Each year, the Partnership for Strong Communities (PSC) invites people to come together to present the prestigious Reaching Home Awards. The awards are presented to individuals and groups that have demonstrated exceptional commitment to preventing and ending homelessness in Connecticut.

**DIANE RANDALL LEADERSHIP AWARD**

This year’s winner of the Diane Randall Leadership Award is the team at the Court Support Services Division (CSSD) within the CT Judicial Branch, which includes Gary Roberge, Michael Aiello, Tasha Hunt, and Sheron Green. The joint efforts of the CSSD team and their collective leadership led to new and innovative methods of tackling homelessness for individuals within the justice system and minors experiencing housing instability. Through the passion and leadership of Michael Aiello who worked closely with the Reaching Home Campaign, CSSD implemented groundbreaking programs and implemented protocols that will benefit those in need for years to come. Now let’s meet the team at CSSD and learn more about their leadership.

**Gary Roberge, Executive Director-CT Judicial Branch**

Gary Roberge has served the Judicial Branch for over 29 years and over the decades has seen many fall through the cracks of the justice system and become victims of homelessness after serving their time. This experience was what inspired him to work with Michael Aiello and his colleagues to implement the housing stability survey to proactively collect information on individuals before their judicial processing to fight back against recidivism.

Gary is heavily invested in giving his team all the tools and resources they need to help clients while they are in pre-trial as those tend be the individuals facing significant housing instability. Whether it results in ‘supportive housing or ‘rapid re-housing’, CSSD’s housing stability survey has proven to significantly diminish the probability of recidivism. Gary’s leadership has garnered his team statewide recognition, and he continues to use his team’s success as his daily inspiration.
Michael Aiello, Program Manager II

Michael Aiello is the key architect of CSSD’s housing stability survey. After 25 years of working in the Judicial Branch and seeing the nuances of transitional housing during his 7 years of working at a non-profit—Michael saw the vision of data collection as a gamechanger to helping the unstably housed before they entered the Department of Corrections system. Partnering with the Reaching Home Campaign, the housing stability survey gave a clear picture of an individual’s housing instability before they went to court. This allowed CSSD to be prepared to help them upon release.

So far, over 87,000 individuals have taken the survey with over 50,000 “unique clients.” Thanks to Michael and CSSD—this model includes partnering with non-profits such as Columbus House, Mercy House, and other community organization to utilize the data from the survey to ensure individuals find housing before trial to avoid recidivism.

Tasha Hunt, Deputy Director, Juvenile Probation

Tasha Hunt started her career with the Judicial Branch nearly 25 years ago as a Juvenile Probation Officer. In 2009, she was appointed to the position of Juvenile Probation Supervisor II and rose through the ranks to become the Deputy Director. Ms. Hunt is responsible for the management and operations of the twelve Juvenile Probation offices across Connecticut. She is committed to the integration of evidence-based practices in probation to improve outcomes for court-involved youth and has played an integral role in Connecticut’s reform of the juvenile justice system which has led to progressive change and the state acquiring recognition as a national model.

With support from the team, Tasha has been an integral leader in developing the Minor Community Care Team model in the Stamford Judicial District. Using concrete data, Tasha and her colleague Sheron Green have utilized cross agency collaboration to match the needs of juveniles throughout the system to mitigate their housing instability. With Tasha's leadership, CSSD is bridging the gap on getting minors the resources they need to stay housed. She is excited to use CSSD’s positive momentum to grant more at-risk youth a second chance to transition into stable adulthood.
Sheron Green, Regional Manager, Probation Services

Sheron Green began her career in the Judicial Branch's CSSD 21 years ago. In her role, Ms. Green manages the staff and operations of Juvenile Probation field offices in her assigned region. Alongside her colleague Tasha Hunt and the rest of the team at CSSD—Sheron has collaborated across state agencies to better serve minors experiencing homelessness & housing instability. She has committed herself to ensuring services are delivered to young people using a best practices approach that includes evidence-based interventions and supports that can help young people make long-term, positive changes. She is dedicated to tackling systemic issues impacting young people's success and transition into adulthood.

Sheron has gone to great lengths to help youth in need because she relates to them with her own shared experiences. She believes her work is paying it forward and that it contributes to developing a better housing infrastructure for at-risk youth. Sheron is looking forward to a large hiring of new probation officers and sees great opportunity from the learning experience of the COVID-19 pandemic and how it has ‘humanized the delivery of services’ at CSSD. At the end of the day, Sheron considers herself a “change agent” whose passion is to help improve outcomes for Connecticut’s youth living in marginalized communities.

REVEREND RICHARD SCHUSTER ADVOCACY AWARD

The winner of the Reverend Richard Schuster Advocacy Award is both Jamie Ortiz-Cordoba and Kendrick Pozo. This award recognizes a professional or volunteer who demonstrates an outstanding commitment to raising awareness about the needs of individuals and families currently/in danger of experiencing homelessness, using either legislative or client-centered advocacy. The award honors Dick Schuster for his work advancing and advocating for supportive housing. Both Jaime and Kendrick worked as a team to help lead the development of the minor homelessness system in CT and bring great prestige to Reverend Schuster’s legacy.
Jaime H. Ortiz-Cordoba, Youth Consultant

With his compassion and ingenuity, Jaime H. Ortiz-Cordoba has been a tireless advocate for youth and young people experiencing homelessness and housing instability here in CT. Working with the Family and Children's Agency, Jaime uses his own lived experience and the trauma of being homeless living in cars—to educate and inspire youth in need. Through his wisdom—Jaime helped to create a methodology to address homelessness and housing instability for minors in Fairfield County. This protocol aides advocates in assessing individual needs and provides key information and recommendation that gives providers and stakeholders direction to ensure key supports are being considered, developed, and incorporated in the minor homeless system.

