluable insights and perspectives. Each JA creates a Justice Advisor Journey Reflection and presents it at the end of their term to reflect on their learnings, applications, and future aspirations.

## Alumni Profiles

# Justice Advisors



Fernecia Smith

**What is your current job or role, and how did being a Justice Advisor help prepare you for it?**

I currently work as a Legal Assistant for the Financial Fraud and Public Corruption Unit at the U.S. Attorney's Office, District of Connecticut. Being a Justice Advisor improved my public speaking and helped me build professional connections by using my personality effectively. In my role, I constantly engage with colleagues and partners from other Federal agencies, similar to the stakeholder conversations and testimonies I practiced as a Justice Advisor.

**What professional or educational milestones have you achieved since completing the Justice Advisor program?**

After completing the Justice Advisory program, I transitioned from a contract to a permanent federal employee. I've taken on additional responsibilities beyond my job description, including sitting on work-groups, assisting with legal pleadings, participating in jury selection, and helping implement new programs. I'm also applying to law school, aiming to start in Fall 2025.

**How has your time as a Justice Advisor influenced your personal growth and views on social justice?**

As a Justice Advisor, I learned that social justice issues are more complex than they seem, often requiring difficult conversations between all parties. I believe change requires collaboration between advocates, policymakers, authorities, and the community. All parts must work together for meaningful progress.

# Justice & JA alumni

**What is your current job or role, and how did being a Justice Advisor help prepare you for it?**

I am a Fellow at Yale Prison Education Initiative and Senior Project Manager of the Juvenile Justice Policy and Oversight Committee. Being a Justice Advisor introduced me to policy development, advocacy, and working with communities to organize and communicate ideas to stakeholders. It helped me refine my writing and speaking skills for clear communication.

**What professional or educational milestones have you achieved since completing the Justice Advisor program?**

I'm currently a law student at UConn Law School and served as a legal intern at the Department of Justice, Federal Immigration Court. I'm also the Assistant Director of the National Prison Debate League, organizing policy debates in Connecticut prisons and abroad in Finland.

**How has your time as a Justice Advisor influenced your personal growth and views on social justice?**

Being a Justice Advisor showed me the importance of policy led by those most impacted and highlighted the need for self-care in social justice work. These experiences shaped my personal and professional growth, helping me balance work and engage with stakeholders effectively.



Brittany LaMarr

# CTJA in the Community

## Justice and Safety For All Vision Session Tour

### Justice for All

A series of Vision Sessions occurred across Connecticut, including Stamford, Hartford, New London, and two Cheshire youth facilities (November 2023 - January 2024). These sessions aimed to address the root causes of crime and discuss the challenges of incarceration. JA's play a crucial role in the work of CTJA, offering invaluable insights and perspectives. Each JA creates a Justice Advisor Journey Reflection and presents it at the end of their term to reflect on their learnings, applications, and future aspirations.

**Stamford, CT  
November 29, 2023**

"The moment people need support and love is the moment they are removed."



**Hartford, CT  
December 5, 2023**

"What can we do to help our children?"

**New London, CT  
December 12, 2023**

"Focus more on what happens after a 16-year-old is arrested."



**OVER 250 BILL TESTIMONIES DURING SESSION 2024**

**192**

**HB 5508:**  
AN ACT CONCERNING RECOMMENDATIONS FROM THE JUVENILE JUSTICE POLICY AND OVERSIGHT COMMITTEE

**87**

**HB 5506:**  
AN ACT ADJUSTING THE STATE BUDGET

**Cheshire, CT (facilities x 2)  
November 2023-January 2024 & November 29, 2023**

"Adult prison does not do what people think it does."

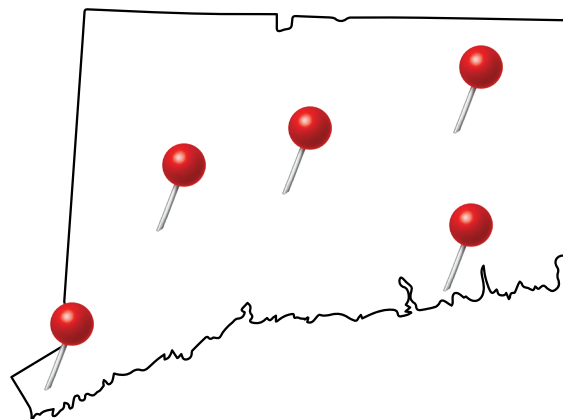
In Cheshire, CTJA began building long-term relationships with incarcerated youth and facility staff. Conversations focused on introducing CTJA, addressing crime's root causes, and reflecting on life behind the walls.

# Vision Sessions Key Findings

Many participants expressed frustration, fearing their voices would go unheard again. In New London, one participant said, "I am tired of talking. We've been asking for resources for a long time, and it's hard to stay motivated." They highlighted the need

for more community support, credible messengers, and Black teachers.

Participants also discussed how negative media and systemic barriers shape their lives, feeling trapped by disparities in resources across the state. They emphasized the high cost of incarceration, both financially and emotionally, noting that crime often stems from despair and hunger, but instead of help, they face punishment. One participant stated, "When you lock someone up, the whole family does the bid."



