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Rewriting Criminal Histories: a Second Chance through Defy Ventures

When people walk into a classroom at York Correctional Institution for Defy Ventures' entrepreneurship program, they often hear something they haven't been told before:

We believe in you.

"It's hard to overstate the impact of those words," said Andrew Glazier, President and CEO of Defy Ventures. "Many participants have never had someone tell them they're capable and worthy."

Defy Ventures works with justice-impacted people—those with criminal histories who often struggle to find employment or support after incarceration. The organization aims to cut the recidivism rate in half by using entrepreneurship education as a catalyst for personal growth, confidence, and opportunity.

"When people enter prison, they often walk away feeling subhuman, believing their mistakes define them forever," Glazier explained. "We tell them on day one: 'You're not an inmate, you're not a felon—you are an entrepreneur.'"

At York Correctional Institution in Niantic, Defy's national program teaches career readiness, entrepreneurship, and personal development. But Glazier is clear: the goal isn't for every graduate to start a business.



It's about helping participants rewrite their narrative and gain skills that translate into employment after their release.

"When someone believes they have unique gifts to offer, their story shifts from 'I'm not worth anything' to 'I have value and I can contribute,'" said Glazier.

Research shows unemployment is a major driver of recidivism, so Defy focuses heavily on in-custody career preparation including a rigorous curriculum of weekly classes and coaching. The *Entrepreneurs in Training* create resumés, personal statements, and business ideas. Graduates earn a Certificate from The Drucker School of Management at Claremont Graduate University.

Support continues after release. Graduates receive a Chromebook laptop and are

paired with reentry coaches, peer support groups, and assistance navigating housing and employment systems.

Through a Community Foundation grant, Defy has been at York for six years. Their results have been encouraging. Graduates now work in mental health counseling, substance abuse support, and peer mentorship, while others have launched small businesses of their own.

"When you give people the chance to rethink who they are and what's possible, it dramatically strengthens their ability to succeed in reentry," Glazier said. ►

Photo: Entrepreneurs in Training meeting with volunteers during a Business Coaching session. | Defy Ventures



Published twice yearly, Compass Points aims to inform and engage our donors and community partners across Eastern Connecticut.



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OUR VISION:

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

OUR MISSION:

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

OUR VALUES:

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A MESSAGE OF HOPE FROM OUR PRESIDENT & CEO

Dear Friends,

This past year has made clear how challenging—and how essential—it is to work toward a healthy, thriving, and equitable community. In a time of real strain on families, institutions, and civic life, creating a world where everyone matters takes both care and resolve. It means strengthening communities and upholding democracy so people are supported, voices are represented, and all living beings are treated with dignity.

Courage and empathy—two of our core values—feel especially important right now. We are proud to partner with organizations, community groups, and individuals who share this commitment and put it into action every day. It is both our mission and our honor to support work that meets urgent needs while building long-term change—from ending child poverty and protecting immigrants to expanding access to housing, empowering women and girls, and stewarding healthy ecosystems.

The six stories in this newsletter offer real examples of what hope looks like in practice—when communities come together, resources are aligned, and people are supported with care and respect. They show how collaboration and readiness can lead to meaningful change.

We are deeply appreciative of every person and partner who has joined us on this journey. The work ahead is one we must continue to build together, grounded in shared responsibility and common values. Together, we can create a future that reflects the best of our humanity. Thank you for being part of this effort.

Stay warm!

With gratitude,

Maryam Elahi
President & CEO





Pawsitive Change—Animal Control Rescues 27 Animals

Old Lyme Animal Control Officer Lynn Philemon has been working in animal rescue for 21 years, but she'd never seen a hoarding situation as dire as the scene she walked into this past July.

Twenty dogs, five birds, and two chinchillas were packed into a small home, which was covered in feces and urine. The smell was so intense that Philemon couldn't enter without a mask. None of the dogs were spayed or neutered and some were so matted they struggled to go to the bathroom. Many had animal waste stuck to their fur. The birds had severe respiratory issues and the dogs had health issues ranging from mammary tumors, to hernias, heart conditions and dental infections. Some dogs couldn't eat hard food because their teeth were so damaged. Three were also pregnant.

"It was so sad to see the environment these animals had been living in – and the terrible condition they were in when we found them," said Philemon.

Philemon and a crew of colleagues and volunteers worked around the clock to tend to the animals' health and wellbeing. They had dogs in every corner of the kennel while they tried to find foster homes and get them ready for adoption.

