Roca
Life Beyond Violence

ROCA HARTFORD YOUNG WOMEN'S PROGRAM

FOUR-YEAR REPORT

JANUARY 2026



www.rocainc.org

INTRODUCTION

MAKING THE UNSEEN VISIBLE

For nearly four decades, Roca has stood with young people whom society has too often written off—young women and young mothers living at the margins, surviving violence, instability, and isolation with little support and even less visibility. Many never showed up consistently in schools or sought help from traditional programs. Many lived in constant danger. Yet Roca has always believed what others did not: that these young women are not beyond hope. What they need is not judgment or short-term fixes, but consistent presence and behavioral health tools that make it possible to build a life beyond violence and trauma.

Roca Hartford has become that presence. Serving young women ages 14 to 24—many already parenting—Roca meets participants in the midst of extraordinary trauma and systemic disconnection. Many are disconnected from education and employment, deeply involved in systems they do not trust, and residing in communities shaped by persistent gun and street violence. And yet, alongside these realities, there is fierce determination: a desire for stability, healing, and a safer future for their children.

Roca's response is grounded, relational, and relentless. Staff meet young women wherever they are—on street corners, in shelters, at court hearings, or across kitchen tables—offering safety, consistency, and practical tools to change behavior and interrupt cycles of harm. Through **Rewire CBT**, Roca's trauma-informed approach to cognitive behavioral skill-building, young women learn how to regulate emotions, slow down in moments of crisis, and make safer decisions. These skills are reinforced through education, employment preparation, parenting support, crisis response, and sustained advocacy across child welfare, justice, education, and healthcare systems.

Four years is a fitting moment to reflect on this work. When Roca Hartford launched, its intervention model was intentionally designed as a **four-year commitment**—long enough to build trust, practice cognitive-behavioral skills until they take hold, and support real shifts in safety, stability, and life trajectory. This report reflects that full arc of engagement. Four years allows us to look beyond moments of crisis to patterns of growth—and to share aggregate results that honor both the complexity of the work and the resilience of the young women at its center.

Between October 2021 and September 2025, Roca Hartford worked with **161 of the city's highest-risk young women.** During this period,



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we observed alarming trends: increases in female-perpetrated violence, trafficking, sexual victimization, intimate partner violence, and incarceration, alongside persistent gaps in trauma-informed, gender-responsive services. Clinician shortages, rigid system requirements, and the lack of supports for adolescent and young adult parents continue to limit access to care.

And yet, progress is real. With time, trust, and consistency, young women begin to heal. They practice new skills, rebuild relationships, and take steps toward safety and stability—for themselves and their children. Roca Hartford stands as both a lifeline and a lever for systems change, committed to ensuring no young woman is unseen and every young mother has the chance to thrive.

PARTICIPANT REFERRALS, ELIGIBILITY, AND RETENTION

Over the four-year period, Roca Hartford received **258 referrals**, including **39 in FY2025 alone,** reflecting persistent need across Hartford's youth-serving systems. Referrals came from a wide range of sources, including self-referrals, schools, law enforcement, hospitals, probation, DCF, and community organizations.

Of those referred, **161 young women were eligible for and engaged in services.** Nearly half of ineligible referrals did not meet the program's high-risk threshold, reflecting Roca's focus on young women experiencing chronic trauma, violence, and deep system disconnection. Other barriers included acute mental health needs requiring higher-level care and active warrants.

Despite significant instability, Roca Hartford maintained a **70% retention rate.** Among those who disengaged, nearly half did so because they moved out of the service area, underscoring the housing instability many participants face. Other reasons included severe substance use, acute mental health crises, or declining services.

