

The background of the cover is a photograph of the Connecticut State Capitol building, a grand neoclassical structure with a prominent golden dome and several smaller spires. The building is set against a clear blue sky. In the foreground, there are green trees and a paved walkway leading towards the building.

CONNECTICUT
VOICES
FOR CHILDREN

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2021 LEGISLATIVE SESSION REVIEW

Introduction

The 2021 Legislative Session in Connecticut differed from most sessions in a number of ways; first and foremost, the primary task of the Legislature was to respond to a once-in-a-lifetime pandemic after a year of executive orders, economic shutdown, and physical isolation. The pandemic caused record-breaking job loss¹ and elevated food and housing insecurity, disproportionately burdening Connecticut's families and youth.² Meanwhile, the rich—particularly online giants—actually became richer from the pandemic.³ Second, the public murders of George Floyd, Rayshard Brooks, Breonna Taylor, and other Black and Brown individuals at the hands of the police brought statewide attention and added rigor to Legislative discussions of systemic racism and wealth inequality in Connecticut. Third, Connecticut's budgetary landscape oscillated unpredictably as the economy and federal support changed rapidly.

In his 2021 budget address, Governor Lamont declared, “Our budget is much more than a list of expenditures and revenues. Rather, it is a reflection of our shared values, as we are collectively deciding not only what we are funding, but why we are funding it. It is a document that defines who we are as a state and a society.”⁴ Even in “normal” times, passing a budget that “defines who we are as a state and a society” is difficult, to say the least. In the times of the coronavirus pandemic and recession, two key shifts—a historic revenue shortfall and then a historic revenue surplus—further complicated this process.

Legislators sought to tackle these issues boldly, proposing and holding public hearings on bills that had the potential to dramatically reduce wealth inequality, residential segregation, the disproportionate incarceration of Black and Brown residents, as well as bills that would better support families so that children could thrive from birth. Through the legislative process, as parties negotiated bills and the Legislature negotiated with the Governor, many of these proposals deteriorated from being transformative to being important but incremental changes. In the end, the Legislature passed bills that will help individuals living in poverty, bills that will expand access to affordable housing in Connecticut, bills that will reduce the number of children entering the criminal legal system, and bills that will expand access to affordable early child care. The Legislature fell short of addressing the breadth of residential segregation and affordable housing development as well as reducing the negative impacts of the criminal legal system on youth. Additionally, by utilizing a combination of carry-forward funds, lapsed funds, federal funds, and appropriating right up to the spending cap, the final budget funded many programs critical to helping low-income individuals and supporting children and families, but it fell short of making structural reforms to combat wealth inequality (with the exception of a handful of policies) and ensure long-term sustainability.

This review of the 2021 Legislative Session in Connecticut will further expand on legislative successes as well as areas for continued work, beginning with an in-depth overview of proposals and changes made to Connecticut's taxes and spending. From there, we review bills related to housing, justice, employment, and other family economic security issues. We close by reviewing policies related to the COVID-19 pandemic.

Fiscal & Economics

Operating as a pre-pandemic baseline, the Office of Fiscal Analysis (OFA) projected in the [2019 fiscal accountability report](#) that the General Fund would have a surplus of \$184 million for fiscal year 2021 and deficits of \$757 million for fiscal year 2022 and \$1.2 billion for fiscal year 2023. A year later, and this time incorporating the effects of the pandemic, the [OFA projected](#) deficits of \$855 million for FY 21, \$2.1 billion for FY 22, and \$2.2 billion for FY 23. The OFA also warned, “While the current balance in the [Budget Reserve Fund] is [\$3.01 billion], the highest ever, the BRF is projected to be almost entirely depleted by the end of FY 22, absent mitigating action.” This historic shift in the budget projection intensified the policy debate, especially over the issue of whether to raise taxes on the wealthy in order to provide support for working- and middle-class families in the form of tax cuts, increased spending, or some combination.

When the Appropriations Committee released its [budget proposal](#) in April 2021, the second historic shift was underway, this time in the opposite direction due largely to a growing stock market and substantial federal support. In particular, the [ongoing fiscal year](#) now had a projected surplus of \$181 million, which nearly matched the pre-pandemic projection; the BRF had a projected balance of just under \$3.75 billion, which would exceed its legal capacity; the projected deficits for FY 22 and FY 23 had decreased to \$760 million and \$895 million, respectively, a smaller combined amount than the pre-pandemic projection; and the state had [\\$2.8 billion in federal support](#), which in and of itself was more than sufficient to close the projected deficits for the upcoming biennium budget. Put simply, it was now possible to increase spending *and* avoid raising taxes, at least for the next two years.

Against this backdrop, the State passed a budget in June 2021 that includes a number of policy successes addressed herein. However, as also addressed herein, the tax system that primarily funds the budget remains regressive, meaning it disproportionately burdens working- and middle-class families, especially those of color, and thereby counteracts the support those families receive through government spending. Further, the federal money used to close the deficit and expand government support is temporary, meaning the state failed to address long-term spending issues.

Supporting Connecticut’s Families and Economy through Tax Reform

In our December 2020 tax report, *Advancing Economic Justice Through Tax Reform*, we showed that Connecticut’s regressive tax system contributes to economic injustice by disproportionately burdening working- and middle-class families, especially those of color. We also showed that reforming Connecticut’s tax system by raising taxes on the wealthy in order to fund an equivalent level of tax cuts for working- and middle-class families—a revenue-neutral process rather than an overall tax increase—would work to reduce income and wealth inequality and thereby advance economic justice.⁵

The report included seven major tax proposals, all of which were incorporated into bills this legislative session and advanced to varying degrees. The following is a list of the proposals and their initial inclusion in bills:

- *Increase the top income tax rates* on single filers earning above \$500,000 and joint filers earning above \$1 million. This proposal was incorporated into [H.B. 6187](#) and [S.B. 821](#), both of which made it to a public hearing.
- *Expand the estate and gift tax* on multi-million dollar estates. This proposal was incorporated into [H.B. 6187](#) and [S.B. 821](#), both of which made it to a public hearing.
- *Establish a surcharge on investment income* on single filers earning above \$500,000 and joint filers earning above \$1 million. This proposal was incorporated into [H.B. 6187](#) and [S.B. 821](#), both of which made it to a public hearing.
- *Establish a statewide property tax* on the portion of homes in excess of \$1.5 million. This proposal was incorporated into [H.B. 6187](#) and [S.B. 821](#), both of which made it to a public hearing.
- *Expand the Connecticut Earned Income Tax Credit*, which would cut taxes for working-class families. This proposal was incorporated into [H.B. 6187](#), [S.B. 821](#), and [S.B. 178](#), all of which made it to a public hearing.
- *Expand the Connecticut Property Tax Credit*, which would cut taxes for working- and middle-class families. This proposal was incorporated into [S.B. 821](#), which made it to a public hearing.
- *Create the Connecticut Child Tax Credit*, which would cut taxes for working- and middle-class families. This proposal was incorporated into [H.B. 6654](#) and [S.B. 821](#), both of which made it to a public hearing.