## Number of Sessions and Participants

We held six Vision Sessions, speaking with over 250 Connecticut residents from diverse backgrounds. Participants shared the goal of a just and safe Connecticut for all, agreeing that unless the root causes of crime are addressed, crime and despair will persist. They emphasized that Connecticut's children must be prioritized and treated equitably.

## ENGAGEMENT DURING SESSION 2024

### JUSTICE ADVISORS

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JUSTICE ADVISORS  
GAVE TESTIMONY  
IN LIVE HEARINGS



PEOPLE WITH  
LIVED-EXPERIENCE  
ENGAGED IN THE  
POLICY-MAKING PROCESS

### CTJA IN THE NEWS

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TV & RADIO STORIES  
ABOUT CTJA

ENGAGED ACCOUNTS ON INSTAGRAM

529

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NEWS STORIES ABOUT  
CTJA IN 2024

# Legislative Session

## 2024 Legislative Session Look Back



## Overview

The Connecticut Justice Alliance (CTJA) had an impactful presence during the 2024 Connecticut General Assembly's Legislative Session. Despite the session's focus on budget adjustments, the legislature decided to maintain the previously approved \$26 billion budget for the 2024-25 fiscal year. They utilized American Rescue Plan Act (ARPA) funds to address various needs and bolster programs through House Bill 5523 (Spending Bill) and House Bill 5524 (Bonding/School Construction Bill). Below are key highlights from the session and CTJA's contributions.

## Impact Stories and Testimonials

CTJA submitted nearly 100 pieces of written testimony in support of various bills. The legislative session saw significant involvement from JAs who used their expert voices to end youth criminalization. Their efforts included testifying, meeting with legislators, and participating in vision sessions. Here are some notable quotes from JAs:

**On Advocacy:** "Testifying in front of the legislature was a powerful experience. It made me realize the impact our voices can have in shaping policies that affect our communities."

**On Personal Growth:** "Being a Justice Advisor has been transformative. The training and support provided by CTJA have equipped me with the skills to advocate effectively and work towards systemic change."



# House Bill 5524

## Bond Package Highlights

Totalling Over \$400 Million: Key allocations included \$5 million for the Manson Youth Institution and \$20 million for the development of a secure residential treatment center. CTJA will continue to monitor how the \$25 million will be spent.

# Juvenile Justice & Policy Oversight Committee Bill

## Youth Gender Responsiveness & Human Trafficking Data

**(HB 5508):** Requires JJPOC to establish a gender responsiveness subcommittee and develop a framework for reporting human trafficking data.

**Reentry Success Plan (HB 5508):** Extends the deadline for developing the plan to November 1, 2024, and includes job readiness and career training requirements.



# Important Defeats

## House Bill 5506

Outcome: Defeated.

Impact: Prevented expanded state intervention in family matters, protecting Black and Brown families from increased inequalities in the legal system.



# Conclusion

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CTJA's engagement in the 2024 Legislative Session, aided by the partnership with the citizens of Connecticut and the efforts of DNB Lobby, has resulted in significant legislative wins for youth in the state. These wins have strengthened CTJA's ability to end the criminalization of youth. For more information or to get involved, visit [ctja.org](http://ctja.org) or contact Christina at [christina@ctja.org](mailto:christina@ctja.org).

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"It is our duty to fight for our freedom. It is our duty to win. We will love and support each other. We have nothing to lose but our chains." Assata Shakur

I heard this quote at a poetry festival this summer. Though it was meant to inspire art, its significance resonates deeply within our beloved organization.

As an advocacy organization, CTJA, along with many volunteers, community partners, and allies, have taken this call to action personally. We are actively working to dismantle the chains of the carceral system. The institutions deeply embedded in this country are stained with the blood of enslaved people, Indigenous Americans, immigrants, the poor, and all others who are oppressed. The modern-day 'isms' continue this legacy of exploitation.

Behind these bloodied hands are real people: A poor teenager forced to turn to crime to feed his family. A mother trying to make ends meet. A 5-year-old handcuffed for her autism. Those who commit suicide in prison. It is the hardships of these individuals that fuel CTJA's fierce dedication to win.

I joined CTJA last year as a Justice Advisor because of my desire to fix the system. In the months since, I have learned how interconnected all our struggles are. I have always worked as an activist, ranging from Asian American awareness to immigration. I now not only know that your struggle is mine as mine is yours. Rather, I feel your struggle like it is my own. CTJA has bred a culture so extraordinarily compassionate that we "love and support" our co-workers and community as if they are our own. After all, to free ourselves we must first free each other.

At its core, our philosophy on advocacy is rooted in love. As we look to the future, we hope to inspire a collective empathy that recognizes the health of our nation's justice system depends on addressing our seven root causes: Economic Insecurity, Housing Insecurity, Trauma within Communities, Lack of Trust in a System that Displays Abuses of Authority, A need for More Positive Influences and Credible Messengers, Lack of Hope, Need for Equal Opportunities.

In 2025, we will highlight this by continuing research with UConn and the Gault Center to uncover the underlying causes of detention, advocating for mental health policies in youth prisons, working on a documentary highlighting inequities in our public schools, renewing our efforts to ban chemical agents and push once again to raise the minimum age of arrest in Connecticut.

As you read this, I urge you to chant with us: Fight for our collective freedom, win for each other, love and support all. After all, there is nothing to lose but our chains.

--- Simar Kaur Soni  
CTJA Justice Advisor