"Most of the animals weren't housebroken and some of the dogs had never even touched grass before," said Philemon. "We had to basically teach them how to be dogs."

A grant from the Community Foundation helped with the immense medical expenses, which totaled over \$14,000 before the animals were even surrendered. The financial support helped provide vital medical care, including an echo-cardiogram for an older sheltie with a heart condition and extensive

dental work for a female dog who needed every tooth in her mouth taken out. Members of the community also contributed time, donations, and supplies like dog food, puppy pee pads and laundry detergent.

The birds and chinchillas have all been adopted or taken in by local wildlife sanctuaries. And all of the dogs are in foster care, new homes, or at Old Lyme Animal Control's kennel.

"They're doing great now, everyone's looking healthy and our foster families have been taking exceptional care of them," she said. ▶

Photos: *Left* > Rescued dog. *Right* > Vet Tech Cairlyn with some of the rescued puppies. | *Old Lyme Animal Control*



The Neighbor Fund: Supporting Undocumented Children through the Asylum Process

When it became clear that 2025 would see a new campaign of mass deportation, members of The Neighbor Fund felt compelled to protect some of the most vulnerable people in their community: unaccompanied, undocumented minors.

The Neighbor Fund was created in 2017 to support the immigrant community in Eastern Connecticut after three residents were detained by immigration enforcement agents in Willimantic, sparking widespread fear. Run entirely by volunteers, the organization has long provided assistance to those facing detention or deportation.

Earlier this year, the group launched Project Stay, a program designed to help unaccompanied minors secure legal protections. The path to permanent residency for these children is long and costly, requiring navigation of both state and federal courts, rigorous documentation, and intensive investigations into each child's circumstances.

"With the rise in anti-immigrant rhetoric and aggressive deportation actions around the country, we wanted to protect this young and vulnerable group by helping them legalize their status so they can have that crucial layer of security," said Kathleen Tonry, a member of The Neighbor Fund.

The Neighbor Fund, has seen firsthand how many students give up because the process is so overwhelming.

To provide this support, the organization partnered with Norte Immigration, and faculty at Windham High School, ensuring students have case managers who can guide them through every requirement – from extensive paperwork and home visits by the Department of Children and Families to the multiyear wait for a Special Immigration Juvenile Visa.

Tatiana Gomez, a local teacher and member of The Neighbor Fund, has seen firsthand how many students give up because the process is so overwhelming. "At every step, there's a potential roadblock that could derail the process," she said, noting barriers such as language, transportation, and missing documentation. Even obtaining passport photos or consulate paperwork can be a burden.

With grant support from the Community Foundation, The Neighbor Fund is currently helping 47 children through the asylum process. While none have yet received a visa—the process takes years—Gomez already sees the impact.

"It gives them a huge peace of mind," she said. "It eases their financial and mental burden so they can focus more in school and feel less anxiety about their futures." ►

Photo: Stock image used to protect the anonymity of Project Stay participants

The Laura Fish-Kelly Scholarship Fund is Empowering Young Women

No one in Laura Fish-Kelly's family had earned a college degree, but she knew she needed a college education to achieve her dreams. She worked three jobs and secured a small scholarship so she could get a bachelor's degree in economics from the University of Connecticut.

That was 41 years ago. She's been a financial planner since she graduated, a career she gravitated to because it combined her mathematical skills with her desire to help people. She has her own financial planning practice, where she helps her clients meet their financial goals, and she was named a Forbes Best-in-State Women Wealth Advisor. When she looks back at how she got to where she is today, she credits that college education with empowering her to succeed in her career – and beyond.

Now, she's helping other young women achieve their dreams through the Laura Fish-Kelly Scholarship Fund, which helps female students from Windham County pay for a college education. Since starting the fund at the Community Foundation in 2021, she's awarded over \$6,000 to four young women pursuing studies in business or business-related fields at institutions like Nichols College, Bentley University and McGill University.

"I believe education is really important," said Fish-Kelly. "It empowers women, gives them flexibility, and gives them a foundation to build upon. Whether it's a trade school or a four-year degree, I want everybody to have an opportunity to learn more and to continue to develop as a person."

Fish-Kelly knew she wanted to focus her scholarship fund on Windham County since she grew up on a farm in Scotland, Connecticut and went to Parish Hill High School. She knows firsthand what a difference a financial boost can make for students and families who could benefit from the assistance.