In April 2021, following the public hearing phase, the Finance, Revenue, and Bonding Committee (from this point on referred to as the Finance Committee) passed its revenue package, [H.B. 6443](#), which included the following four of our proposed tax reforms:

- *Increase the top income tax rate income* (or, in the bill's terms, establish a "consumption tax"). This consisted of an additional 0.7 percent tax on income above \$500,000 and up to an additional 1.5 percent on income above \$13 million, all of which would raise \$500 million a year.
- *Establish a surcharge on capital gains*. This consisted of an additional 2 percent tax on income above \$500,000 for single filers and \$1 million for joint filers, which would raise \$262 million a year.
- *Expand the Connecticut Earned Income Tax Credit*. This consisted of increasing the credit from 23 percent to 40 percent, which would cut taxes for working-class families by an additional \$77 million a year.
- *Create the Connecticut Child Tax Credit*. This consisted of creating a partially refundable credit up to \$600 a child (for a maximum of three children), which would cut taxes for working- and middle-class families by \$300 million a year.

Working together, these four components of the Finance Committee’s revenue package would increase taxes on the wealthy by an amount that was sufficient to provide the largest tax cut for the state’s working- and middle-class families as well as an expansion of government spending in support of those families.

In addition to the aforementioned tax reform options, we supported [S.B. 783](#), which proposed to limit the State’s ability to place liens on the property of public assistance beneficiaries, which effectively operates as a government-imposed poverty tax. After receiving a public hearing in February 2021, this proposal was incorporated into [H.B. 6516](#) and signed into law by the governor in March 2021. In its final form, the law works to advance economic justice both by prohibiting the state from recovering public assistance through new liens placed on property and by directing the state to release existing liens.

We also supported and celebrate the provision within [the budget](#) that expands the Connecticut Earned Income Tax Credit from 23 percent of the federal EITC to 30.5 percent, the highest level in the state’s history. Along with the elimination of the state’s poverty tax, which will provide a tax cut of \$12 million a year for former beneficiaries of public assistance, the expansion of the CT EITC will provide an additional tax cut of \$34 million for working-class families.

Next steps for tax justice

Importantly, the budget excludes the creation of the Connecticut Child Tax Credit, which would supplement the EITC in providing support for both working- and middle-class families. However, the budget does include a key provision requiring the Office of Policy and Management to submit a plan for creating a state CTC if the current, temporarily expanded federal CTC is not made permanent. While the federal CTC provides considerable support for families, it does nothing to reform Connecticut’s regressive tax system or improve Connecticut’s competitiveness in retaining and attracting working- and middle-class families. In contrast, a state-level CTC would provide financial support for working- and middle-class families, make Connecticut’s tax system fairer, and make Connecticut more competitive.

Also important, rather than rely upon new progressive taxes to raise revenue, the final budget and supplemental legislation rely upon several regressive sources, such as gaming revenue, a highway use tax, and maintaining the limit on the property tax credit, all of which will make Connecticut’s tax system less fair. For example, the limit on the property tax credit operates as a \$53 million annual tax increase on working- and middle-class families and thereby more than offsets the combined tax cut under the expansion of the CT EITC and elimination of the state’s poverty tax. The budget also maintains the phased-in dismantling of the estate tax, with the exemption increasing to \$7.1 million in 2021 and \$9.1 million in 2022, which operates as a tax cut for the wealthy.

In addition to advocating for a fairer tax system, we supported [H.B. 6452](#), which would require Connecticut banks to report information on overdraft fees to the Bank Commission, a key step in shining light on this problem. As our research shows, bank overdraft fees effectively operate as a

private sector poverty tax that disproportionately targets the state's lowest-income residents, especially those of color.⁶ In the end, H.B. 6452 received a public hearing but failed to move forward, making it an important issue to address next session.

Although many of the tax reforms we proposed were not incorporated into the budget this session and the bill to report information on overdraft fees did not make it out of committee, CT Voices and its fiscal coalition partners were highly influential throughout the past year in framing the debate over economic inequality and taxation. We're thankful for the partnership of Unidad Latina en Acción, RAACE, All Our Kin, the Center on Budget and Policy Priorities, the Institute for Taxation and Economic Policy, The Early Childhood Alliance, United Way of CT, Connecticut Legal Rights Project, the Connecticut chapter of the American Academy of Pediatrics, the Yale Pediatricians, and many other organizations. Moreover, it will be essential for our fiscal coalition to continue this work. As we've shown, pre-tax income inequality, the racial income gap, wealth inequality, and the racial wealth gap are greater in Connecticut than even the historically high levels for the U.S. as a whole, and Connecticut's regressive tax system has contributed to those dynamics in the past and will continue to do so under the state's new budget due to the absence of tax reform.⁷

Supporting Connecticut's Families and Economy through Spending Reform

In research conducted by CT Voices in 2020, we highlighted the economic benefits of maintaining the highest possible level of government spending. In particular, we showed that when the economy is operating below full capacity, a dollar increase in government spending boosts economic output significantly more than a dollar increase in taxes restricts economic output, meaning Connecticut can grow its economy through increased spending, even while balancing its budget.⁸

Maintaining the highest possible level of spending is especially important in Connecticut due to the State's restrictive spending cap, which limits spending to the level appropriated in the previous year plus a percentage increase based on the greater of either the average growth in the state's personal income over the past five years or the growth in the consumer price index over the last year. In operation, a reduction in spending or failing to increase spending by the full amount in a given year decreases the budget base in subsequent years, thereby limiting possible investments in the state and further weakening an already slow growing economy.⁹

In addition to our recommendation of maintaining the highest possible level of spending, we supported three individual spending proposals this session: S.B. 873, S.B. 948, and H.B. 6659.

