

Ascend Family Navigation System Building

The Co-creation of Shared Navigation Standards



CHILDHOOD PROSPERITY LAB

[Childhood Prosperity Lab](#) (the Lab) advances social innovations that support the optimal health, development, and well-being of children, families, and communities where they live, learn, work, play, and pray. Collaboration is key to our work. We partner with practitioners, service providers, families, and changemakers across Connecticut and beyond to improve outcomes. Our multidisciplinary team at Connecticut Children's brings expertise in family sciences, child development, public health, and more to drive impactful change. Three core components serve as the foundation for our unique approach:

- Co-designing solutions in partnership with children, families, and communities using human-centered design approaches and methodologies;
- Strengthening family and community protective factors; and
- Advancing systems change to help children and families thrive in all areas of life.

What is Human Centered Design (HCD)?

The Lab defines Human Centered Design (HCD) as a methodological framework for centering the needs, goals, and perspectives of children, families, communities and other key stakeholders in the design, implementation, and evaluation of social innovations. The Lab team are certified practitioners of 36 methods that comprise the [LUMA system](#), a framework of the [LUMA Institute](#). The Lab serves as a

3/23/2026

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resource for internal and external partners as they coordinate opportunities to elevate community voice and perspectives through co-design

How can HCD be Leveraged to Advance Community Health Projects?

The Lab partners with programs in the Office for Community Child Health as well as external partners to:

- Co-develop goals framed by HCD approaches and best practices.
- Plan co-design sessions and prepare materials.
- Facilitate activities at internal or external program convenings.
- Organize and interpret findings [qualitative and quantitative data] from activities with concrete recommendations that are returned back to the partner/s in the form of a summary report.

PROJECT OVERVIEW & SCOPE OF PARTNERSHIP

In December 2025, the *Ascend Together* plan developed. *Ascend Together* is a detailed, system-wide roadmap for advancing Ascend's sustainability beyond the December 2026 grant period, outlining priorities and essential next steps. The plan was shared with the five thematic work groups of Ascend, including the Family Navigation System Building (FNSB) Work group. The FNSB Work Group recognized alignment between their ongoing efforts and the plan's **Shared Infrastructure** strategic priority, which is defined as follows: *"Build and sustain the relational, operational, data, and physical infrastructure that enables partners, residents, and institutions to work together seamlessly—creating the conditions for consistent, coordinated support for every child and family."*

Within this priority, the 2026 Goals explicitly calls for a collaborative effort to: *"Advance cross-partner infrastructure improvements across navigation, data, learning, community relationships, and coordinated operations"* and *"establish Shared Navigation Standards."*

These priorities aligned with work already underway in the FNSB Work Group. In late 2025, the Work Group co-created a Family Navigation One-Pager (see Appendix 1) in response to 2024 aggregate, program-level data showing significant ambiguity in service providers' understanding of what Family Navigation is and how it supports system-building within Ascend. This resource established a shared definition of Family Navigation and outlined three core elements: *Trust & Connection, Referral & Navigation, and Follow-Up & Collaboration*. Additionally, the one-pager provided a definition of who Family Navigators might be across programs and services, recognizing that their role can be operationalized as a Care Coordinator, Career Navigator, etc. depending on their organization or agency. Once broadly disseminated across Ascend, this resource will strengthen shared understanding among both providers and the community. Building on this momentum, and in direct alignment with *Ascend*

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Together's strategic priority of building shared infrastructure, the FNSB Work Group identified the need to co-create Shared Navigation Standards.

Co-creating Shared Navigation Standards would minimize Family Navigator's variation in everyday practice, improving the Family Navigation experience across entry points within the Ascend system. As a result, cross-partner coordination and data consistency would be strengthened. To support this work, Connecticut Children's Childhood Prosperity Lab was asked to facilitate the co-design process.

TECHNICAL ASSISTANCE SESSION: IMPLEMENTATION APPROACH

The co-design session was integrated into the FNSB Retreat on March 2nd, 2026 which ran from 12:30-4:00 PM at Parker Memorial Community Center. There were approximately 30 participants representing 15 programs affiliated with Ascend. Participant roles varied – in attendance were Frontline Navigators, care coordinators, program managers, organizational leaders, and staff who support navigation workflows across the Ascend ecosystem.

To ground the co-design approach in data and system-level trends to date, Ascend's Data and Evaluation Work Group co-chairs, Hartford Data Collaborative (HDC), opened the session. HDC shared high-level aggregate data trends since 2024, covering six quarters of patterns across referrals, linkage, follow-up, and family engagement. The contextual level-set helped participants enter the co-design discussions and activities with a shared understanding of system-level patterns, prompting participants to reflect on how their day-to-day practices may be shaping the outcomes reflected in data.

