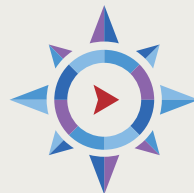




STANDING UP WITH OUR COMMUNITY

2024 ANNUAL REPORT

**COMMUNITY
FOUNDATION
OF EASTERN
Connecticut**





▲ State Reps. Anthony Nolan and Jennifer Leeper with Community Foundation staff and board members at the Legislative Office Building.

COMMUNITY FOUNDATION
of EASTERN CONNECTICUT

SERVING 42 TOWNS

in New London, Windham and Tolland Counties

VISION

A healthy, thriving, sustainable Eastern Connecticut with greater equity for all

MISSION

Collaborate with partners to put philanthropy into action to address the needs, rights and interests of our community in Eastern Connecticut

VALUES

Integrity, Equity, Respect, Courage, Empathy

CFECT.ORG

INVESTING in our community*

2024 By the Numbers

Assets:	\$ 127,426,782
Gifts:	\$ 7,510,225
Grants:	\$ 8,336,220

Grantmaking by Issue Area

- Basic Needs: \$3,697,508 (44% of total)
- Environment & Animal Welfare: \$1,473,004 (18% of total)
- Youth (includes Scholarships): \$2,229,045 (27% of total)
- Advocacy, Capacity Building, Designated, and Other: \$936,662 (11% of total)

* Based on unaudited financial statement

“ Hope is our superpower.
Hope is what gets you to
stand up when other people
want you to sit down. ”

Bryan Stevenson, *Civil Rights Lawyer*

IN EASTERN CONNECTICUT, hope doesn’t sit on the sidelines

— it stands up. It shows up in the voices of youth sharing their stories, in the hands of advocates knocking on legislators’ doors, and in the shared vision of neighbors who believe every child deserves nourishment, every family deserves dignity, and every community deserves to thrive.

This year’s annual report reflects a region alive with purpose, anchored in the belief that progress is possible when we stand with one another, not merely *for* one another.

It is a celebration of the supporters, organizers, and everyday champions — people who rise each morning asking, “*What can I do today to make my community a better place?*”

Whether pushing for affordable housing, speaking up for climate action, or building coalitions across differences, this work proves that *advocacy is the engine of a just, inclusive, and vibrant region*. And while progress may come in increments, every step forward reflects shared resolve and collective hope.

And, like you, we believe that our hopes and dreams for Eastern Connecticut are not just worthy of attention — they are the blueprint for a more just future.

This report tells stories of standing together with conviction and care, and reminds us all there is no sitting this one out.

With deep gratitude for your generosity and commitment to creating an even better region,

Maryam Elahi, *President & CEO*

Nicholas Fortson, *Board Chair*



CAROL WILLIAMS: *On a Mission for Lasting Change*

When Carol Williams first received a letter inviting her to be part of a fund to benefit local women and girls, she had no idea it would spark a 25-year journey into philanthropy and advocacy.

“I saw the names on the steering committee — women I admired most in the community — and I said, ‘*Sign me up*’.” The fund connected people to the idea that investing in the success of women and girls benefited the entire community. That simple invitation led to Carol’s involvement with the Community Foundation.

Living in Willimantic — a town she and her husband cherish for its community spirit — Carol was drawn to the nonprofit organizations striving to improve one of the least-resourced areas of the state.

And, over time, her involvement deepened, and her understanding of philanthropy broadened. “At first, we gave small grants—\$2,000 here, \$3,000 there. But I kept wondering: Are we really changing anything? That’s when I began to see the difference between charity and philanthropy.”

Inspired by books like *Poverty, by America*, Carol shifted her focus to more lasting solutions to social problems. She stepped into advocacy — something she’d never done before — and helped champion causes like Paid Family Medical Leave.

Now a member of the Foundation’s Board of Trustees, Carol is committed to making Connecticut the first state to end child poverty. She has regularly trekked to the Capitol to talk to legislators and provide testimony for long-term policy solutions.

“We’ve normalized poverty in this country,” she says. “But we don’t have to accept it.”

Her vision? “In ten years, I don’t want to see our town on the ‘least-resourced’ list anymore. If we can make a huge dent in child poverty, families can thrive, and youth can feel more connected and see a future for themselves in this area.”

DRIVING POLICY CHANGE — Together

“The Community Foundation of Eastern Connecticut is leading the charge to end child poverty by uniting partners, driving policy change, and demanding action. Their bold advocacy and coalition-building are making real strides toward a future where no child in our state is left behind.”

State Rep. Anthony Nolan (*New London*)

The Community Foundation and its growing coalition (120 partner organizations) were active voices at the Capitol during the legislative session advocating for policies to end child poverty. The coalition supported key pieces of legislation including funding for child care, free school meals for all Connecticut school children and enacting a permanent, refundable state Child Tax Credit.