[S.B. 873](#) proposed to establish both a minimum reimbursement rate for payment in lieu of taxes (PILOT) grants and a three-tiered system for prorating the grants when appropriations fall short of full funding. This measure was then incorporated into [H.B. 6516](#) and signed by the governor in March 2021. In its final form, the law works to advance economic justice by providing increased funding to cities, which will support either property tax relief for those residents, an increase in government support, or some combination of the two.

[S.B. 948](#) proposed to expand in several ways the Education Cost Sharing (ECS) grant, which comprises the majority of state funding to school districts. In particular, it proposed to eliminate the ECS's scheduled phase-in and provide full funding beginning in FY 22, increase and expand the weights for English language learners (ELL) and students in districts with concentrated poverty, and extend the ECS grant to include public school students in non-district schools. Although S.B. 948 was not approved by the General Assembly, several of the bill's recommendations were ultimately incorporated into the budget: the Office of Fiscal Analysis is charged with creating a model of the fiscal impact of the complete set of proposals raised in the original bill; the poverty and ELL weights and thresholds will be adjusted as recommended in S.B. 948; and state charter schools will receive state funding based on the ECS formula. These measures will help to reduce the state's considerable racial funding disparities and simplify its disjointed education finance apparatus, making Connecticut's education systems more equitable and effective.

[H.B. 6659](#) proposed to combat wealth inequality and the racial wealth gap by requiring the state to deposit \$5,000 from the General Fund to the new CT Baby Bonds program for every eligible birth—namely, individuals provided medical coverage under HUSKY Health. The State would then invest the money on behalf of the designated beneficiary, who would be able to spend it on eligible expenses, such as education, homeownership, or business ownership if they are living in Connecticut on their 18th birthday. The Appropriations Committee passed the bill in April 2021, and the General Assembly passed a modified version as part of [H.B. 6690](#) in June 2021, making Connecticut the first state to establish such a program. [In its final form](#), the law authorizes the Treasurer to use a total of \$50 million in bond proceeds each year from FY 23 through FY 34 to issue up to \$3,200 to the Connecticut Baby Bond Trust for every birth covered under HUSKY Health.

Also important, [H.B. 6690](#), the state's two-year bonding package, includes overall authorizations of \$3.43 billion in general obligations and \$1.77 billion in special tax obligation bonds, producing a total estimated debt service cost of \$4.83 billion and \$2.84 billion, respectively. This will add to the state's current estimated [\\$91.6 billion in long-term obligations](#), one of the highest levels in the nation in relation to ability to pay and primarily consisting of outstanding bonds, unfunded pensions, and unfunded other post-employment benefits. At the same time, Connecticut's [credit rating has improved](#), lowering the cost of borrowing, and the state plans to use the [projected excess revenue](#) from the volatility cap system to pay down its unfunded pension liabilities. The net effect of these dynamics (i.e., whether they will cancel each other out, increase the long-term obligation burden, or reduce the long-term obligation burden) is not yet known and will ultimately depend on several factors, especially interest rate levels, the condition of the stock market, and the amount of debt issued rather than authorized, all of which means this is a critical policy area to monitor moving forward.

Finally, [the budget](#) that the General Assembly passed into law in June 2021 includes total appropriations of \$22.74 billion for FY 22 and \$23.62 billion for FY 23, which is estimated to come in, respectively, at 99.9 percent and 99.85 percent of the spending cap's capacity. Although the budget provides nearly the highest possible level of spending allowed under the State's established fiscal restrictions and includes some notable improvements—such as increased support for municipalities

and education spending reforms—it is essentially a status quo budget from a high-level perspective rather than a transformative budget.

Next steps for spending justice

To create a transformative budget, the state must address three high-level issues. First, like past budgets, the *size* of Connecticut’s new budget is relatively small and steady. When measured as a percent of state personal income (SPI)—which takes into a state’s ability to fund government support and therefore is one of the key variables that the Connecticut government itself relies on in setting the allowable growth of expenditures—Connecticut’s spending level is below average relative to other states and has not grown in several years. In particular, the state budget equaled 7.66 percent of SPI in FY 18, 7.54 percent in FY 19, 7.50 percent in FY 20, and 7.55 percent in FY 21, and the new budget—assuming the same average annual growth in SPI—will equal 7.56 percent of SPI in FY 22 and 7.63 percent in FY 23, which is slightly below the level in FY 18. Second, the *distribution* of Connecticut’s new budget closely tracks that of past budgets. Most notably, non-functional spending remains the largest category and primarily includes spending on debt service, pensions, and other post-employment benefits. The latter two spending obligations are especially problematic because they are largely for unfunded liabilities of past generations and limit new investments and support for the state’s younger generations of families. Third, Connecticut’s budget maintains a *structural imbalance* in the out years, meaning, like the two preceding budgets, which averaged an out year deficit of more than \$1 billion each year, the new budget relies upon temporary measures over the next two years to balance revenues and expenditures and leaves a projected out year deficit of \$1.1 billion in FY 24 and \$1.2 billion in FY 25. This structural deficit will generate considerable pressure to prevent tax reform and/or reduce government spending at the start of the next budget cycle.

Taking into account both taxes and spending, the new budget maintains a regressive tax system that disproportionately burdens working- and middle-class families, especially those of color, and thereby counteracts the support those families receive through government spending; the new budget maintains a steady, low level of spending relative to the state’s economic resources, and a considerable portion of that low level of spending is for the unfunded liabilities of past generations, which limits the state’s new investments and support for younger generations of families; and the new budget maintains a structural imbalance that will generate considerable pressure to prevent tax reform and/or reduce government spending during the next budget cycle. In contrast, a truly transformative budget—and one worthy of “defin[ing] who we are as a state and a society”—would include a progressive tax system that supports the state’s working- and middle-class families, especially those of color; it would include a greater level of permanent spending on new investments, especially in support of the state’s younger generations of families; and it would be structurally balanced, thereby removing a major obstacle for passing newly proposed reforms that arise each budget cycle.

