

## **I. Community Description**

### *A. Describe the community geographically.*

Norwalk is located in southern Fairfield County, CT along the Long Island Sound. It is both a small independent city (approximately 23 square miles) and a bedroom community of New York City, which lies 41 miles southwest. Within a county known for being predominantly white and wealthy, Norwalk maintains a separate identity as a diverse middle-class city, bordered by four wealthy homogeneous suburbs (Darien, New Canaan, Wilton, Westport) and the coastline.

The city is also defined by the three interstate and state routes that traverse it west to east: I-95, Route 1 (paralleled closely by the Amtrak and Metro North railroads), and the Merritt Parkway, and by the Route 7 connector that rises south to north, mostly following the Norwalk River. South of I-95, Norwalk has a number of recreational resources including beaches, a children's museum, a regional aquarium, and a mall. Along the corridor created between I-95 and Route 1 are found most of the city's shopping areas and municipal buildings, as well as services such as two Federally-Qualified Health Centers (FQHCs), a methadone clinic, and a large and diverse group of nonprofits. Since this corridor is part of the I-95 throughway connecting NYC to Boston, the city is considered part of a High Intensity Drug Trafficking Area. The area north of the Merritt is predominantly residential.

In addition to the recreational resources mentioned above, Norwalk has a number of community resources that draw people from neighboring towns, including a hospital, community college, concert hall, several shopping areas, several large parks, and a public golf course. Neighborhood-based resources include four libraries serving Central Norwalk, East Norwalk, South Norwalk, and Rowayton, as well as 12 elementary schools feeding into four middle and two high schools. The city also has a PK-8 parochial school and a charter school.

### *B. Describe the community demographically.*

According to the US Census 2019 estimates, Norwalk has a population of 88,816 people, with 20.4% under age 18 (~18,119 youth) and 14.9% over age 65. With 33,923 households, Norwalk is the sixth largest city in Connecticut.

The median household income is \$82,474 with a per capita income of \$47,322. An estimated 9.7% of residents live below the federal poverty level. In a city where the cost of living is 33.4% higher than the US average, many residents who live above the federal poverty limit still struggle economically.

The community racial/ethnic breakdown includes:

- Hispanic Population- 28%, which is significantly higher than the state average of 16%
- White, Non-Hispanic- 52%, lower than the state average of 68%
- Black, Non-Hispanic- 14%, higher than the state average of 10%
- Asian - 5%
- Other – 2%

Notably, 28.4% of the population is foreign born, and 39.3% of residents over age 5 speak a language other than English at home. Spanish is the most common language other than English.

### *C. Define your community:*

Norwalk is subdivided into a number of neighborhoods. South Norwalk is an entertainment hub surrounded by a poor, immigrant community with a high proportion of Spanish speakers. Two of the neighborhoods along the Long Island Sound (Wilson Point, Rowayton) are very wealthy and have their own identity, with significant support among local residents for Rowayton to become its own town. The areas along the western and northern borders of the city (West Norwalk, Cranbury) are generally more residential and report higher incomes compared with the neighborhoods in Central and East Norwalk. South Norwalk and Rowayton are the areas that have the strongest identities, where people are least likely to leave the boundaries of their neighborhood or interact with other City residents.

Communities of interest include a variety of immigrant groups, with large current immigration from Latin America, Haiti, and India and Bangladesh. Past immigrant groups that stay connected through local institutions include a Greek community (St George Church), Polish community (St Ladislaus Church), Italian community (St Ann's Club), and a Hungarian community (annual festival). The city's faith communities are diverse. Norwalk is largely Christian with seven Catholic churches and a number of Protestant churches, but also has three synagogues, a Sikh temple, and a mosque. The LGBTQ+ community is served by the Triangle Community Center, a regional nonprofit located in the city. There are also various service organizations, such as the Masons, Rotary, Exchange Club, and a veteran community (VFW, American Legion).

Other communities within the city are defined by past shared experiences (e.g., Norwalk High School Marching Bears families) and membership in one of the boat clubs or country clubs.