Facilitation & Methodologies

Following HDC's presentation, participants were randomly assigned to three breakout groups aligned with the core elements of the Family Navigation System - *Trust & Connection*, *Referral & Navigation*, and *Follow-Up & Collaboration*. This ensured each table had a focused and structured discussion during the co-design activities. An Innovation Specialist from the Lab led the discussion of each group.

Each breakout group engaged in three activities, which are framed as methodologies in the LUMA framework: Contextual Inquiry, Persona Profiling, and Affinity Clustering.

Contextual Inquiry is an approach to interviewing and observing people in their own environment (Luma Institute, 2012, p. 8). For the purposes of the in-person retreat, the Lab adapted implementation of the method by asking participants to reflect on *their* everyday role and respond from the perspective of lived context. To facilitate the methodology in action, the Lab offered two guiding questions for participants to respond to:

- *How would you describe your role within the family navigation system?*

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- *What day-to-day practices or experiences might be shaping the data trends presented earlier?*

Participants described their real-world navigation workflows and clarified how their role fits within the broader system.

After participants engaged in *Contextual Inquiry*, they moved into *Persona Profiling*, a method used to understand experiences from the perspective of different stakeholders by stepping into their shoes (Luma Institute, 2012, p. 34). In this activity, Navigators answered a set of questions as “parents in the community” and then a set of questions as themselves in a family navigation role. This helped to build empathy for caregivers and create an informed summary of the mindsets, needs and goals typically held by the Navigators.

The following questions were asked to participants in the *Persona Profiling* Activity:

Persona Profiling	
Group 1 Trust & Connection	
Parent	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. When you first reach out for help, what makes you feel comfortable opening up to a Navigator or a service provider? 2. What helps you feel that a Navigator truly understands your family’s situation? 3. When you first meet a Navigator, what makes you feel respected and not judged?
Navigator	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. What strategies do you use to build trust quickly with families, especially during the first interaction? 2. What makes an entry point feel welcoming or unwelcoming from your perspective? 3. What helps you build rapport with families who have had negative experiences with systems? 4. What would be an example of trust and co-creation?
Group 2 Referral & Linkage	
Parent	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. What would make it easier for you to get connected to the right services the first time? 2. What helps a referral feel clear, supportive, and easy to follow? 3. When someone gives you information about a service, what helps you decide whether to follow through?
Navigator	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. When do you think referrals successfully result in linkage?

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	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 2. What tools or information would make referrals smoother for you? 3. How do you decide which service is the best fit when families have multiple needs? 4. What would be an example of referral & navigation?
Group 3 Follow-up & Collaboration	
Parent	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. After being connected to a service, what kind of follow-up or check-ins feel most supportive to you? 2. How often do you want a navigator to check in with you after a referral?
Navigator	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. What makes it easy or difficult to coordinate with other providers? 2. What systems or processes help you track follow-up effectively? 3. What does “closing the loop” look like in your day-to-day work? 4. What would be an example of follow-up and collaboration?

Following *Persona Profiling*, all of the groups transitioned to *Affinity Clustering*, a method for organizing large volumes of ideas into meaningful themes (Luma Institute, 2012, p . 40). Participants sorted all of their responses from the *Contextual Inquiry* and *Persona Profiling* exercises into thematic clusters, labeling each cluster with an emerging theme. This step helped generate the emerging themes for the Shared Navigation Standards.

For instance, these were some of the themes that emerged through Affinity Clustering:

Affinity Clustering: Emerging Themes and Patterns	
Trust & Connection	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Practice active listening 2. Creating a welcoming and judgment free space 3. Address barriers to engagement 4. Recognize the whole family context
Referral & Linkage	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Match families to the right service 2. Provide actionable referrals 3. Use warm handoffs 4. Reduce duplication
Follow-up & Collaboration	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Close the loop on every referral 2. Maintain consistent and predictable follow-up 3. Provide hands-on support for families through the process

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All three groups then reconvened and each shared the key insights, themes, and examples that emerged from their discussions.

KEY LEARNINGS & FINDINGS

Trust & Connection Group

Participants emphasized that Family Navigation begins with relationship-building practices that make families feel respected, understood, and safe to express their concerns. Navigators highlighted the need for clarity and transparency regarding the Navigation process from the first interaction, as well as recognizing the full context of a family's circumstances, such as competing priorities, stressors, and immediate needs.

Participants elevated the importance of:

- Active listening
- Culturally responsive communication
- Creating a welcoming and judgment-free environment

Participants indicated that these practices form the foundation for trust and set the tone for the entire navigation experience.