PHOTOS: (left) Carol Williams, Jake Koteen Photography // (center) Nilda Havrilla, Litigation and Advocacy Director at Connecticut Legal Services, Darrick Hamilton, founding director of the Institute on Race, Power and Political Economy at The New School, and State Treasurer Erick Russell discuss how Baby Bonds can reverse child poverty in Connecticut at a forum hosted by the Community Foundation. // (right) The Community Foundation’s President and CEO Maryam Elahi discussed anti-poverty policies with State Sen. Martin Looney, Senate Majority Leader of the Connecticut General Assembly.

YES, WE CAN END CHILD POVERTY

— and *There's a Proven Solution*

As president and CEO of the United Way of Connecticut, a leading group advocating for a permanent, refundable Connecticut Child Tax Credit, Lisa Tepper Bates has heard countless stories of families in crisis.

“One of the most moving stories I’ve heard,” Bates recounted, “was from the mother of a child with a physical disability. He required a special pair of shoes that cost \$800. But, as is often the case in our country, the shoes weren’t covered by health insurance. She said the tax credit could help her afford the shoes her son needed to walk.”

It’s one example of the impossible choices facing thousands of Connecticut families striving to overcome poverty. Pay for diapers or pay the electric bill? Food or rent? Shoes or heat?

For these families, a few hundred dollars can make a world of difference. That’s because 42% of Connecticut children are in households that live paycheck to paycheck — and they’re one unexpected expense away from crisis.

The good news? *We know what works.* During the pandemic, the federal Child Tax Credit was astonishingly effective in lifting millions of children out of poverty. Child poverty was cut nearly in half in the U.S. — the largest reduction ever recorded.

That’s why, when the federal government let the tax credit expire, the United Way sprang into action to assemble allies and urge lawmakers to establish a permanent, refundable Connecticut Child Tax Credit of \$600 per child annually. Bolstered by a grant from the Community Foundation for advocacy work, the United Way’s coalition has swelled to 40 organizations.

While progress in policymaking is often incremental, momentum is growing.

“The tax credit *will* happen,” Bates asserted. “It’s a profoundly impactful way for our elected leaders to show that they hear and understand the pain felt by these very budget-constrained families. Government can work for the people who need it most.”



Lisa Tepper Bates stood with coalition members and lawmakers to call for a Child Tax Credit to ease the financial burden on Connecticut families. Gio Roper, United Way of Connecticut

Systems Change Grants Launched to Create Long-Term Sustainable Solutions



A NEW GENERATION of Housing Advocates Rises in Norwich

How do hard-working immigrant and first-generation residents of Greater Norwich grow into powerful voices for housing justice? How do they speak out for solutions to improve their living conditions? And how do they summon the courage to do so in spaces like city council meetings, especially when fear and uncertainty weigh heavily on immigrant families nationwide?

Partnership for Strong Communities (PSC), a statewide leader in affordable housing advocacy and research, is helping Norwich residents answer those questions for themselves. Together, they're aiming to achieve the vision of a community where everyone has access to a safe, stable, affordable home in a neighborhood they choose.

Carline Charmelus, operations and equity director at PSC, cited the power of working together with trusted local organizations and building on the residents' strengths already present in Norwich. As one of two organizations selected to receive the Community Foundation's inaugural Systems Change grants, PSC is turning their ideas into action, recognizing that stemming housing insecurity is key to fighting poverty.

The coalition's strategies are simple but powerful: Build trust and relationships. Support residents in sharing their stories. Organize and educate where residents are. Center the voices of young people, not statistics.

Already, youth volunteers have stepped up to co-lead a housing resource fair and an "Advocacy 101" workshop for their neighbors.

THE PARTNERS

- Partnership for Strong Communities
- NAACP Robertsine Duncan Youth Council
- Sankofa Education and Leadership, Inc
- Norwich Free Academy
- Norwich Public Schools
- Greater Norwich residents impacted by housing insecurity
- Center for Housing Opportunity
- Eastern Connecticut

PHOTO: Norwich youth leaders, guided by PSC's Carline Charmelus, organized a Housing Resource Fair. Via Partnership for Strong Communities

OPENING DOORS to Homeownership in Windham County

A conversation with Kathleen Krider, community engagement and resource manager at the Access Community Action Agency.