She's immensely grateful that she's now in a position to help others—and to be the one giving that boost to those who need it. Fish-Kelly has always felt called to serve and give back, especially through her Catholic faith. She appreciates that she can do that, both through helping her clients map out their legacies and planned gifts—and through creating her own.

"I want everybody to have an opportunity to learn more and to continue to develop as a person."

"I've worked really hard, and it's definitely paid off," she says. "I want to give back and give other women in Windham County an opportunity to go to college and then fulfill whatever their dreams are going to be." ▶

Photos: *Left* > Laura Fish-Kelly gives back to her community through her financial planning work and the Laura Fish-Kelly Scholarship Fund. *Right* > Gabby Couture, a recipient of the Laura Fish-Kelly Scholarship.



Working Together for a Thriving Mystic River Watershed

The Mystic River Watershed spans 47 square miles across two Tribal nations and four towns. Home to great blue herons, alewives, oysters, beavers, and countless other species, it is an ecological treasure with profound cultural significance for Native people who have stewarded its lands and waters for generations.

But the watershed faces mounting pressures—climate change, rising sea levels, development, flooding, and ecological degradation. Protecting such an interconnected system requires a broad, coordinated effort.

That's why the Alliance for the Mystic River Watershed is advancing a collaborative, multi-pillar approach to safeguard the river and the communities that rely on it.

Working alongside Tribal partners, the Alliance is building a multi-generational coalition of organizations, municipalities, and residents to create a community-owned Watershed Regeneration Action Plan (WRAP). The plan aims to regenerate the watershed so it can support clean water,

ecological health, environmental justice, resilient food systems, affordable housing, clean energy, and strong local economies.

"We're committed to taking an intersectional approach," said Executive Director Zbigniew Grabowski. "Everything—from food to energy to transportation—contributes to the health of the watershed and the communities that share this land and water."

By collaborating across generations and identities, Grabowski says, the Alliance draws on "collective creativity and wisdom" to imagine how all life within the watershed can flourish.

A key part of their work is helping residents feel connected to the river. Through kayak outings, forest kitchen gatherings, conferences, and citizen science projects, the Alliance creates opportunities for people to deepen their relationship with the watershed and its seasonal rhythms.

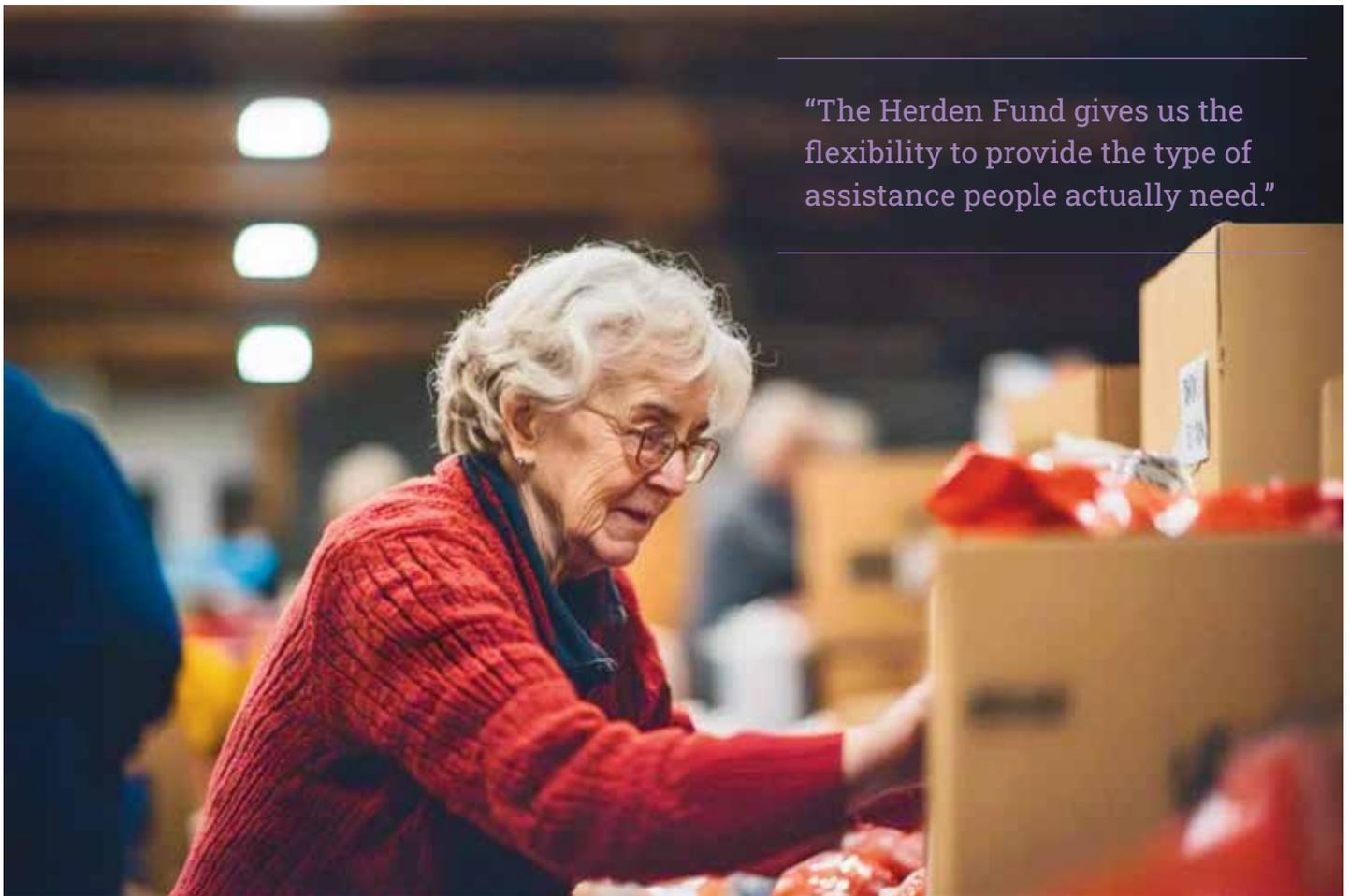
The watershed faces mounting pressures — climate change, rising sea levels, development, flooding, and ecological degradation.