## **II. Community History**

### *A. Historical origins of community generally*

Norwalk was founded in the early 1600s. During the Revolution, it was the landing spot for British troops who crossed the Sound, fought at the Battle of the Rocks (in what is now central Norwalk), and marched across the county to Danbury, burning Norwalk's downtown and several other towns along the way.

Historically, the major industries were fishing and oystering. Norwalk was for decades known as the Oyster Capital of America; these industries still exist, and the annual Oyster Festival draws large crowds each summer. In the 1800s Norwalk was a manufacturing center for hats and shirts, and during the Victorian era it was relatively wealthy, with beachside hotels and weekend getaways for New Yorkers. In the 1950s a major flood destroyed the main shopping area of downtown Norwalk, which never recovered, though new shopping plazas were created on the outskirts of the city. The city's status declined from that time, although the Lockwood Matthews Mansion (one of the country's earliest Second Empire mansions), a local street known as "millionaire's row," waterside homes along the Sound, and SoNo's historic train station still echo that past. South Norwalk still retains its historical and artistic character and draws visitors, artists, and young urban professionals to its loft apartments, restaurant row, entertainment options, annual Arts Festival, and direct access to the train to NYC.

Nowadays Norwalk is the headquarters for several nationally known companies, including Pepperidge Farm and Priceline. The city is also proud of our regionally known supermarket chain, Stew Leonard's, which is listed in Ripley's Believe It Or Not as "the world's largest dairy store." The city has always grown through immigration and is currently a sanctuary city for immigrants from Latin America.

### *B. Historical origin of related issues*

After the death of her college-aged son from a heroin overdose 24 years ago, Norwalk's own Ginger Katz (a member of our coalition) created The Courage to Speak Foundation, Inc. Its mission is to save lives by empowering youth to be drug-free and encouraging parents to communicate effectively with their children about the dangers of drugs, breaking what Ginger sees as "the conspiracy of silence" around the disease of addiction. The Courage to Speak Foundation now offers curriculum and trainings in city schools, as well as throughout the state and country.

Due to Norwalk's location along a High Intensity Drug Trafficking Area, South Norwalk (SoNo) was for some time recognized as a regional drug center. Cleanup efforts began in the 1980s. In the early 2000s when the city's police headquarters moved to SoNo, much of the drug trade left Norwalk. SoNo is still known along the coastal towns for its vibrant social and restaurant scene. In recent years clubs have had to be closed due to rampant underage drinking.

## **III. Community Needs**

### *A. Data Collection Methods:*

Data collection methods prior to receiving the DFC grant include: youth focus groups (2017); key informant interviews with law enforcement, JRB, and other stakeholders (2017); community survey (2017); a youth survey administered in 7<sup>th</sup>, 9<sup>th</sup> and 11<sup>th</sup> grades (2018), a young adult survey administered at the Norwalk Community College (2018), a community readiness survey developed by the state and administered to all towns (2018); and local, regional, and state data sources. Since the start of the 2020-21 school year, we have met with key informants, conducted a focus group with all sectors at our first coalition meeting of the year, and held two focus groups with youth to try to determine how needs have changed as a result of COVID. We are conducting a parent survey in December 2020 and a youth survey in February 2021.

### *B. Data Identifying Problems:*

In 2018, Norwalk's community assessment revealed that alcohol and marijuana were the most widely used substances among Norwalk teens. Our 2020 focus group data confirm this finding, and we expect our upcoming parent and youth surveys to provide additional data to assist in our work. Data are summarized below. The logic models presented separately identify the specific measures to be used to evaluate our work; these are bolded below.

- In the 2018 Community Readiness Survey (CRS) for our region, key informants identified alcohol as the number one "problem substance" for teens, young adults, and adults up to age 65. In our recent October 2020 focus group with key informants, **marijuana had moved to top priority, with alcohol identified as the second problem substance among youth.**
- In the 2018 student survey, **39.5% of 11<sup>th</sup> graders reported consuming alcohol in the past 30 days, and 19.8% reported using marijuana in the past 30 days.** (Among 7<sup>th</sup> graders, the statistics were 12.8% and 3.5%, respectively.) At that time, more than half (54%) of all 11<sup>th</sup> graders and more than one-third (38%) of all 9<sup>th</sup> graders had been to a party in the past year where youth their age were

drinking. In addition, 23% of 11<sup>th</sup> graders reported binge drinking in the past two weeks. Our February 2021 youth survey will allow us to update these data and identify the impact of COVID-19.