Referral & Linkage Group

Across programs, participants agreed that effective referrals require more than merely providing information. The referral needs to be a right fit i.e., based on the priorities of the families and supporting them to act on it immediately.

Participants elevated the importance of:

- Matching families to services based on readiness and priorities
- Providing actionable and easy to follow instructions
- Prioritizing warm handoffs to increase successful referral and linkage

Navigators also elevated the importance of reducing duplication by avoiding multiple screenings, coordinating across providers, and documenting referrals consistently to support system-wide alignment.

Follow-Up & Collaboration Group

Participants identified follow-up and collaboration as critical components of Navigation, ensuring families are not left to navigate systems of services alone.

Participants elevated the importance of:

- Closing the loop on every referral

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- Maintaining predictable follow-up timelines
- Collaborating directly with providers to reduce gaps

Navigators emphasized the importance of hands-on support such as helping families to schedule appointments or reviewing visit summaries. These supports are essential to ensuring continuity, reducing confusion, and strengthening coordinated care.

IMPACT

A feedback quality and satisfaction feedback survey was distributed to participants at the end of the session. Eight participants formally completed the post-session feedback survey. All of the participants responded positively across all indicators.

Of the feedback collected:

- 75% strongly agree, and 25% agreed that there was a sense of community, and their voices were heard in the workshop.
- 62.5% of participants strongly agreed, and 37.5 % agreed that human-centered design was useful for them.
- 62.5% of participants strongly agreed, and 37.5 % agreed that they were engaged in a group setting.
- 62.5% of participants strongly agreed, and 37.5 % agreed that the activities were engaging.

Participants were also asked for any other feedback for improvement. One response was:

- “Noticed FCSSPs were not present. Their perspective would have been valuable.”

NEXT STEPS & RECOMMENDATIONS

- **Co-create the Shared Navigation Standards Document.** The immediate next step is to co-create the Shared Navigation Standards document, informed by the feedback from the retreat. The Innovation Specialists from Childhood Prosperity Lab will synthesize all of the insights gathered during the co-design session and prepare a draft. The draft will be reviewed by the Family Navigation Work Group co-chairs and its members at the next scheduled monthly work group meeting in April. The goal of this activity is to continue strengthening cross-agency engagement, validate the content of the draft, and ensure that it accurately reflects frontline experiences. During this meeting, Work Group members will be asked to provide their feedback on the structure, format, and overall flow of the document. Building on this feedback, the Innovation Specialists will revise and prepare a more completed version of the Shared Navigation Standards to bring back to the Work Group for further discussion. The document will iterate as needed before broader dissemination.

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- **Disseminate the Shared Navigation Standards Across Ascend’s Work Groups.** Once the Shared Navigation Standards are finalized by the FNSB Work Group, they should be disseminated across key work groups and co-chairs to ensure alignment, shared ownership, and system-wide implementation. The document should first be shared with the Data & Evaluation Work Group, where it can inform data priorities, strengthen data collection and sharing practices, and improve cross-partner data workflows. Simultaneously, the standards should be shared with the Community and Family Engagement Work Group so they can better understand how navigators work, how families experience navigation, and how to support community members in engaging with Navigators effectively. The document can also be shared at Ascend’s service provider meetings - an activity of the Partner Engagement Work Group; with the Resident and Community Advisory Group (RCAG); and with Ascend leadership to ensure alignment with broader sustainability plans and to support system-level adoption and integration.
- **Strengthening Families Protective Factors Framework (SFPPF) Community of Practice (CoP).** There is strong alignment between the insights shared by navigators during the co-design session and the learning and active skill-building that takes place in the SFPPF CoP facilitated by Childhood Prosperity Lab. Several key navigation practices identified in the retreat are core components that are discussed in depth during SFPPF CoP, such as: active listening skills, building trust, and applying strength-based theory and protective factors to interactions with families. Childhood Prosperity Lab is offering three SFPPF CoP cycles for Ascend partners in 2026. The SFPPF CoP will give FNSB members a structured space to explore how the protective factors can be used to further strengthen their everyday work with families. To support this alignment, the Innovation Specialists can conduct a targeted outreach regarding SFPPF CoP to partner organizations that participated in the FNSB retreat, as well as other North Hartford organizations involved in navigation, referral, and linkage. This will encourage people to sign up for the upcoming SFPPF CoP sessions beginning in September.

