



## Re: HB 7252

April 2, 2025

Committee on Appropriations, Connecticut General Assembly

Dear Committee members:

Domus provides this feedback in support of HB 7252 as a nonprofit provider that has been supporting disconnected youth since our programs began in 1972.

We appreciate the Appropriations Committee's support of juvenile justice initiatives and the support of expanding community services for disconnected and justice-involved young people. We are proud to be referenced throughout the *Young People First* report (from Connecticut Conference of Municipalities and the 119K Commission) as providing high-quality school and workforce development programs for these young people.

**Domus builds loving relationships with young people facing adversity, empowering them to pursue their path to self-sufficiency.** Our two main programs are a workforce development program and a school engagement program utilizing *family advocates*, a model we created in 1999 and have been perfecting ever since. Through these programs, we work alongside justice-involved and disconnected young people until they graduate from high school or gain employment on the path to self-sufficiency.

**Everything we do is grounded in the power of love to transform lives.** We build strong, trusting relationships with young people and their families, remove the obstacles that get in the way of youth finding school and work success, and teach them the skills they need to thrive in those settings. Many youth at high risk of or already involved in the system have struggled to build and/or maintain positive, loving relationships with adults. Caring adult relationships were identified by the America's Promise Alliance (which Domus hosted in Stamford) as one of five elements a child needs to thrive.

In our school engagement program in FY24:

- 82% of our students were promoted on time.
- Average daily attendance of participating students was 80%.
- 79% of students were not suspended out of school.
- 93% of our students AND families feel the help our staff provide is extremely helpful.
- We retained 91% of students in our program.

- 87% of students who graduated high school in 2023 were enrolled and engaged in post-secondary or employed on a path to self-sufficiency 12 months after graduation.

This program focuses on re-engaging young people in school and ensuring they attend every day. Some of the strategies we utilize to improve student attendance include:

- Providing transportation, as one significant issue for our students is that high school students must walk to school within a two-mile radius, which is very far and takes a long time.
- Providing incentives for improved attendance and perfect monthly attendance.
- Hosting an attendance game twice a year in months when daily attendance is challenging (December and March): Young people who arrive at school on time get a *scratch-off ticket* with the chance to win prizes.
- Providing students with winter-weather gear to walk to school in the cold.
- Providing students with wet-weather gear to walk to school in the rain.
- Providing fun prizes and special lunches for school days that tend to be low-attendance days (half days, day before break, etc.).
- Helping young people and families understand the importance of daily attendance and the correlation between excellent attendance and improved academics.
- Providing on-site mediation with students who are struggling with peers or school staff so we can help them calm down and return to class rather than being suspended or leaving the classroom for the entire period/day.
- Helping young people collect missed work and re-enter the classroom/school after an absence, and helping them plan for successful re-entry so they don't continue to fall behind after missing school.
- Monitoring attendance every day and reaching out to students and families when students are absent.

In our workforce development program in FY24:

- 94% of young people said the program met their needs extremely well.
- 92% retention rate of youth in our program.
- 94% of the young people who graduated from the program in 2023 remained employed in a job on the path to self-sufficiency 12 months later.

**Our roots with young people trying to avoid or escape the juvenile justice system are long and deep.** Domus created one of the state's first juvenile justice centers in 1996 in partnership with the City of Stamford. In 1972, Domus began as a group home for abused and neglected youth removed from their homes by DCF; many of these youth were involved in the justice system. Currently, we operate Stamford's Juvenile Review Board in partnership with the Stamford Police Department, a street outreach program diverting youth from the criminal justice system, a program for young adults re-entering the community after incarceration, year-round school at Hartford Residential Center, and the summer school enrichment program at Bridgeport Residential Center.

We know all too well what youth in the system or those trying to avoid it have faced and are facing in their lives, and it's usually grounded in multiple traumas, or Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACEs). Domus was the first Connecticut nonprofit certified as a trauma-responsive Sanctuary organization, which included a three-year organizational process. Every member of our staff is trained in how trauma affects the brain and how our responses to a young person can help or hinder their healing. The daily focus on trauma has changed how we talk to youth as well as to our colleagues. **We hope you'll consider the role of trauma and trauma-responsive practices as you look at community support of this group of young people.**

As you expand community services for juvenile justice-involved youth, we hope you rely on the proven strategies of the many excellent nonprofits throughout the state. Domus, alongside six other Connecticut organizations serving justice-involved and disconnected young people, recently formed a collective, 119K To Zero, to directly address the issues facing the 119,000 disengaged and disconnected youth in Connecticut. Each of us has been focused on this population for many years—in some cases, over 50 years. Our collective is ready, willing, and able to offer this committee our experience and knowledge to help develop and implement effective strategies for these young people.

Thank you for your commitment to Connecticut's most vulnerable citizens. All of us at Domus would be happy to help in any way we can to support them.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Michael Duggan". The signature is fluid and cursive, with the first name "Michael" written in a larger, more prominent script than the last name "Duggan".

Michael Duggan  
Executive Director