- Key informant interviews among community stakeholders and the Connecticut Association of Prevention Practitioners support that marijuana use rates among youth will continue to increase as they have seen in other states where marijuana use has been decriminalized and legalized for medical purposes. In 2019, a medical marijuana dispensary opened up in an adjacent town. We anticipate an increase in marijuana use among youth as a result.

### C. *Data Identifying Root Causes:*

Data reveal our community risk factors to be social access for both alcohol and marijuana; community norms for alcohol; and low perception of harm among youth for marijuana, as described below. Those included in the alcohol logic model are bolded.

- Community norms regarding alcohol: Respondents to the 2018 Community Readiness Survey believed that most Norwalk residents are less concerned with preventing alcohol abuse than other drug abuse and that **many residents feel it is okay for youth to drink alcohol occasionally**; our upcoming parent survey in December 2020 will identify the current percentage of Norwalk parents who believe that **drinking alcohol is an inevitable part of growing up**. In October 2020 focus groups, **86% of students indicated that their parents advise them to avoid drugs other than alcohol and marijuana**. Among students there is low peer disapproval of alcohol use, with **36% of 11<sup>th</sup> graders reporting little to no peer disapproval**.
- Social access to alcohol: In Norwalk's 2017 Community Survey, **95% of residents reported that it would be "Easy" for a young person (12-20) to access alcoholic beverages in Norwalk**; that finding will be updated through our upcoming December 2020 parent survey. In October 2020 focus groups (during COVID), **41% of high schoolers reported that it would be easy for them to access alcohol**.
- Social access to marijuana: The vast majority (91%) of Norwalk residents in the 2017 Community Survey identified access to marijuana as being "easy" for youth ages 12-20 years old. In October 2020 focus groups (during COVID), 41% of high schoolers reported it would be easy to access marijuana.
- Perception of harm related to marijuana: Perception of harm was found to be low in the 2017 Community Survey, with 44% of respondents reporting no risk or only a slight risk in using the substance on a regular basis. Norwalk youth corroborated this in the 2018 school survey: 54% of 11<sup>th</sup> graders reported no risk or only a slight risk in regular marijuana use, and marijuana use was rated least harmful of all core substances. In October 2020 focus groups, 68% of high school students reported their friends believed marijuana was less dangerous than drinking of pills, and 36% said their friends believe marijuana helps them drive better.

### D. *Data Identifying Local Conditions:*

- Community norms around alcohol are reflected in alcohol consumption on school grounds at family events such as games: In 2019, **key informants reported picking up dozens of mini vodka bottles and beer cans under the bleachers following the homecoming football game/marching band contest**. In 2020, **22% of high schoolers who attend school sports or band events report adults consuming alcohol there** (youth focus groups). Our upcoming parent survey will identify the percentage of parents who report alcohol consumption as common on school grounds at these events.
- Community norms around alcohol are also reflected in alcohol consumption at family-oriented celebrations held outdoors in public (e.g., the beach, town concerts, people's yards – all reported by

key informants). In 2020 focus groups, **86% of youth reported visible alcohol consumption by adults at the beach**. Our upcoming parent survey will identify the **percentage of parents who report consuming alcohol at the beach**.

- Social access to alcohol by youth mainly happens in private homes: In 2020 focus groups, **64% of high schoolers report their friends drink alcohol at their own or someone else's house**. We are seeking a baseline on parental awareness of the social host law in our upcoming parent survey (December 2020).
- Social access to alcohol by youth also takes place in public spaces: In 2020 focus groups, there was a three-way tie for the **second-most identified location for drinking after private homes, with 41% of high schoolers identifying beaches, parks, and cars** as common locations where their friends drink. Because the beach is also identified as a place where adults commonly drink, and due to the presence of many recreational and parking areas at the beach, we have selected the beach as a target local condition. We are seeking **citations data** from the police department.