As an advocate, Jaime uses his past experiences to motivate at risk youth to not lose hope. He gets inspiration from his 5-year-old son who he says will “break the chain” and not suffer as he had to.

Kendrick Pozo, Youth Consultant

As someone who has lived through housing instability —Kendrick Pozo brings his expertise to the table when helping minors facing homelessness. Kendrick has given great perspective to the Family and Children’s agency (FCA) on how they can reach at-risk youth before it’s too late. Having been recently incarcerated—Kendrick knows the tell-tale signs of youth heading in the wrong direction and has even used his insights to create documents that capture data during the homeless minor’s intake and case conferencing process. He is also currently working with Family & Children’s agency to create a youth survey that will measure the effectiveness of the case conferencing process in the minor homelessness scope.

With his and FCA’s efforts on the creation of a minor homeless system, Kendrick foresees great, positive changes coming in 2022 and 2023. He believes the COVID-19 pandemic forced CT cities and town with high homeless minor rates to adopt new and more humane policies.
CAROL WALTER HOUSING TENANT AWARD

This year the Carol Walter Housing Tenant Award will go to Rosemary Rainey and James Powers. This award recognizes two housing tenants who show commitment to advocacy for permanent housing solutions, exhibit leadership skills, and work to make their community a better place. The award is named in honor of Carol Walter, a much-loved Executive Director of the Connecticut Coalition to End Homelessness and respected advocate in the area of housing and homelessness. Ms. Rainey and Mr. Power both exemplify Carol’s spirit in giving back to their community and striving to educate others on escaping homelessness.

Rosemary Rainey

A tenant with Hands on Hartford’s housing program, Ms. Rainey has been an inspiration for those facing homelessness in Connecticut and beyond. Her plight with homelessness and getting sober has motivated her to give back and help vulnerable individuals learn that there are resources to achieve housing stability. She educates all those around her with her experiences and serves as a mentor to people who are struggling with recovery. She cites her sobriety as the reason and her inspiration to share her own experiences of homelessness, dispel myths, educate audiences on the causes of homelessness, and encourage others to get involved in making positive changes in the community.

When she is at home, Rosemary regularly prepares home cooked meals and distributes it to those who need it. She isn't just feeding people - she’s using her own narrative and experience with homelessness and addiction to connect with the people she’s feeding - they relate to her - and her generosity helps them.

James Powers

The story of James Powers is one of pain, perseverance, and spirit. Saved from homelessness by the Wallingford Emergency Shelter (WES)—frontline workers have expressed how humble and kind James was even as he suffered serious medical ailments, addiction, and severe malnourishment. He pushed past his severe trauma to utilize the shelter’s library and computer to attain an Associate Degree which led him to being accepted into Columbus House with an affordable housing unit. This transformation allowed him to change his tragedy to triumph as he was able to receive the medical treatment he needed. He now uses his experience to educate and help others.

James’s education is his inspiration, and he believes that if it wasn’t for CT’s incredible homelessness response system and array of social services—he would still be homeless. James now takes classes at Southern New Hampshire University, for Technology Management and will graduate this year with his bachelor’s degree.
Barbara Geller Lifetime Achievement Award

The Barbara Geller Lifetime Achievement Award recognizes an individual who has worked tirelessly throughout their lifetime or career to help people experiencing homelessness to find housing and support, reconnect with family and friends, and reach their full potential. This award goes to a person who stands above the crowd over decades of truly extraordinary work toward ending and preventing homelessness in Connecticut. This year this prestigious goes to someone who has truly dedicated themselves to tireless advocacy for those in need, Reverend Bonita Grubbs.

Reverend Bonita Grubbs Executive Director, CCA

Reverend Bonita Grubbs is the Executive Director of Christian Community Action (CCA), an ecumenical social services organization that provides help, housing, and hope to those who are poor in New Haven. She has served CCA as Executive Director since 1988 and has transformed the lives of thousands of needy families in the greater New Haven area for the better. Under her leadership, CCA has developed an array of new programs and initiatives to help the homeless in New Haven including the ARISE center and program (Accessing Resources for Independence, Skill-building and Employment) which focuses on not only giving individuals access to safe housing—but instilling in them the skillsets to go far beyond homelessness and “achieve a higher level of living.”

Bonita believes that CCA is a bridge for “change—transition—transformation” and offers those facing homelessness an opportunity to invest in themselves. COVID-19 was a test for organizations like CCA, but Bonita saw it as an opportunity to show the faults in the system. “Why waste a crisis?” is her take when asked how the fight on homelessness will look in a post-pandemic world. She thinks the future is bright for the fight against homelessness and in the spirit of Barbara Geller herself, believes that change for good doesn’t happen without the will to make that change. She conveys that saving someone from being homeless is an opportunity to give that person the capacity to better themselves and their community. Under Bonita, CCA’s service model encompasses the whole person and not just their housing instability and she believes the next year will be an opportunity for CCA to utilize its ‘person centered’ methodology and advance the progress of helping more needy families in a post-COVID world.
Partnership for Strong Communities is truly honored to work with these incredible individuals and groups as they work to ensure homelessness in Connecticut is rare, brief, and one-time. We thank everyone who made this and every ceremony these past 17 years memorable and special.

We are dedicated to ensuring everyone in Connecticut has a safe, stable home that is affordable to them in an equitable community of their choice.