WHO WE SERVE

PARTICIPANT CHARACTERISTICS

Roca Hartford serves young women across Hartford, East Hartford, Manchester, New Britain, Bloomfield, and surrounding towns. **Sixty-four percent** of participants reside in Hartford, with others coming from New Britain (8%), East Hartford (7%), and neighboring communities including Waterbury, Meriden, and Manchester (21%). Of the 161 young women served over the past four years, **102 (63%) are young mothers,** collectively parenting **117 children.**

Risk Factors

The young women served by Roca Hartford face profound and overlapping risk factors that place them at exceptionally high risk for continued harm without sustained intervention. Among the 161 participants, **50 young women (31%) are victims of sex trafficking,** including **38 confirmed cases and 11 identified as potentially trafficked. One hundred twenty participants (75%) are survivors of abuse, victimization, or violence,** often beginning in childhood and continuing into adolescence and early adulthood. In addition, **112 young women (70%) have current or prior involvement with the criminal justice system,** reflecting both survival-based behaviors and the criminalization of trauma.

These risks rarely occur in isolation. Many participants experience exploitation, violence, system involvement, housing instability, and untreated trauma simultaneously—creating cycles that traditional, short-term services are not designed to interrupt. This concentration of risk underscores the necessity of Roca's long-term, trauma-informed, gender-responsive model, which is built to meet young women where they are, build safety and stability over time, and support lasting behavior change.

Child Welfare Involvement

DCF involvement is a significant reality for the young mothers Roca Hartford serves. **More than half the number of parents in the program (56 young women)** were involved with the Department of Children and Families during the reporting period. Given the profound and overlapping risk factors young women face—including trauma, violence, housing instability, and system disconnection—this level of child welfare involvement is not surprising. It reflects both the challenges young mothers are navigating and the urgency of long-term, trauma-informed support to help them build safety and stability for themselves and their children.

Community Violence

The young women Roca Hartford serves are closely intertwined with community violence—often as victims, witnesses, participants, or all three. As noted earlier, many already experience sexual assault, trafficking, and repeated intimate partner violence. Many are also involved in street-level crimes such as physical assaults and larceny, including auto theft; are affiliated with gangs; or are connected to partners or family members who perpetrate violence. For many participants, several of these conditions overlap at once.

Gun violence is a constant and acute reality. Over the past four years, **25 young women were shot (including one fatality), 35 were shot at, and 17 were identified as shooters or instigators in violent incidents.** These numbers reflect both the extreme vulnerability of young women in Hartford's highest-risk environments and the degree to which they are pulled into violent situations driven by trauma, exploitation, and instability.

EMOTIONAL AND BEHAVIORAL REGULATION

REWIRE CBT IN ACTION

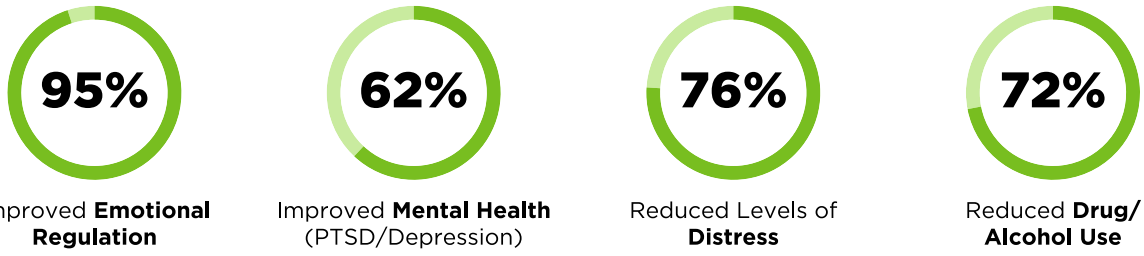
Emotional and behavioral regulation is foundational to safety and long-term stability. At Roca Hartford, this work is anchored in **Rewire CBT,** Roca's non-clinical adaptation of Cognitive Behavioral Therapy developed for young people who have experienced chronic adversity and disengagement from traditional services.

Rewire CBT equips trained Youth Workers—not therapists—to teach cognitive-behavioral skills through consistent, trusting relationships in real-world settings. Participants learn to identify triggers, connect thoughts, feelings, and behaviors, and practice safer responses when activated by trauma. Skills are reinforced daily through outreach, coaching, and crisis response over a multi-year intervention.