#### IV. Community Resources

##### A. Current Resources

Youth in Norwalk currently receive substance use prevention education at several points in time:

- DARE is taught in all elementary schools in 5<sup>th</sup> grade by the police.
- The age-appropriate Courage to Speak curriculum is taught in the elementary and middle schools.
- Health education classes in high school incorporate substance misuse information.

Parents have several options each year to attend “Courageous Parenting 101,” a parenting prevention education series provided free of charge by the Courage to Speak Foundation in English and Spanish.

Prevention efforts have historically been provided by the Community Prevention Task Force (CPTF). Due to insufficient funding to coordinate robust plans and strategies, CPTF primarily focused on information dissemination (e.g., mailings, posters) and providing activities such as Family Day at housing associations and monthly activities in schools. Three years ago, a state grant led to the creation of a small separate prevention group which was able to conduct the first student survey in grades 7, 9, and 11. During the summer of 2020, we have worked to merge these two groups to create what is now relaunched as The Norwalk Partnership, benefiting from the joint talents and funding from both prior prevention councils.

In terms of positive youth development, schools offer a variety of sports and clubs after school (prior to COVID) and there are a number of faith-based youth groups in town, as well as scouts, Norwalk Youth Symphony, and opportunities for teens to work as counselors in the Norwalk Sailing School or summer camps run by Norwalk Recreation and Parks or Norwalk Public Schools.

For at-risk students, resources include School-Based Health Centers, “teen talk” counselors, and the Youth Services Bureau. There are many providers in the community for those requiring treatment.

##### B. Gaps and Opportunities

There is great room for awareness of underage substance use in Norwalk. The subject does not have much visibility in the city, partly because of the focus on issues such as immigration, housing, and education, and partly due to the low profile and limited funding of the earlier prevention efforts. There has never been a fully developed plan with community buy-in to address these issues, and past data were not disseminated due to community politics. Our new coalition is mindful of this history, so we are

pleased to be working closely with a couple of key stakeholders who are new in their positions and will be essential partners: the chief of the city's new Community Services Department and the new Director of School Counseling.

Parent attendance at Courageous Parenting 101 and other educational presentations has been decreasing in recent years. There is a need to identify new ways to engage parents, particularly in the virtual environment of COVID. It may be that the increase in day drinking and access to substances in the home can be a way to raise concerns. It will be critical for this year's school survey data to be disseminated widely and well to mobilize the community. It will also be important to engage the Latino and Haitian communities. We have identified two Creole speakers who are interested in working with us, and one of our coalition leaders is Spanish speaking.

One important underlying issue is that many Norwalk youth do not feel empowered: only 33% of middle and high schoolers see youths as resources, and even fewer--23%-- reported that the community values youths (2018 youth survey). We are working closely with Norwalk ACTS, the cradle-to-career coalition that focuses on social-emotional learning, to look at youth engagement, create a youth committee, and use assets and developmental relationships information from the upcoming student survey to address this issue. The Community Services department, which oversees the Norwalk Youth Services Bureau (YSB), is also working on plans to expand the YSB's role beyond its current functions (providing limited counseling and serving as the Juvenile Review Board) to provide more options for youth in the city.

## **V. Problem / Goal Statements**

### *A. Problem Statements*

The problems are very basic: Norwalk youth are drinking, and Norwalk youth are using marijuana. Our logic models are built on these two fundamental issues.

### *B. Rationale*

Data reported above show that alcohol and marijuana are used by a large proportion of youth. With 2 out of 5 juniors reporting drinking and 1 out of 5 juniors reporting using marijuana in the past month (2018 youth survey)—higher rates than in neighboring towns—our primary concern is to reduce overall usage rates. In so doing, we will also have an impact on other related issues found in our data, such as past 30 day binge drinking (reported by 23% of juniors in the 2018 survey) and being in a car with an impaired driver at least three times in the past year (reported by 11% of middle and high schoolers in the 2018 survey).

To accomplish our goals, we will need to address the social availability of both alcohol and marijuana; recognize the community norms around alcohol while promoting the visibility of the social host law (which exists but is not known or enforced); and create awareness among adults and youth about the risks of marijuana.