

*U.S. Representative John B. Larson CT01*



*First Congressional Youth Cabinet*

March 24, 2012 Meeting Minutes:

Co-Chairs: Victoria Olakojo & Aaron Vontell (Representing Hartford)

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10 a.m.: Victoria & Aaron welcomed everyone to the meeting and ask that each CYC member introduce themselves and provide an update on what's happening with youth from the towns they respectively represent.

After the CYC members introduced themselves, Aaron and Victoria welcomed and introduced the Connecticut Secretary of State, Denise Merrill.

Secretary Merrill shared opened her remarks by saying how delighted she was to be meeting with the CYC and explained how impressed she was with the whole concept of a CYC. She said that it is her desire to see more of this type of youth-government partnership. She was also impressed with the wide range of towns represented.

She then proceeded to share her feelings on the importance of meaningful youth engagement in all areas of civic life.

As a founding member of the Connecticut Consortium, Secretary Merrill stressed the importance of youth citizens learning how to present and argue for an issue they care about. She stressed that while learning the “art” of debate was important, she felt that **listening** may be a lost art. CYC members were in strong agreement with her on this and in fact, shared their desire for members of

government be required to take courses that would help them develop strong listening skills. In fact, it was one of their federal policy recommendations they made in their 2011 report to Congressman Larson on the status of youth in the first congressional district.

Secretary Merrill shared that all citizens, beginning with the very young, should learn about how to be engaged in civic activities and learn why it's important and how to become involved.

Citizens should be aware of our laws, on a local, state, and federal level and be engaged in understanding why the laws exist in the first place and ask, at times, whether they believe they're "fair" or helpful to society.

She then asked the CYC members why they believe people engage in civic activities, or more importantly, why they do not.

She shared that more than 1/3 of Connecticut citizens who could vote, are not registered.

The group questioned why people are not involved- why they seemingly do not care enough about the issues that affect them to be involved?

One thought is that the current atmosphere of "negative politics" makes people abhor anything remotely related. It is believed that people may be fearful of being "pigeon-holed" into a specific political party, because of the deeply negative party politics and therefore are more likely to identify themselves as "independent."

Secretary Merrill discussed with the CYC and Congressman Larson the outcome of the 2011 "Connecticut Civic Health Index" report that was released late last year. (Note: the Congressman and the CYC read the report last year when it came out and several CYC members participated in an event the Secretary hosted last November at the Old State House on how to inspire more people to become civically engaged.).

The report showed that Connecticut citizens are doing well in the area of volunteerism, which is very good news. However, the report also showed that

voter participation seems to be directly related to income. The lower the income, the less likely a person is to vote. In addition, voter participation among the young in Connecticut is dropping. In the Secretary's words, "This will kill democracy over time."

The question was then asked by the Secretary to the CYC-"How can we change this?" She asked if it might be helpful to survey students to ask what they are doing to volunteer in their community and what prevents you from doing so if you do not? CYC members felt strongly that this could be helpful because they believe youth are not often asked to be involved in such activities.

The Secretary asked if youth feel that they receive an appropriate education in "civics" at school. A discussion ensued where a majority of CYC members felt that in their respective civic classes, the emphasis was more on the constitution, rather than what civic engagement means, its importance, how to engage effectively as a citizen, and the impact of a person's personal engagement or lack thereof.

There was a discussion on the myriad of excuses people use to explain why they don't vote or otherwise engage in civic activities. Some of the excuses included, "I get out of work too late and can't make it to my polling station in time." Or, "The 2000 Presidential election where Al Gore received a majority of the popular vote, but lost the Electoral College vote, proved that my vote doesn't count."

A discussion followed on the "benefit" of online voter registration, and whether CT should consider allowing registered voters to vote online as well. Because of potential risk for hacking into an online poll, the group agreed that allowing people to vote online could be extremely risky.

Secretary Merrill said Oregon is a state that allows for voters to mail in their votes, and that the program is so successful they realize an 80% voter turnout during elections.

Congressman Larson talked about his currently pending legislation that would change election day to the first Saturday in November so as to make voting easier

for most working Americans. He followed that by saying to the CYC members, "You are the citizens of the Republic. You are the hope of our great nation."

"However, every citizen must understand their responsibility to our nation, to protect and guide it through their civic participation." He shared with the CYC that he believes we "need more like you, who care about enough about their nation to become involved." He went on to say, "We have the most diversified parliamentary body on earth (the U.S. House of Representatives) and yet, government is increasingly demeaned in the eyes of the general public."

CYC members shared that they believe that an enhanced civics education offered in schools (including middle schools) where the curriculum stresses to students not just the premise that every American should vote and become civically engaged, but meaningful examples of WHY it's so important.

Secretary Merrill said that her office is sponsoring a PSA contest for CT students to submit their ideas for inspiring more young people to become more civically engaged and to care about what their vote means. She said "We need a narrative that connects- emotionally- for this generation the importance of their involvement." She went on saying, "That narrative has yet to be written. We must continue to learn from youth their ideas of impactful ways in which to tell that story. This is a test for this generation in terms of what direction we are going as a country."

CYC members shared their desire to help create such a narrative-one that could inspire more youth to become aware of the importance of their involvement with their communities and their government on all levels. Victoria Olakojo asked on behalf of the CYC if the Secretary would be interested in creating a video narrative on the importance of civic engagement for and by CT youth that could be posted online. The Secretary responded that she would very much like to look into creating a video with them and would have a member of her staff be in touch to begin that process.

Congressman Larson felt very positive by the discussion and that it reinforced for him the importance of meaningful youth engagement. He said that youth from

outside our country are “aghast” at our citizen apathy. The CYC members and their work with special guests such as Secretary Merrill help to dispel such thoughts and provide great hope for a more involved citizenry.

He went on to say that one of the most important components of citizen involvement is being informed. He was careful to stress to “Not just be informed, but be knowledgeable, and the best place to become knowledgeable is the library.”

CYC members concurred that that researching issues you care about in school and in libraries provides the most reliable information. They shared that in this day and age, most of the sources on which we rely for our “news” or information, is often very biased. They shared that it can be extremely difficult to know what to believe when relying on such sources and too easy for citizens to access information from those sources who they know will say what they want to hear. One CYC member said, “It’s really hard to know what to believe if you don’t know the other side and too often people don’t want to learn about the “other side” which dilutes their ability to be truly knowledgeable.”

Congressman Larson encouraged the group to read Daniel Webster’s speech where he spoke of President George Washington. To see this speech, follow this link: <http://digital.library.umsystem.edu/cgi/t/text/pageviewer-idx?c=webster;idno=web000074>

Other business on the agenda:

The CYC talked about the items for their April Meeting Agenda. They are as follows:

- Skill Building: Public Speaking
- Youth Civic Engagement Video Script
- Kyera Sterling (Breaking Beauty Campaign)

At 12 noon, Aaron and Victoria adjourned the March meeting of the CYC.

Submitted by: E.M. Bunnell