Over four years, **92% of participants engaged in Rewire CBT.** Among the **87 young women enrolled for 18 months or more,** outcomes were strong: **95% improved emotional regulation, 62% improved PTSD and depression indicators, 76% reduced emotional distress,** and **72% reduced drug or alcohol use.** These outcomes demonstrate what is possible when behavioral health tools are delivered with consistency, trust, and time.

Cognitive Behavioral Outcomes

(Enrolled 18+ months, n=87)



PRACTICING SKILLS THROUGH PROGRAMMING

At Roca Hartford, programming is not simply a set of services—it is a structured environment for practicing the emotional regulation, decision-making, and healing skills taught through Rewire CBT. Every programmatic opportunity is designed to reinforce cognitive-behavioral tools and support real-time, real-world application.

Roca's programming model is stage-based and flexible, recognizing that many young women enter the program carrying unresolved trauma, heightened stress responses, and deep distrust of formal systems. Early programming prioritizes safety, relationship-building, and regulation over compliance or performance. Youth Workers use Rewire CBT skills—such as identifying triggers, labeling emotions, and pausing before reacting—to help participants navigate daily challenges related to housing, parenting, education, relationships, and court involvement.

As young women progress, these skills are embedded into more structured education, employment, and life-skills programming. In GED and workforce readiness settings, participants practice focus, frustration tolerance, emotional control, and decision-making under pressure, with Youth Workers and Educators reinforcing reflection and connection to long-term goals. Parenting education, harm-reduction work, and group activities further support accountability and collective healing.

Programming is delivered through an outreach-based model that meets young women wherever they feel safest—allowing CBT skills to be practiced in the environments where trauma responses are most likely to be triggered. Through Roca's Transitional Employment Program, including partnerships with Ebony Horsewomen, Forge City Works, and Harriott Home Health, participants engage in paid work and vocational training that builds readiness, professionalism, and confidence as they move toward long-term stability.

Programming Engagement



Engaged in **Education** Programming



Engaged in **Employment** Programming



Engaged in **Life Skills** Programming

EMPLOYMENT

TRANSLATING SKILLS INTO STABILITY

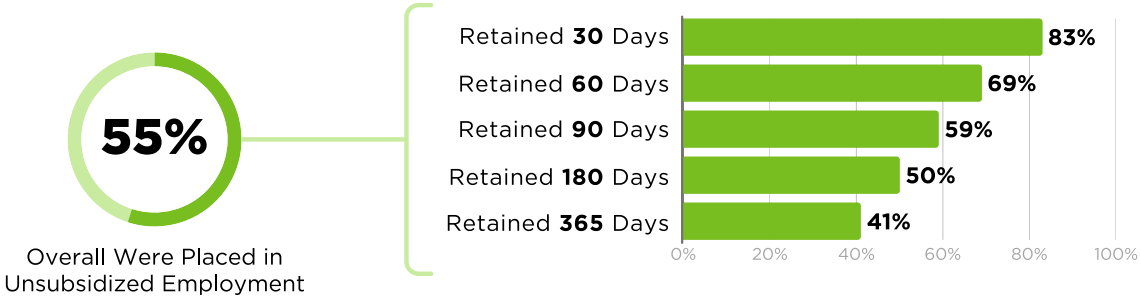
As more young women advance through Roca Hartford's intervention model, employment has become a critical focus of the work. For participants who have spent months—or years—building emotional regulation, decision-making, and trauma-healing skills, employment represents an opportunity to practice those skills while building economic stability.

Roca's employment approach is intentionally phased and supportive. Workforce participation is not treated as a single outcome, but as a developmental process that requires ongoing coaching and reinforcement. Employment settings become extensions of the intervention—places where CBT skills are tested, strengthened, and sustained.

During the reporting period, **75 young women had been enrolled for 21 months or longer,** reaching a level of readiness for employment. Of those participants, **41 (55%) were placed in unsubsidized employment.** While this rate is below Roca's organization-wide target, it reflects the younger age of Hartford participants, continued enrollment in high school or postsecondary education, new motherhood, and high levels of instability related to housing and violence.