Key legislative successes

- Expansion of the Connecticut Earned Income Tax Credit
- Commitment to establishing the Connecticut Child Tax Credit if the current, temporarily expanded federal CTC is diminished
- Appropriated essentially the highest possible level of spending under the established fiscal restrictions
- Increased financial support for municipalities
- Created the Connecticut Baby Bonds Trust

Family Economic Security

Today, the state's income and wealth divides are more significant than ever,¹⁰ but so much of a child's well-being is rooted in family economic security. Children cannot thrive unless families do, which is why CT Voices prioritizes affordable housing, criminal justice, and fair employment, as well as the intersectional issues of health, child welfare, and education. We believe that our state's social and economic well-being depends upon the dismantling of policies that perpetuate poverty and criminalize poverty and the creation of policies that advance inclusive growth policies that ensure pathways to opportunity for all our children, youth, and families.

Family Economic Security - Housing

Safe, affordable, and stable housing is fundamental for healthy child development and educational success. Connecticut Voices for Children advocates for the development of more affordable housing and the dismantling of policies and practices that prevent people from accessing housing that fully meets their needs. Our housing advocacy this legislative session focused primarily on funding for housing and homelessness prevention programs, land-use reform, and tenant protections. This work was part of efforts led by Desegregate Connecticut, Elm City Communities, Open Communities Alliance, Partnership for Strong Communities, and other partners in the housing justice space.

Funding for homeless prevention programs

CT Voices applauds the Legislature for including within the budget notable increases in funding for affordable housing and homelessness prevention. Namely, the final budget and bonding packages ([H.B. 6689](#) & [H.B. 6690](#)) includes the following increases:

- Funding for the Department of Housing's (DOH) Housing/Homelessness Services line item at \$85.3 million in each year of the biennium, representing a \$3.5 million increase from the proposed Appropriations budget. This line item primarily funds the Rental Assistance Program (RAP), which assists very low-income families in affording private rental housing.
- A \$351,975 increase in fiscal year 2022 and a \$641,975 increase in fiscal year 2023 for the DOH's Homeless Youth Program, a program specifically tasked with creating comprehensive systems to end youth homelessness.

Steps toward increasing Connecticut's affordable housing options

The Legislature made notable steps towards increasing the state's affordable housing options and affirmatively furthering fair housing through the passage of [P.A. 21-29](#). This law legalizes accessory dwelling units (ADUs), caps excessive parking requirements, develops a model form-based code, defines character by physical standards, mandates training for land-use commissioners, clarifies technical standards, defines "as-of-right," eliminates unreasonable application fees, and requires towns to affirmatively further fair housing.

P.A. 21-29 represents progress in increasing and diversifying Connecticut's housing options. However, it leaves substantial work to be done in reforming statewide land-use policies or adding affordable housing stock. The law allows municipalities to opt out of the ADU and parking requirement language, which has the potential to limit the effectiveness of the law. P.A. 21-29 also does not include language requiring transit-oriented development (TOD) and main-street development, and both are important components to effective land-use reform. CT Voices testified in strong support of these provisions in the original draft legislation ([S.B. 1024](#)). We encourage the Legislature to continue efforts toward residential zoning reform and the development of more affordable housing in future legislative sessions through passage of aforementioned policies without harmful opt-out clauses.

Creating a right to counsel in eviction cases

CT Voices also applauds the passage of a right to counsel ([P.A. 21-34](#)). This law creates a right to free legal representation for tenants facing eviction. While approximately 90 percent of landlords have legal representation in eviction proceedings, most tenants do not. Numerous studies have shown that access to legal representation improves outcomes for tenants. Attorneys can help a client find alternative housing, negotiate payment plans, and help avoid the eviction altogether.¹¹ We applaud the legislature for taking this important step to protect tenants.

Ending segregation

The Legislature also made efforts to end segregation in Connecticut, through mandating a study of state and federal housing programs focused on these programs' impact on economic and racial segregation ([S.B. 1202](#)). While this is an important first step, there is substantial work to be done to dismantle patterns of segregation that limit choice for communities of color.

Next steps for housing justice

This legislative session brought about important markers toward progress on achieving housing equity. However, several important pieces of legislation did not pass. CT Voices is committed to continued advocacy to ensure every Connecticut resident has access to safe, affordable, and stable housing.

CT Voices supported [H.B. 6430](#), legislation expanding jurisdiction for public housing authorities. This bill would allow public housing authorities (PHAs) to operate and develop affordable housing and administer housing choice vouchers in towns outside of their municipal boundaries. Passage of this legislation would give low-income families greater choice in where to live and disrupt patterns of segregation.¹²

We also supported two pieces of legislation to require multi-family housing near transit stations. CT Voices testified in support of [H.B. 6570](#). This legislation would have required 50 percent of the area within a one-half mile radius of CTfastrak stations and passenger rail stations to be zoned to allow ADUs by right and to allow for multi-family and mixed-use buildings. As previously noted, we also testified in strong support of [S.B. 1024](#)'s TOD provisions, which were ultimately removed. Both bills would have functioned to increase housing diversity and affordability in Connecticut.¹³

[H.B. 6611](#) was another bill focused on affordable housing. In short, this bill asked Connecticut towns to plan and zone for their fair share of the state's affordable housing needs. CT Voices supported this legislation because of the dire need for affordable housing across Connecticut.¹⁴

Additionally, CT Voices supported [S.B. 194](#) to establish a right to housing in Connecticut. Safe and affordable housing is a basic necessity. However, for many renters in Connecticut, access to housing is far out of reach.¹⁵ We applauded this bill as a critical recognition of the challenges facing low-income families and children and a pathway toward addressing those challenges.

Finally, we supported key legislation focused on sealing criminal records and past eviction records for prospective renters ([S.B. 355](#) and [H.B. 6528](#)). Tenants with a past criminal record and those with past evictions on their record are punished when trying to find housing. These individuals, who are often already the most disenfranchised, are punished and pushed to the bottom of the rental market where they are forced to accept substandard housing.¹⁶ These bills would limit landlord's access to past records to ensure that everyone can find stable housing.

Collectively, these bills would have worked to ensure that every Connecticut resident has access to safe, affordable, and stable housing. While they were not signed into law during the 2021 legislative session, we look forward to continued work with our partners to achieve true housing justice in Connecticut.