STAY CONNECTED

- **Email:** childhoodprosperitylab@connecticutchildrens.org
- **Facebook:** Connecticut Children’s Community Child Health
- **LinkedIn:** Connecticut Children’s Office for Community Child Health
- [Advancing Kids Blog](#)

REFERENCES

LUMA Institute. (2012). *Innovating for people: Handbook of human-centered design methods* (1st ed.). [\[LUMA Institute\]](#).

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APPENDICES

Appendix 1

North Hartford Ascend

ASCEND FAMILY NAVIGATION HELPING CHILDREN, YOUTH, AND FAMILIES THRIVE

WHAT IS FAMILY NAVIGATION?

Family Navigation is a trust and relationship-based support process that walks alongside families, identifying their strengths, needs, and goals. Through consistent relationships, active problem-solving, and coordination across systems, Family Navigation helps families access, connect, and effectively use programs, services, and other resources available to the community. By reducing barriers and strengthening connections, Family Navigation promotes stability, well-being, and thriving at school, at home, and in the community.

Built on Three Elements:

Trust & Connection	Referral & Linkage	Follow-up & Collaboration
Listening to family priorities, building relationships, and creating accessible, safe entry points.	Warm handoffs to appropriate services, ensuring families are not just referred but successfully connected to the resources aligning with their priorities.	Ongoing support, advocacy, and coordination across providers to meet the evolving needs of children, families, and communities.

WHO IS A FAMILY NAVIGATOR?

Family Navigators are embedded across many Ascend partner organizations. Titles vary, but the role is shared:

Youth Development Specialists
Family & Community Support Specialists (FCSSPs)
Student Engagement Specialists
Care Coordinators

Home Visitors
Social Workers
Juvenile Specialists
Career Navigators

- ✓ If you talk with families about their needs, goals, and priorities, make referrals, or ensure families are linked to services, you are a Family Navigator

1 January 2026

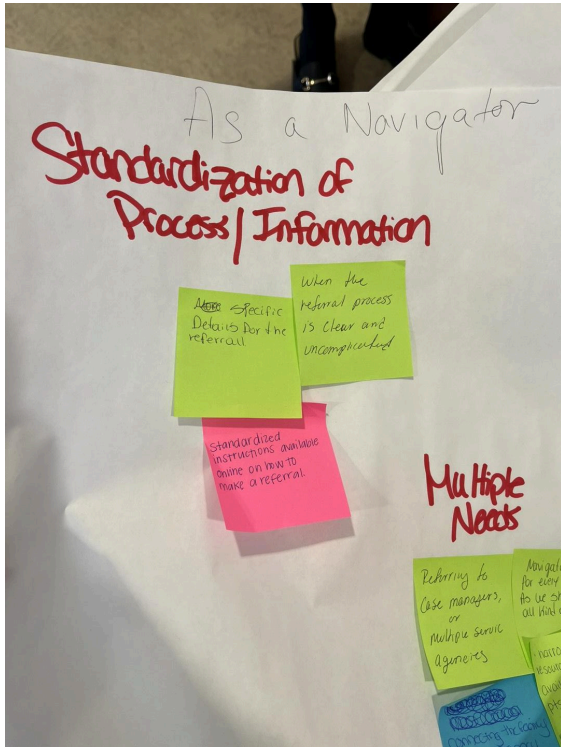


Picture 1 : Family Navigation one-pager

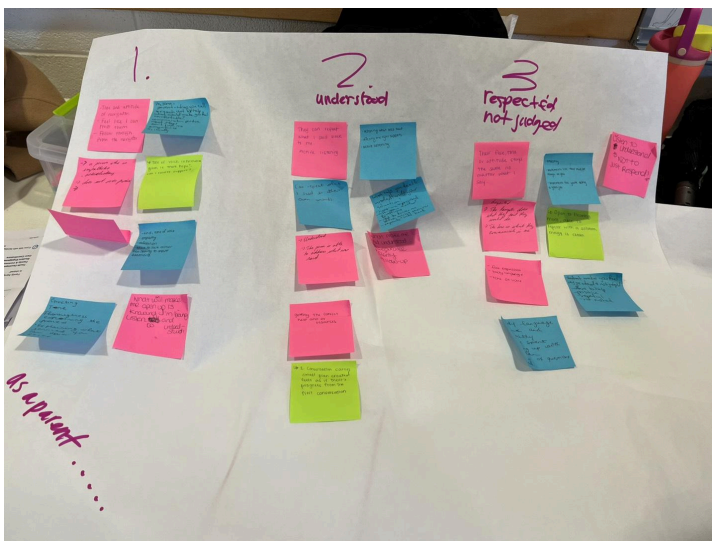
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Appendix 2



Picture 1: Persona Profiling Activity from Group 2



Picture 2: Affinity Clustering Activity from Group 1