

2026 Advocacy Report

Powering Advocacy in Fairfield County

Speaking Up. Working Together. Expanding Opportunity.



FROM THE PRESIDENT AND CEO



What will it take to create a Fairfield County where every person has a fair chance to reach their full potential?

There's no single or simple answer to that question.

But I can say with certainty that it will take far more resources than the region's foundations combined could ever afford to invest.

Achieving that vision will require all of us — philanthropy, individuals, businesses, and especially government — to think and act differently.

It's that realization that has inspired us to change how we approach our work at [Fairfield County's Community Foundation](#).

This report tells the story of our holistic approach to advocacy — and it invites you to join us as partners in this groundbreaking and community-changing work.

We hope it serves as a call to action for you to join us in moving Fairfield County Forward in ways that benefit everyone in our community.

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Mendi Blue Paca". The signature is fluid and cursive, with a long horizontal line extending to the right.

Mendi Blue Paca
President and Chief Executive Officer

**Speaking
Up.**

**Working
Together.**

**Expanding
Opportunity.**

Lasting change rarely comes easily. That's especially true when the systems that aren't working have been in place for generations. Change takes persistence and bold voices willing to stand up for what matters.

230+
Community
Allies
Strong

Our commitment to lasting change sits at the heart of [Fairfield County Forward](#), the strategic plan Fairfield County's Community Foundation launched in 2022. Through it, we've made advocacy a defining feature of how we work.

Since launching our strategic plan, we've invested more than **\$1 million** in organizations successfully advocating locally and statewide for fairer access to education, health, housing, economic opportunity, and the ballot box.

But our advocacy strategy isn't just about money out the door. It's about building community power through a grassroots [Allies community network](#) that's more than 230 residents strong.

More people are stepping forward, sharing insights and experiences to help shape policy. And lawmakers such as State Senator Ceci Maher are taking notice.

"The tireless efforts of Fairfield County's Community Foundation, collaborating with countless partners to support and improve local nonprofit infrastructure and services, has made an indelible impact on our communities," Maher said. "These connections allow FCCF to advocate for the needs of all of our residents, helping spur efforts in increasing regional support and creating baselines for sustainability. I'm grateful for their constant work benefitting Fairfield County."

FCCF's strategic approach to advocacy is getting attention far beyond Fairfield County and Connecticut as a model for how community foundations can drive systemic change through advocacy.

From left to right Wilton First Selectwoman Toni Boucher; FCCF President & CEO Mendi Blue Paca; Stamford Mayor Caroline Simmons; The Campaign School at Yale Executive Director Patti Russo

"The tireless efforts of Fairfield County's Community Foundation, collaborating with countless partners to support and improve local nonprofit infrastructure and services, has made an indelible impact on our communities."



Ceci Maher,
State Senator



Four Pillars, One Through-line

The Foundation's advocacy strategy rests on four aligned pillars. While each serves a unique role, together they provide a cohesive structure for achieving systemic change. They are:



Funding the front lines.

We invest in local nonprofits doing the day-to-day work of advocacy. They have the trust and the credibility – we help them have the runway.



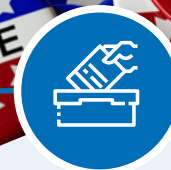
Using the Foundation's voice.

We add our weight to the issues that matter most: through public statements, op-eds, lobbying, and direct engagement with policymakers, drawing on more than a decade of public-policy experience.



Activating community voice.

We equip residents with the tools, training, and relationships they need to advocate effectively for the most pressing issues in our community.



Strengthening democracy.

Through nonpartisan civic engagement, voter education, and partnerships with employers and election officials, we help more people across our region take part in shaping the place they call home.



“By investing in advocacy and civic participation, FCCF is helping build the conditions for lasting impact. Their work underscores the vital role community foundations can play in connecting philanthropy, community leadership, and policy to advance opportunity across their regions.”

—Kathleen Enright, President and CEO of the [Council on Foundations](#)

The four stories in this report amplify how executing on each of these interconnected pillars – together with our nonprofit partners, our donors, and the residents we serve – is helping move Fairfield County forward.



Empowering the Front Lines

Pillar one:

Funding the nonprofits leading change

Daniel Pearson knows what it takes to get school supplies into the right hands.

But as Executive Director of the [Connecticut chapter of Educators for Excellence](#), Pearson's focus isn't on providing immediate help to individual students. He wants to improve the systems that decide which students get a fair shot in the first place.

That's why Educators for Excellence works collaboratively to advance smart policies that create the conditions for more students to succeed. Through its advocacy, the organization has played a key role in passing legislation that increased state education funding by \$150 million and streamlined Connecticut's cumbersome teacher-certification process, opening more pathways into the classroom for the educators our students need.

Pearson counts FCCF as a vital partner. In addition to grantmaking

that supports his organization's advocacy efforts, FCCF works alongside Educators for Excellence by connecting local nonprofits, advocates, and lawmakers on key issues.

"FCCF being 10 toes down in this with us is incredibly valuable. FCCF immediately brings credibility to an effort. When they say, 'This group is doing an advocacy effort we're supporting,' people already know FCCF has done the due diligence – and they bring the coalition-building piece. FCCF is just really good at making connections and building breadth of support," Pearson said.

Educators for Excellence is one of dozens of grantees the Foundation supports, and the wins extend across issues.

With FCCF's support, our grantees:

- Helped extend mandatory paid sick days to every worker in Connecticut.