Key legislative successes

- Increased funding for various Housing and Homelessness prevention programs
- Pathways to affirmatively further fair housing and develop more affordable housing in Connecticut
- Passage of a right to legal counsel for tenants facing eviction
- Required study of state and federal housing programs focused on these programs' impact on economic and racial segregation

Family Economic Security - Justice

Ensuring that all families can meet their basic needs through safe housing, appropriate educational opportunities, and employment with fair wages helps to ensure that children and families are not forced to break the law to support basic survival. Involvement with punitive systems such as the criminal legal system and the child welfare system all too often separate family members and trap families in cycles that deplete family resources including money, time, and security. Our Rights and Justice advocacy this legislative session worked to reduce the number of people making contact with the criminal legal system; funding community-based programs that support children and families; ensure that involved families stay connected; and reduce the physical, psychological, and fiscal harm done to individuals within the criminal legal system. This work was part of efforts led by the many members of the Juvenile

Justice Policy and Oversight Committee (JJPOC), the American Civil Liberties Union - CT, Stop Solitary - CT, the Citywide Youth Coalition, the Black and Brown Student Union, the Connecticut Justice Alliance (CTJA), RAACE, the Cops Out of Schools Coalition, and many other partners.

Reduce the number of people making contact with the criminal legal system

Amidst the backdrop of a deadly pandemic that disproportionately impacted incarcerated individuals and Black and Brown communities, residents across Connecticut began loudly demanding increased decarceration. CT Voices advocated for decarceration through two avenues: reduction of laws and mechanisms that funnel people into the criminal legal system and safely releasing incarcerated individuals back into their communities.

[H.B. 6667](#), an omnibus child justice reform bill written by the JJPOC, sought to take advantage of the moment and make numerous bold reforms including:

- increase the age at which a child can become involved in the criminal legal system from seven to 12,
- automatically erase the records of young people who successfully complete judicially-mandated services and stay out of the criminal legal system afterward,
- eliminate the use of exclusionary discipline policies that disproportionately contribute to the school-to-prison pipeline,
- streamline the work of educating youth involved in the criminal legal system and integrating them back into their schools,
- eliminating the use of chemical restraints on children involved in the criminal legal system, and
- numerous other policies.

Ultimately, the Judiciary Committee amended the bill, changing or removing many of the concepts within this omnibus bill. The bill ultimately passed by the House and the Senate did increase the minimum age at which a child can become involved in the criminal legal system from seven years old to 10 years old. The bill additionally creates a mandatory pre-arrest diversion plan to keep children who break a number of laws where other individuals are less likely to be hurt such as trespassing, public disturbances, cannabis use, and others. Through these two avenues, this bill will help to reduce the number of children who become involved in the criminal legal system.

To help reduce incarceration experienced by adults, CT Voices advocated in support of [S.B. 1058](#), which would have strengthened pathways for the Department of Corrections (DOC) to release incarcerated individuals who pose little safety risk to communities back into communities. The bill passed the Senate with a party-line vote, but it did not receive a vote in the House of Representatives. Had this bill been in place when the pandemic began, it is possible that some of the 19 incarcerated individuals who died of COVID-19 in Connecticut State prisons would still be alive.¹⁷

Finally, to reduce the school-to-prison pipeline that sends children out of school, CT Voices advocated in opposition to [H.B. 6535](#), which would have created a taskforce to study School Resource Officers. The House and Senate did not end up discussing this bill, so it did not pass. In particular, we opposed the over-representation of law enforcement on the taskforce and the under-representation of disproportionately impacted youth and community members. CT Voices has studied the impact of School Resource Officers on schools and found that they contribute to increased arrests for children of color and no discernible educational benefits.¹⁸

Funding community-based programs that support children and families

Economic insecurity is one of the largest predictors of individuals becoming involved in the criminal legal system.¹⁹ Additionally, the presence of pro-social activities and supports in communities for children has been shown to reduce child involvement in the criminal legal system.²⁰ In partnership with CTJA, CT Voices released research prior to legislative session modeling the impact of community-based organizations on reducing crime in Connecticut's cities.²¹ In order to help support families struggling with economic security, we advocate to increase funding for programs empirically shown to reduce crime including programs that help individuals find work, programs that reduce addiction, programs that intervene in community violence, programs that support neighborhood development, and programs that provide pro-social supports for children. We also advocated to reinvest funds saved from efforts to reduce criminal legal system involvement, such as through reducing the inflow and amount of time individuals spend in carceral facilities and through closing prisons.

In order to balance Connecticut's early-predicted deficit, Governor Lamont cut funding to a number of community-based programs that fall into these categories such as Bridges to Success and Family Resource Centers. The budget passed by the Legislature in the final hours of legislative session undid the vast majority of these cuts, instead funding previously funded programs through carry-forwards or grants. The final budget also included an additional \$350,000 in grants to expand Project Longevity, a community-based violence prevention program in Connecticut's largest cities.

Governor Lamont also recommended closing two prisons, including Connecticut's highest security prison, Northern Correctional Institution. OPM estimated that this would save the state \$15.4 million in FY 22 and \$41.5 million in FY 23. Governor Lamont recommended investing these savings into an account to mitigate the predicted deficit, while the Appropriations Committee recommended reinvesting the entire amount into health services for incarcerated individuals. The final budget reinvested around 30 percent of these savings into health services for incarcerated individuals.

Ensure that involved families stay connected

Once individuals become involved in the criminal legal system, maintaining strong family ties can help these individuals land on their feet once they re-enter the community and keep from reoffending.²² Connecticut charges families with incarcerated members the second highest in-state calling rate in the country,²³ which limits contact between incarcerated individuals and their family members and racks

up debt for economically strained families. CT Voices celebrates the passage of [S.B. 972](#), which makes up to 90 minutes per day of phone calls free for incarcerated individuals, beginning in July 2022, and prohibits DOC from charging for other communication services such as email and videoconferencing. This change also removes from Connecticut's tax structure \$8.2 million in the highly regressive revenue collected by charging incarcerated individuals from calls. Additionally, the budget implementer requires that DOC allow incarcerated individuals at least 60 minutes of contact visits with family and close friends each week, beginning in July 2022.

CT Voices, in partnership with the Criminal Justice Advocacy Clinic of the Jerome N. Frank Legal Services Organization at Yale Law School and the Children with Incarcerated Parents Initiative at Connecticut Central State University, also advocated in support of [S.B. 1084](#), which would have mandated the collection of data regarding the Termination of Parental Rights as a result of the federal Adoption and Safe Families Act. Research done by students at Yale Law School and CT Voices shows that Connecticut has no way of assessing how many parents lose their children to the child welfare system after becoming incarcerated.²⁴ This bill did not receive a vote out of committee and thus was not passed this legislative session.