Employment Placement and Retention

(Enrolled 21+ months, n=75)



Roca partners with **Ebony Horsewomen, Forge City Works, Harriott Home Health,** and other CORI-friendly employers to create supported pathways into employment. Roca is also expanding its **Bridge to Success (B2S)** model, which provides subsidized placements that allow participants to demonstrate readiness while continuing to receive Youth Worker support, with the goal of permanent employment.

CRIMINAL JUSTICE OUTCOMES

Time matters when measuring change for young women with significant system involvement. Among the **66 young women who remained enrolled for 24 months or longer,** outcomes over the following two years were striking. **Eighty-eight percent (58 young women) had no new arrests,** and **100% experienced no incarcerations during that period.**

These outcomes are particularly notable given the prevalence of prior justice involvement, exposure to violence, and ongoing pressures related to housing, relationships, and parenting. They reflect what becomes possible when young women have consistent relationships, practical tools for regulating emotions and decision-making, and the time required to practice new behaviors—reducing justice-system contact and creating space for safer, more stable lives.

Upon Enrollment



Had a History of Criminal Justice Involvement

After 24+ Months



Had No New Arrests



Had No New Incarcerations

EXTERNAL EVALUATION

In 2022, Roca partnered with Tufts University's Interdisciplinary Evaluation Research (TIER) to conduct a multi-year evaluation of the Young Women's Program. TIER reviewed Roca's assessment tools, analyzed participant data, and examined outcomes across multiple systems, producing research briefs and helping secure additional funding to study complex systems involvement.

TIER's analysis of FY19–FY24 data for 509 young women (includes women served in Massachusetts) confirmed the extraordinary level of risk at enrollment: **62% faced high levels of nearly all measured challenges,** including systems involvement, domestic violence, PTSD, substance use, and housing instability. Another **33% faced especially high intimate partner violence.** Importantly, young women experiencing the highest levels of violence were also among the most engaged in programming.

Evaluation findings showed **statistically and clinically significant reductions** in emotional dysregulation (17.7%), depression (41.8%), PTSD symptoms, and relationship violence—improvements large enough to bring scores below clinical cutoffs.

Preliminary state administrative data reinforced these results: child welfare involvement dropped from 71% before enrollment to 4.9% reporting new cases after, and active arraignments fell from 43% to 14.5%. **For children in Connecticut, 65.2% had an open case prior to their mother enrolling in Roca, compared to 43.5% after enrolling in Roca—a 33% decrease.**

These findings validate Roca's long-term, relationship-based model and have led to updates in assessment tools, the addition of a trafficking screener, and plans to implement new measures of parenting and protective factors.

Looking ahead, Roca and TIER are launching the next phase of the impact study, which will use more rigorous methods to better assess Roca's effect on young women's systems, economic, and behavioral outcomes. This work will also examine the relationship between dosage of Rewire CBT and participant progress over time. In addition, a second phase of qualitative research will center the experiences of young women with the most complex systems involvement, providing deeper insight into what drives transformation and where additional support is needed.



Roca: Working with Traumatized Young Women
TIER, March 2024
Read



Roca Young Mothers' Program: Data Brief
TIER, June 2024
Read



How Roca Supports Young Women Experiencing Human Trafficking
TIER, August 2024
Read



Roca Young Women: FY2025 Summary Report
TIER, June 2025
Read

PARTNERSHIPS AND ADVOCACY

CHANGING SYSTEMS, NOT JUST OUTCOMES

Beyond direct service, Roca Hartford plays an active role in **systems-level advocacy** to reduce barriers facing high-risk young women statewide. Roca advances policies that promote trauma-informed workforce development, economic mobility, and long-term stability.

Most recently, Roca supported **House Bill 7104: An Act Concerning Programs to Mitigate the Benefits Cliff,** submitting testimony and a formal letter of support. The "benefits cliff" occurs when individuals lose critical public assistance—such as Medicaid, SNAP, or SSI—as soon as they begin earning income, discouraging participation in job training and employment.