Above State Rep. Antonio Felipe (left) with members of the Educators for Excellence coalition

- Pushed transit-oriented development through a historic omnibus housing bill in 2025.
- Secured Medicaid reimbursement for community health workers and the certification of doulas.

Each of these wins began with local organizers who knew their issues inside and out. The Foundation helped amplify their efforts by providing resources and room to stay in the fight.

"No single organization can tackle these systems alone."



Daniel Pearson, Executive Director of the Connecticut chapter of Educators for Excellence



Taking the Lead

Pillar two: Using the Foundation's voice

When a high school senior earns a merit-based college scholarship, it is usually a moment to celebrate. Yet for too many students, the news comes with a costly catch.

That catch is a practice called scholarship displacement. When a student receives an outside scholarship, some colleges and universities reduce the financial-aid offer they've already promised. The student ends up no further ahead,

and the donor sees that gift clawed back.

As an organization that annually awards more than \$1 million in scholarships, FCCF saw the harm being done. So in 2024, we advocated for a new state law requiring every Connecticut college and university to disclose its scholarship displacement policies.

Disclosure was the first step. The Foundation is pushing for a full state ban on scholarship displacement, so no Connecticut student has their

hard-earned outside scholarship taken back and no donor sees their generosity quietly redirected.

Lawmakers approved a bill this year prohibiting the practice at Connecticut public institutions.

We have more to do. While progress is being made, barriers remain. FCCF will continue working with partners to make higher education more accessible for Connecticut students.



Mobilizing and Amplifying Community Voice

Pillar three: Activating residents as advocates

Nora Geissert always wanted to make a difference in her community. What she lacked, until recently, was a clear sense of how to translate her conviction into influence.

She found that path through the Foundation's Allies community network, already 230 members strong.

Allies network members gather in person and virtually to learn new skills, track bills they care about, take action, and hear updates on legislation addressing issues such as housing and economic mobility.

Geissert and her fellow participants took part in a lunch-and-learn series that taught them how to be effective advocates — and included

a trip to the State Capitol in Hartford for a firsthand look at the people and processes that shape state policy. One insight the group heard during their visit continues to resonate.

“Even if a bill doesn't pass, there might be elements of it that a lawmaker includes in a future bill because they heard how important it was to their constituents. That was really eye-opening for me,” Geissert said.

The program inspired Geissert to submit testimony advocating for strong supports for children and families, including a refundable Child Tax Credit and universal school meals. In her written testimony, Geissert shared her

experience growing up in poverty, when school breakfasts and lunches were sometimes the only meals she and her siblings ate.

“No child should have to learn on an empty stomach,” she testified. “Providing a child with nourishment is a powerful act of community — and a reminder of what becomes possible when we choose to care for one another.”

Other Allies submitted written testimony on the bill, contributing to the Connecticut Legislature's approval of universal access to free breakfast statewide. It's an important victory as we continue to advocate for students to have the supports they need to reach their full potential.





Strengthening the Democracy We Share

Pillar four: **Nonpartisan civic engagement**

A community foundation represents a community of voices. When more of those voices take part in our democracy, the community grows stronger.

That's why we champion efforts that encourage Fairfield County residents to vote — and measures that make it easier for them to exercise their constitutional rights.

We've done this through public awareness campaigns, funding civic organizations, and raising our voice to support measures such as early voting and the [2024 No-Excuse Absentee Ballots measure](#), which expands access to the ballot box for every voter in the state. Both of these measures are now law in Connecticut.

“We're grateful for FCCF's partnership in helping to promote civic education and the importance of civic engagement.”

Stephanie Thomas,
Connecticut
Secretary of State

From left to right FCCF President & CEO Mendi Blue Paca; filmmaker Diane Robinson; FCCF Director Chinedum Nnodum; Connecticut Secretary of State Stephanie Thomas

**PLEDGE TO GRANT
THEM TIME TO VOTE.**



**SIGN
THE CEO
PLEDGE**

Pledge your support at
VoteFairfieldCounty.org

We also stepped into our role as a convener. In partnership with the Connecticut Secretary of State, the Foundation championed the [CEO Pledge](#), a public commitment by employers to give their employees the time and information they need to vote. We were among the first to sign the Pledge, then enlisted other local businesses and nonprofits to follow.

“Through its focus on advocacy and civic engagement, FCCF is strengthening community voice and participation. This work reflects the unique role community foundations play in bringing people together to drive meaningful, lasting change,” said Mary L. Thomas, President and CEO of [CFLeads](#).

The Foundation will keep partnering with election officials, employers, and nonprofits to make voting easier, civics more visible, and democratic participation a habit rather than an afterthought.

“By sharing clear, nonpartisan voting information with its employees and the broader community, and encouraging other employers to do the same, FCCF is playing an important role in increasing participation in our representative democracy across Fairfield County,” said Connecticut Secretary of State Stephanie Thomas.

What Comes Next





What Comes Next

These four stories are part of a larger commitment. Advocacy is patient work. It requires showing up every day, year after year, and trusting that the cumulative effect of all those efforts is a fairer county for everyone who lives here.

We are deeply grateful to the donors and partners whose generosity makes this work possible. With more partners and investment, we can build on this strong foundation and accelerate our progress in creating a thriving region for all.

To join us in supporting this important work, please contact Elaine Mintz, FCCF's Vice President of Strategy and External Relations:

EMintz@fccfoundation.org



fccfoundation.org