A grant from the Community Foundation has been crucial in building these coalitions and programs—especially as federal funding declines.

At a time when many feel overwhelmed by environmental challenges, Grabowski sees hope in this collective effort. "People are energized when they realize there are avenues to a better world — and ways to get involved themselves," he said. ►



Photos: *Top* > Sunrise across the Mystic River Estuary, where Alliance partners and residents are advancing long term stewardship of the watershed. *Bottom* > Derrick Strong, Eastern Pequot Tribal Nation, leads a storytelling circle at SpringFest, bringing cultural knowledge and community voices into the heart of the event.



“The Herden Fund gives us the flexibility to provide the type of assistance people actually need.”

The Herden Fund Helps Families through Financial Crisis

For years, the Town of Colchester has maintained a strong food bank and energy fund, but support was limited to those basics. Now, a gift from the Everette L. and Irene L. Herden Fund, allows the town to help residents with broader financial needs such as housing, transportation, childcare, and urgent home or car repairs.

The Herden Fund was established in 2023 through a bequest from longtime East Haddam residents Everett and Irene Herden—a teacher and an occupational therapist who were deeply engaged in their community. Their fund supports both Colchester and East Haddam.

“Residents turn to Social Services when financial burdens are too heavy to manage,” said Valerie Geato, Director of Colchester Youth and Social Services. “The Herden Fund gives us the flexibility to provide the type of assistance people actually need.”

That flexibility is critical for needs that go far beyond food and fuel. Geato notes that many families are facing issues like car repairs that risk someone’s job,

emergency home fixes that restore heat or water, or housing costs that can run into the thousands. A family seeking a new apartment, for example, may need more than \$5,000 upfront—an amount that previously would have exhausted the town’s resources.

Last fiscal year, the Herden Fund helped Colchester support 66 residents, while East Haddam Youth & Family Services assisted another 195. Funds helped people maintain housing, cover utility bills, afford dental care, and make essential home or vehicle repairs.

Geato recalls one case in particular: a full-time truck driver raising his two young relatives. He had fallen thousands behind

on daycare payments and feared the children might return to foster care. The Herden Fund stepped in to cover the bill—allowing him to keep working and keep the children with family.

“It’s life-changing for those kids,” said Geato. “Everyone we work with is one paycheck or one unexpected expense away from financial disaster. The Herden Fund helps people avoid crisis and keep moving forward.” ▶

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