Roca's advocacy highlighted how maintaining access to stabilizing benefits during workforce transitions enables participants—particularly young mothers—to pursue legitimate employment while meeting basic needs like childcare and food security. By supporting HB 7104, Roca helped advance a policy framework that rewards progress rather than penalizing it, aligning with Roca's mission to disrupt cycles of poverty, trauma, and violence.

SUCCESS STORIES

WHAT CHANGE LOOKS LIKE OVER TIME

Behind every data point is a young woman navigating extraordinary barriers—and building a future that once felt out of reach. The following stories reflect what is possible with consistent relationships, cognitive-behavioral skill-building, and long-term support converge.

Alejandra: Rebuilding Family, Creating Stability

When Alejandra enrolled in Roca, she was pregnant with her second child and facing gun-related charges that placed her on probation. At the same time, her three-year-old daughter had been removed from her care and placed with a family member through the Department of Children and Families. Alejandra entered the program with clear goals: complete probation, avoid further system involvement, and reunify with her daughter.

The path forward was demanding, requiring compliance with supervised visits, parenting classes, therapy, an ankle monitor, and a daily curfew. Throughout this period, Alejandra remained engaged with Roca, participating consistently in Rewire CBT and working closely with her Youth Worker to practice emotional regulation and decision-making skills.

In November 2024, Alejandra gave birth to her second daughter. By March 2025, she successfully regained custody of her older child and reunified her family. She now lives independently in Hartford, supported by family members while building economic stability

through culinary training with Forge City Works. Alejandra credits Roca—and the CBT skills she practiced over time—for helping her navigate reunification, manage stress, and begin building a safer future for her children.

Moya: "I am not a number. I am proof."

Originally from Jamaica, Moya emigrated to Hartford with her mother, who allowed her to be trafficked from a young age to feed a drug habit. She came to Roca soon after the Young Women's Program expanded to Hartford in October 2021. At 17 years old, she and her baby had just been removed from her mother's home, separated, and placed into DCF custody. At risk of disengaging from school and determined not to stay in the group home she was placed in, Moya was fearful, angry, and mistrusting.

She came around when we were able to arrange with DCF for her to have supervised visit at Roca. We held on tighter when she bravely navigated having her parental rights terminated, knowing it was best for her son. Unfortunately, she got trapped in a coercive relationship, which altered her path. But Roca kept reaching out, and eventually Moya was able to grab on.

Moya became one of the first Roca Young women to participate in transitional employment at Auerfarm, an idyllic farm in Bloomfield, CT, where she learned how to operate heavy machinery and even helped lay the foundation for a new barn wall. Beyond that, she learned to be responsible to the job and to her teammates, to manage and save her new earnings, and, underpinning all of this, to use the seven life-saving Rewire CBT skills. Since enrolling at Roca, Moya completed her high school diploma, become a US citizen, and obtained her first apartment.

Watch Moya's Story

Sam: Navigating Complex Systems

Sam[1] was referred to Roca by DCF in October 2021. She had just turned 18 and had been in DCF custody since age 12 when she gave birth to her son, having been sexually abused by her uncle for many years. She had run from care and was alternatively living with her boyfriend, where she experienced ongoing intimate partner violence, and her mother who would take her bus passes and food stamps, resulting in physical altercations between the two and Sam being arrested for assault.

> **When I was lost, when I felt like a statistic, like just another story that would end soon, Roca showed up. … [They] reminded me that healing is possible, that growth is real, and that my life is worth fighting for.**
>
> — MOYA

1 Name has been changed to protect anonymity.

With Roca's support she obtained Husky and accessed medical care for unaddressed health issues. She connected with Roca's clinician and qualified for supportive housing through DMHAS. She obtained her basic documents and got a job.

When she got her first paycheck, she learned that she owed $17,000 in arrears for the child she had by her uncle. Sam experienced a relapse, going back to her boyfriend, losing her housing, and refusing to engage. Roca stepped in and was given the runaround by several state agency, legal, and community partners. Sam was told nothing could be done without her terminating her parental rights, which she refused to do because she has always held out hope that she would have a relationship with her son.