Reduce trauma caused by criminal legal system involvement

After years of advocacy to eliminate the use of solitary confinement for incarcerated individuals, the Connecticut General Assembly passed [S.B. 1059](#) with bipartisan support. This bill makes numerous changes to laws governing the Department of Corrections, which runs Connecticut's prisons for adults and young people charged with adult crimes. Chief among these changes are limiting the use of isolated confinement, seclusion, and restraints, which are known to cause physical and psychological harm to incarcerated people. Additionally, the bill guarantees that incarcerated individuals (with a few exceptions) have a right to 6.5 hours or more outside of their cell each day.

Next steps for rights and criminal legal system justice

Although Connecticut passed some legislation that will help stabilize families and reduce child involvement in the criminal legal system, a number of the child and youth criminal legal system reforms proposed did not pass. In particular, CT Voices strongly advocated for raising the minimum age of criminal legal reform to *at least* 12,²⁵ and we will continue to advocate to phase-in higher ages as part of our vision to eliminate the incarceration of children in Connecticut. Additionally, we will continue to advocate for making the erasure of youth records automatic rather than one initiated by young people and families, eliminating the use of harmful chemical restraints on young people, and eliminating the use of exclusionary discipline on young children and in all but federally mandated circumstances for older children.

Outside of our work with the JJPOC, we will work to remove School Resource Officers from schools and increase funding for behavioral health support staff in schools including counselors, psychologists, and social workers. Behavioral health support staff spend years in higher education learning to support positive school environments, connect with and support families, and identify when children are

struggling and intervene before crises emerge. We will also continue to advocate for improving data collection and reporting to understand the full impact of incarceration on families in Connecticut.

Key legislative successes

- Increased the minimum age at which a child can become involved in the criminal legal system from seven to 10
- Eliminated fees for phone, email, and video communication between incarcerated individuals and their families
- Ensured that incarcerated individuals spend at least 6.5 hours per day interacting with other people

Family Economic Security - Employment

High-quality jobs with fair living wages help ensure that parents can meet the physical and emotional needs of their families. In Connecticut, wage stagnation coupled with job losses amidst the economic shutdown in response to COVID-19 has strained the economic security of many families. According to the National Women’s Law Center, four times as many women in the United States have left the labor force than men, and Black and Brown women have been disproportionately impacted.²⁶ For parents who were fortunate enough to retain their jobs, lack of available and affordable child care forced many parents to choose between working and keeping their children safe and learning. The majority of CT Voices’ employment work during the 2021 legislative session focused on stabilizing and expanding Connecticut’s early child care industry as well as helping ensure that schools were prepared to meet the social and emotional needs of children when they returned from over a year of physical distancing and the trauma of living through a pandemic. We completed this work in partnership with the Early Childhood Alliance, All Our Kin, the Office of Early Childhood, and Unidad Latina en Acción.

Stabilizing and expanding the early child care industry

We celebrate the bipartisan passage of [HB 6559](#), which will help expand Connecticut’s shrinking preschool slots by allowing Family Child Care homes (FCCs) and Group Child Care homes (GCCs) to receive school readiness slots, a policy CT Voices began advocating for early in the pandemic.²⁷ It also provides much-needed resources to FCCs by expanding eligibility to grants-in-aid and including FCCs in the definition of “early care and education and child development programs,” giving them access to Office of Early Child Care (OEC) resources to create high-quality programs.

We also celebrate the expansion of funding for numerous early child care programs. In the final budget, the Legislature utilized \$1,650,000 in lapses to cover Birth to Three parent fees and expand the Birth to Three program. The Legislature additionally designated \$5,300,000 of the state’s American Rescue Plan Act funds to cover Care 4 Kids Parent fees and \$3,500,000 for parent fees for state funded child care centers. This will help ensure that parents seeking to get back to work are not hampered by the high cost of child care after a long stretch of unemployment or underemployment.

Meeting children’s social and emotional needs in school

One of the Legislature’s top priorities this legislative session was ensuring that schools were prepared for children returning after having experienced over a year of isolation and trauma. CT Voices testified in support of [H.B. 6557](#), which would have required annual mental health and trauma screening in schools; established mandatory minimum ratios of support staff including counselors, psychologists, and social workers in schools; and required Boards of Education to develop comprehensive counseling programs. While this bill did not pass, a number of similar concepts passed with bipartisan support in the form of [S.B. 2](#). S.B. 2 does not include mandatory minimums for support staff, but it does create excused mental wellness days; require the Department of Education to create a community resource document; allow Local Education Agencies to provide virtual learning opportunities to students and remote parent-teacher conferences, which will help improve attendance for students struggling with health needs; requires schools to make 18 hours of social emotional learning professional development available each year; and expands the Birth-to-Three program and ensures families can receive affordable early intervention services.

Next steps for employment justice

To help ensure that students’ social and emotional needs are met in schools, CT Voices will continue to advocate to increase the funding for school counselors, psychologists, and social workers.

Additionally, the Legislature did not pass either [H.B. 6612](#) or [S.B. 87](#). These bills both sought to allow FCCs and GCCs to operate in a residential zone without needing a special zoning permit. The process of applying for special zoning permits can be time-intensive and expensive with little guarantee of approval. They also force early care small business owners—many of whom are women of color—to withstand thinly-veiled racist opposition targeted toward them and the families they serve, often under the guise of noise concerns, traffic concerns, or “community character” concerns. Connecticut’s number of FCCs has declined by 30 percent over the last decade, creating an infant and toddler care shortage of almost 50,000 slots.²⁸ Removing zoning barriers to opening FCC and GCC businesses is an important step to rebuilding this declining offering within the early care industry and supporting small business owners.

In addition to continuing to pursue zoning reform to ensure that FCCs and GCCs can operate within their homes, CT Voices recently launched a bold campaign for universal access to affordable child care in Connecticut. As part of this campaign, we will relentlessly propose and support pieces of legislation that will expand both the quantity of child care slots available and the quality of the care at little or no cost to parents.

Key legislative successes

- Stabilization of FCCs through expansion of grants-in-aid and school readiness grants to these child care providers
- Social and Emotional professional development for school staff as well as virtual learning options and mental wellness days for students struggling with mental health and trauma

Family Economic Security - Other Issues

Connecticut Voices for Children envisions a thriving and equitable state where all children achieve their full potential. Several pieces of legislation supported by CT Voices during the 2021 legislative session don't fit under the categories of Housing, Justice, or Jobs. Nonetheless, they function to advance our vision of a thriving and equitable state.