- Q:** Why focus on home ownership in Windham County?
- Krider:** Too many people here don't believe home ownership is within reach. It is! It can be hard to convince people to stay here, to buy a home, and to believe that you can someday pass on generational wealth to your children. So, we knew we needed to educate people on what it means to be a home buyer and that they can achieve the stability that comes with it.
- Q:** Access recently opened a Housing Education and Counseling Center. Tell us about it.
- Krider:** We found a location, hired a staff person, and literally hung a shingle! Then, with Habitat for Humanity and the Northeastern Connecticut Chamber of Commerce, we held a "summit." We invited realtors, mortgage brokers, bankers, plumbers, electricians, roofers, HVAC contractors,

- you name it. We said, 'This is who we are, our intention is to prepare future home buyers, and we need your help. Send people our way.'
- Q:** What's unique about your approach?
- Krider:** We offer a free, six-part series of home ownership workshops. We cover budgeting, building credit, the home buying process, home maintenance, taxes, and even things like being a good neighbor, and your responsibility to your neighborhood and community.
- Q:** What's next for the Center?
- Krider:** Thanks to continued funding from the Community Foundation, we are ramping up outreach to reach more aspiring homeowners. Our goal is to create "purchase-ready residents." Even if the housing market is tough right now, we can help them get prepared when the opportunity arises. Home ownership builds wealth, increases civic participation, and leads to better educational outcomes for kids. We want that for Windham County.

PHOTO: Access Program Manager Helen Scanlon and Northeastern Connecticut Chamber of Commerce Board President Jason Verraneault happily celebrate the opening of the Housing and Education Counseling Center. Via Access



STUDENT CIVIC LEADERS *Discover a Vibrant Classroom: New London*

In 2020, the Community Foundation partnered with Connecticut College to fund a community internship for students to connect with civic life in New London. For the past five summers, students have stepped beyond the classroom and into the city's heart. Through the College's Summer Civic Leaders program, they interned with nonprofits serving residents, gaining hands-on experience tackling local, real-world challenges.

Hailing from around the globe, the students' academic pursuits ranged widely — government, computer science, the arts, education — but each sought more than a summer internship. They wanted to roll up their sleeves and understand how New London *worked*, where help was needed, and how real change took shape.

The experience was “incredibly transformative” for many students, reported Rebecca McCue, director of the College's Holleran Center for Community Action and Public Policy, which ran the Civic Leaders program.

“Many students had never explored New London, and their entire perception of the city changed. They came to appreciate the city's vibrant art scene, for example, and its downtown's vitality.”

One student's equity research at the Connecticut Fair Housing Center sparked a commitment to New London that continued through college. Later, as a reporter for *The Day*, he applied a newly awakened social justice lens to his journalism. Another intern worked with Spark Makerspace and became an active part of the city's creative economy, building lasting connections.

McCue was especially gratified to see students develop insights into ethical and equitable community decision-making, while local nonprofits gained fresh ideas and energy for projects that benefited city residents. And the Civic Leaders strengthened the bridge between campus and city — ensuring students didn't just study in New London but became *part* of it.

PHOTO: Civic Leader Ma Rabanne Permelona '27 at Spark Makerspace, a community workshop providing access to tools and equipment for creative pursuits like woodworking and art. Via Connecticut College

CHANGE IS IN THE AIR *to Protect Our Region's Environment*

Sometimes sharing conversation with neighbors over a simple cup of coffee can motivate action.

That's what happened at in-person “Climate and Coffee” events and virtual “Action Hours” organized by the Connecticut League of Conservation Voters over the last year. Eastern Connecticut residents came together to talk about issues like rising energy bills, offshore wind development, and the growing threat of coastal flooding.

Climate experts shared their wisdom. Conversations deepened. And for one Mystic store owner in attendance, it inspired an idea: just weeks later, he hosted his own climate awareness event in his store, attended by his state representative.

“That's exactly the point,” says Connor Yakaitis, the League's deputy director (*pictured*). “We want people to take what they learn and lead in their own communities. That's how a movement grows.”

The League's community organizers, aided by a grant from the Community Foundation, saw the fruits of their

work play out across the region. More than 1,700 people got involved. Some donated, volunteered, or emailed their lawmakers. Others showed up at the Capitol on lobby days. Youth and college students energized a new environmental ambassador program.

They are stepping up to encourage lawmakers to address local concerns with climate-friendly solutions:

- Lower skyrocketing electric bills through energy efficiency and investments in renewable energy
- Minimize flood risks in vulnerable coastal communities
- Protect precious wildlife from toxic pesticides
- Consider offshore wind farms to meet growing energy demand and bring jobs to the region
- Expand public transportation like Metro-North into New London to cut emissions and improve access

Conversations over coffee are becoming much bigger: a growing network of local climate advocates speaking up to protect and sustain our beautiful region.

PHOTO: Connor Yakaitis, Deputy Director of the Connecticut League of Conservation Voters. Via CTLCV

THE LEGACY SOCIETY: Sustaining Generations to Come

Through bequests, charitable trusts, gift annuities, retirement plans, or life insurance, Legacy Society members plan to make gifts to causes important to them after their lifetimes. We are deeply grateful to every member of the Legacy Society for the care and compassion they put into action through their future gifts.

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* Deceased

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In 2024, the Community Foundation received over 1,100 donations from individuals and organizations who gave more than \$7.4 million in support of causes that matter to them and to the well-being of Eastern Connecticut residents. We are so grateful for their generosity.

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PHOTO: Peg O’Shea, former board chair



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