Finally, thanks to a legislator and a Director of Child Support, Sam's case was reopened and her child support order and arrears were zeroed out. Unfortunately, in navigating this case, we learned of several young women in similar situations, and an urgent need for administrative changes in screening for child support.

A TRIBUTE TO JESSIAH MERCADO

Jessiah Mercado came to Roca in November 2021, referred by the Department of Children and Families as a 17-year-old mother whose one-year-old son, Syncere, was in DCF custody. Her life had been shaped by instability from an early age—moving between Hartford and Springfield, between her mother and her aunt, and eventually into DCF custody herself after surviving violence at home. When she refused placement in a group home, Jessiah returned to Hartford on her own terms, guarded and determined to survive on her own.

At Roca, trust came slowly—but it came. Jessiah began showing up independently, supported by both her and her son's DCF workers. Her Springfield DCF worker traveled to Hartford to meet with her at Roca, allowing Jessiah to begin supervised visits with her son onsite. For the first time in a long time, systems bent toward her rather than pushing her away.

As Jessiah engaged more deeply in programming, staff saw meaningful change. Within months, her emotional regulation improved. Before Roca, Jessiah had often been caught in cycles of street involvement and physical conflict, sometimes losing visits with her son after explosive interactions with systems meant to support her. Through consistent engagement and Rewire CBT, she began learning to name her feelings, slow herself down, and respond differently.

In March 2022, Jessiah reflected on that progress, sharing that Roca helped her label her emotions, stay engaged in therapy, parenting classes, and GED preparation, and work toward reunification with her son—crediting her Youth Worker for never giving up on her.

Jessiah showed what was possible when a young mother—so often labeled "too difficult" or "too risky"—was met with patience, consistency, and belief. But for young women raised amid generational violence, safety and stability are fragile. Jessiah was unable to secure enough stability to reverse the termination of her parental rights and returned to Springfield in late 2023, where her enrollment transferred to the Springfield Young Women's Program. Even

then, when her life again became entangled with violence and she found herself pregnant, she reached back out to Roca for support.

In April 2024, Jessiah's mother was shot and killed in Springfield. The loss compounded her trauma and led to increased substance use. When her son Messiah was born, he was placed in DCF custody. Jessiah wanted deeply to reunify, but the road ahead was long—and tragically, she did not get the time she needed. Jessiah passed away in November.

We remember Jessiah for her fierce love for her sons, her determination to keep trying, and the encouragement she offered other young women at Roca striving to become the mothers they hoped to be. Her life is a reminder of both the profound possibility of this work—and its urgency.

OUR FUNDERS
PARTNERS IN PERSISTENCE

The work of Roca Hartford's Young Women's Program is made possible through the sustained commitment of funders who understand that meaningful change for young women affected by violence, trauma, and system involvement does not happen quickly—or without setbacks.

Over the past four years, the **Dalio Foundation, Greater Hartford Gives Foundation, the Tow Foundation, Gawlicki Family Foundation, and the City of Hartford** have been essential partners in this work. Their long-term investment enabled Roca Hartford to remain present with young women facing the highest levels of risk, adapt to evolving needs, and prioritize what works.

Because of their support, and the critical guidance of the **Roca Hartford Advisory Board,** Roca Hartford has been able to respond to crises, deliver Rewire CBT through trusted Youth Workers, support young mothers navigating complex systems, build pathways to education and employment, and advocate for policy changes that reduce systemic barriers to safety and opportunity.

Roca also received, from the U.S. Department of Justice, a **Community Violence Intervention (CVI) grant**—the only CVI award in the country designated for a CVI program focused specifically on young women. The grant was intended to support a comprehensive landscape analysis and community assessment in western Massachusetts and Connecticut, as well as strengthen evaluation capacity for the Young Women's Program. While the grant abruptly terminated when the new federal administration took office in 2005, the award itself underscored the national relevance of Roca's work and the urgent need for gender-responsive approaches to community violence intervention.

The outcomes reflected in this report—family reunifications, reduced justice involvement, workforce engagement, and young women moving toward stability—are shared achievements. They demonstrate what is possible when funders invest not only in programs, but in people.