Adoption of the Connecticut Parentage Act

We are pleased to have been part of the We Care Coalition, an advocacy group made up of CT Families and community groups working to protect Connecticut's children via passage of the Parentage Act ([P.A. 21-15](#)). Without provisions outlined in the Parentage Act, Connecticut law leaves thousands of families without protections or paths to parentage for non-biological parents to establish their legal parent-child relationship.²⁹ As such, non-biological parents are treated as legal strangers to their children. The Connecticut Parentage Act, signed by Governor Lamont on June 1, 2021, protects LGBTQ+ couples and their children, secures families formed through assisted reproduction, removes gender distinctions, and provides methods of establishing parentage for non-biological parents; hence this legislation provides greater stability to children with unmarried, same-sex, or non-biological parents.

Key legislative successes:

- Passage of the Connecticut Parentage Act

Emerging Issues - Responding to the COVID-19 Pandemic

The world and state are changing rapidly, and we recognize that to keep up with the pace of these changes, we must be nimble and adapt, and address issues and emergencies when they arise, which is why Connecticut Voices for Children identifies new, timely issues to conduct research and advance advocacy on that are of the most emergent import to the well-being of the state's children and families.

Over the past year, Connecticut faced the convergence of a health crisis, an economic recession due to that crisis, and a contentious and long-overdue conversation on race. The COVID-19 pandemic has revealed and exacerbated structural and systemic inequities that disproportionately harm Connecticut's communities of color.

In response, legislators passed a range of policies to support families and children. While much of the legislation passed during the 2021 Legislative session will function to address the challenges we face in the aftermath of the pandemic, this section focuses specifically on legislation passed in direct response to COVID-19.

Ensuring legislative oversight of allocation of federal COVID-19 relief dollars

We helped pass a critical piece of legislation, [H.B. 6555](#): An Act Concerning Legislative Oversight and Approval of COVID-19 Relief Funds, which establishes a process for legislative oversight and approval of the allocation of COVID-19 relief funds from the federal government; H.B. 6555 requires that the state legislature operates as a co-equal branch of government and maintains involvement in the distribution of these dollars. Our best estimate is that the State will have the opportunity to receive over \$2.5 billion, and localities will have the opportunity to receive over \$1.3 billion.³⁰

This bill was influenced by CT Voices' 2020-2022 Issue Briefing Book,³¹ which called for increased transparency around the COVID-19 relief funds, and this legislation received bipartisan support. Along with several other partners, CT Voices worked to ensure the new federal funding pool is administered accurately, efficiently, and equitably. As a result, the governor signed this bill on March 31, 2021.

Declaration of racism as a public health crisis

Connecticut policymakers passed comprehensive legislation ([P.A. 21-35](#)) declaring racism a public health crisis and establishing the Connecticut Commission on Racial Equity in Public Health. CT Voices testified in support of this legislation because it creates a pathway to examine the way racism degrades the health and well-being of Connecticut residents. Connecticut's most marginalized communities, particularly low-income families and people of color, are more likely to be exposed to adverse social determinants of health, such as food insecurity, limited access to transportation or employment, housing instability, and the rotating door of Connecticut's criminal justice and child

welfare systems. These experiences make managing chronic health conditions and gaining access to preventative care difficult. Further, educational gaps and disproportionate school disciplinary practices inflict trauma, damaging health from childhood through adulthood.³² Racism is a driver for poor health outcomes; thus, we need intentional anti-racist policies to address Connecticut's health disparities.

Expansion of HUSKY Health

The Legislature passed law expanding HUSKY health coverage to immigrant children age 8 and under (up to 323 percent FPL, within available appropriations), to all undocumented pregnant people, and for individuals up to one-year postpartum (up to 263 percent FPL, within available appropriations). This legislation is an important win. However, the law is far more limited than the legislation that passed the Human Services and Appropriations Committees during this legislative session ([S.B. 956](#)). S.B. 956 would have provided HUSKY health coverage to all state residents who qualify, regardless of immigration status.

The Legislature also extended HUSKY's postpartum coverage from 2 months to 12 months ([S.B. 1202](#)). This extension of coverage is critical to supporting low-income Connecticut residents post-pregnancy and immigrants without documents.

Furthermore, the budget implementer established the Covered Connecticut program in the Office of Health Strategy to support fully-subsidized coverage through the Connecticut Health Insurance Exchange for parents and caretakers and eligible dependents with incomes up to 175 percent FPL, and low-income non-pregnant adults with incomes up to 175 percent FPL effective in 2022.

Next steps for health justice

In coming years, we urge the Legislature to consider expanding HUSKY health coverage to all undocumented children and parents. In addition, we urge the Legislature to expand parental income eligibility for HUSKY A. Original budget discussions provided a slight increase in income eligibility for HUSKY A from 160 percent of the Federal Poverty Level (FPL) to 175 percent FPL. This expansion would have a profound impact for the parents and caregivers who will now be eligible for HUSKY services. Unfortunately, this increase was removed in exchange for Governor Lamont's proposal to create additional subsidies for people with incomes at or below 175 percent FPL to access insurance through Access Health CT, the state's insurance exchange.³³ CT Voices will remain involved in continued advocacy to increase access to healthcare in Connecticut.

Key legislative successes:

- Increased legislative oversight and approval of COVID-19 relief funds
- Declaration of racism as a public health crisis
- Establishment of the Connecticut Commission on Racial Equity in Public Health
- Expansion of HUSKY health coverage to immigrant children age 8 and under, pregnant people, and for individuals up to one-year postpartum
- Extension of HUSKY's postpartum coverage from 2 months to 12 months

Conclusion

Dialogue in Connecticut was profoundly different this legislative session than in prior years, with direct conversations about income and wealth inequality and systemic racism reverberating through the Capitol building. While these conversations resulted in passage of some extraordinary policies, the breathtaking needs of the state mean that there's far more work to do to close Connecticut's yawning income and wealth gaps, dismantle residential segregation, eliminate the disproportionate incarceration of Black and Brown residents, and expand affordable child care to all families. As a state, Connecticut is well-situated to care for all its residents and ensure that all children achieve their full potential, but we must prioritize equity above stasis in order to achieve this goal.

Bills We Supported

Fiscal & Economics

Passed

- [HB 6654](#): An Act Establishing a Child Tax Credit Against the Personal Income Tax. Our [Testimony](#). (Included in Budget Implementer)
- [HB 6659](#): An Act Concerning the Establishment of the Connecticut Baby Bond Trust. Our [Testimony](#).
- [SB 178](#): An Act Increasing the Applicable Percentage of the Earned Income Tax Credit. Our [Testimony](#). (Included in Budget)
- [SB 873](#) / [HB 6516](#): An Act Mitigating Adverse Tax Consequences Resulting from Employees Working Remotely During COVID-19, and Concerning the Removal of Liens on the Property of Public Assistance Beneficiaries, and a Three-Tiered Grants in Lieu of Taxes Program. Our [Testimony](#).
- [SB 948](#): An Act Concerning the Modeling of a Proposal for Education Funding in Connecticut. Our [Testimony](#). (Some provisions included in Budget)

Did not pass

- [HB 6187](#): An Act Concerning the Restructuring of Certain Taxes and Tax Equity. Our [Testimony](#).
- [HB 6452](#): An Act Requiring Connecticut Banks to Report to the Banking Commissioner Certain Information Concerning Overdraft Fees. Our [Testimony](#).
- [HB 6660](#): An Act Concerning a Study of Liens Placed on Personal Property for State Recovery of Financial Assistance. Our [Testimony](#).
- [SB 821](#): An Act Concerning the Reformation of Certain Taxes and Tax Equity. Our [Testimony](#).

Housing

Passed

- [HB 6107](#): An Act Concerning the Reorganization of the Zoning Enabling Act and the Promotion of Municipal Compliance. Our [Testimony](#).
- [HB 6531](#): An Act Concerning the Right to Counsel in Eviction Proceedings. Our [Testimony](#).
- [SB 1024](#): An Act Concerning Zoning Authority, Certain Design Guidelines, Qualifications of Certain Land Use Officials, and Certain Sewage Disposal Systems. Our [Testimony](#). (Some provisions included in [H.B. 6107](#))

Did not pass

- [HB 6430](#): An Act Concerning Housing Authority Jurisdiction. Our [Testimony](#).
- [HB 6528](#): An Act Concerning the Sealing of Eviction Records. Our [Testimony](#).
- [HB 6532](#): An Act Appropriating State Funds for Mental Health Services and Housing. Our [Testimony](#).
- [HB 6570](#): An Act Concerning Transit-Oriented Development and Municipal Zoning. Our [Testimony](#).
- [HB 6611](#): An Act Concerning a Needs Assessment and Other Policies Regarding Affordable Housing and Development. Our [Testimony](#).
- [HB 6613](#): An Act Concerning Accessory Apartments, Middle Housing, and Multifamily Housing. Our [Testimony](#).
- [SB 1027](#): An Act Concerning Accessory Dwelling Units and Zoning Regulations. Our [Testimony](#).
- [SB 194](#): An Act Establishing a Right to Housing. Our [Testimony](#).
- [SB 355](#): An Act Concerning a Landlord's Ability to Consider the Criminal Record of Prospective Tenants. Our [Testimony](#).
- [SB 875](#): An Act Concerning the Risk of Homelessness for Those Released from the Custody of the Department of Correction. Our [Testimony](#).

Justice

Passed

- [HB 6667](#): An Act Concerning the Recommendations of the Juvenile Justice Policy and Oversight Committee. Our [Testimony](#).
- [SB 1059](#): An Act Concerning the Correction Accountability Commission, the Office of the Correction Ombuds, the Use of Isolated Confinement, Seclusion and Restraints, Social Contacts for Incarcerated Persons, and Training and Workers' Compensation Benefits for Correction Officers. Our [Testimony](#).
- [SB 1060](#): An Act Concerning Court Proceedings Involving Allegations of Coercive Control Occurring Between Family or Household Members. Our [Testimony](#).
- [SB 753](#): An Act Concerning the Counting of Incarcerated Persons for Purposes of Determining Legislative Districts. Our [Testimony](#).
- [SB 972](#): An Act Concerning the Cost of Telecommunications Services in Correctional Facilities. Our [Testimony](#).

Did not pass

- [SB 1058](#): An Act Concerning Compassionate Parole Release by the Board of Pardons and Paroles and Concerning Staff of the Department of Correction. Our [Testimony](#).
- [SB 1069](#): An Act Concerning Female Genital Mutilation. Our [Testimony](#).

- [SB 1084](#): An Act Concerning the Collection of Certain Data Relating to Parents who Have Their Parental Rights Terminated. Our [Testimony](#).

Employment

Passed

- [HB 6559](#): An Act Implementing the Recommendations of the Office of Early Childhood. Our [Testimony](#). (Passed)
- [HB 6557](#): An Act Concerning Social and Emotional Learning. Our [Testimony](#). (Some provisions included in [S.B. 2](#))

Did not pass

- [HB 6612](#): An Act Concerning Protections for Family Child Care Homes and the Zoning Enabling Act. Our [Testimony](#).
- [SB 87](#): An Act Concerning Certain Protections for Group and Family Child Care Homes. Our [Testimony](#).

Other - Family Economic Security

Passed

- [HB 6321](#): An Act Concerning Adoption and Implementation of the Connecticut Parentage Act. Our [Testimony](#).

Emerging Issues - COVID-19 Pandemic Response

Passed

- [HB 6555](#): An Act Concerning Legislative Oversight and Approval of COVID-19 Relief Funds. Our [Testimony](#).
- [SB 1](#): An Act Equalizing Comprehensive Access to Mental, Behavioral and Physical Health Care in Response to the Pandemic. Our [Testimony](#).
- [HB 6662](#): An Act Declaring Racism as a Public Health Crisis and Establishing the Commission on Racial Equity in Public Health. Our [Testimony](#). (Included in S.B. 1)
- [SB 956](#): An Act Providing Medical Assistance to Certain Individuals Regardless of Immigration Status. Our [Testimony](#). (Some provisions included in [H.B. 6687](#))

Bills We Opposed

Justice

Did not pass

- [HB 6535](#): An Act Concerning Issues Related to School Safety. Our [Testimony](#).

Other Notable Bills

Fiscal & Economics

Passed

- [HB 1106](#): An Act Establishing the Connecticut Equitable Investment Fund and Dedicating Certain Revenues to Said Fund. Our [Testimony](#). (Some provisions included in Budget)

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