



## NORTH HARTFORD ASCEND

[North Hartford Ascend \(Ascend\)](#) is a prenatal-to-career initiative to ensure children living in the North Hartford Promise Zone – which includes the Clay Arsenal, Northeast, and Upper Albany neighborhoods – have the support they need to reach their full potential. Funded by the U.S. Department of Education’s Promise Neighborhoods Grant Program, Connecticut Children’s is facilitating a cross-sector team of early childhood experts, community leaders, community-based organizations, and residents to identify community priorities and enhance the academic, health, and quality of life outcomes of North Hartford Promise Zone residents.

## 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 child health outcomes. Our multidisciplinary team at Connecticut Children’s brings expertise in family sciences, child development, public health and more to drive impactful change. The Lab has three core components that are unique to our approach:

- **Co-designing solutions** in partnership with children, families and communities using Human-Centered Design (HCD) approaches and methodologies;
- **Strengthening family and community protective factors;** and
- **Advancing systems change** to help children and families thrive in all areas of life.

## PROJECT OVERVIEW & SCOPE OF PARTNERSHIP

As North Hartford Ascend enters its fifth year of the Federal Promise Neighborhoods grant, Connecticut Children’s contracted Rick Brush, Collective Health LLC, to engage residents, project team members, and partners in a collaborative process to co-create a Sustainability & Scale plan. In October of 2025, Collective Health submitted an inquiry to the Childhood Prosperity Lab to explore how HCD approaches and methodologies might be applied to elicit insights and perspectives from key stakeholders on five core themes that emerged after conducting 75 interviews: (1) Value & Impact; (2) Infrastructure & Governance; (3) Financing & Policy; (4) Community Ownership; and (5) Scaling Strategy. The co-design session brought together 30 stakeholders including: residents, NRZ leaders and community organizations; Ascend project and leadership team members; partners from the City of Hartford; Hartford Public Schools; members of the five thematic work groups; and others to shape key elements of the plan, and further operationalize core themes. Goals for the co-design session included: (1) engage multi-stakeholder perspectives in shaping the Ascend Sustainability & Scale Plan, (2) recommend key strategies and actions within the five pre-identified areas of sustainability (Value and Impact, Infrastructure & Governance, Financing & Policy, Community Ownership, and Scaling Strategy) and (3) generate action steps that will inform the creation of the plan and begin the formation of a multi-stakeholder coalition committed to achieving sustainability.

## OUR APPROACH: METHODOLOGIES & FACILITATION

Childhood Prosperity Lab team members are certified HCD practitioners, specializing in the 36 methods that comprise the LUMA Framework. The Lab defines 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.

### Methodologies & Facilitation

Three methodologies were implemented during the co-design session: Statement Starters, Abstraction Laddering and Affinity Clustering.

*Statement Starters*, is a methodology for “phrasing problem statements that invites broad exploration” which was integrated into the *Abstracting Laddering* activity (LUMA Institute, 2025). Statement starters help to shape a question by providing the first few words such as “how might we...” or “in what ways might we...” to spark open-ended dialogue. Statement starters, importantly, invite creative brainstorming and promote divergent thinking. Participants were asked to respond to the statement starter “how might we...” to frame a range of questions to help narrow the problem scope. Participants used sticky notes to individually reflect on the questions and then placed them on a rung on the ladder as we narrowed the problem scope.

*Abstraction Laddering* is defined as “a way of reconsidering a problem statement by broadening or narrowing its focus,” according to the LUMA Institute (LUMA Institute, 2025). Abstract Laddering was employed to help participants think critically about the current state of North Hartford Ascend. This method enabled participants to brainstorm what needs to be done to achieve the Ascend Sustainability

# Ascend Together: Sustainability & Scale Co-Design Session Part 1

## North Hartford Ascend

strategic priorities in 2026 by analyzing why each strategic priority is important for sustaining the initiative and identifying how North Hartford Ascend would operationalize each priority.

Lastly, *Affinity Clustering* was used to help facilitate an organized reflection and large group report out by systemically identifying emergent themes as they arose within breakout group discussions. Affinity Clustering is “a graphic technique for sorting items according to similarity” (LUMA Institute, 2025). This methodology enabled the groups to develop clear action steps that Rick would then use to draft the Ascend sustainability plan.

### Co-designing with Community Members & Residents

The session was facilitated at Parker Memorial Community Center on Monday, November 3<sup>rd</sup> from 6:00-7:30 PM. Participants were recruited via email. The email shared information about the goal of the session, the location of the session, and conveyed that each participant would receive a \$50 gift card and a warm meal from a local restaurant for participating. Recruitment efforts were led by the Connecticut Children’s team who engaged their network in disseminating the opportunity to families.



Thirty stakeholders participated in the session, including: 9 North Hartford Residents, 16 internal Ascend team and/ or partners, and 4 leadership team members. Participants sat at either a rectangular or circular table so that they could easily see and converse with one another throughout the session. The session began with a welcome and grounding to build rapport and a hot meal from a local restaurant, Pietro’s Pizza.

Breakout discussion began with an ice breaker. Breakout groups were intentionally organized so that each one had cross-sector representation. Participants were asked to state their name, favorite movie, affiliation with Ascend, and how they became involved in Ascend.



A total of three HCD methodologies were leveraged during the co-design session, all of which were guided by individual reflection and group discussion. *Statement Starters*, a methodology for “phrasing problem statements that invites broad exploration,” was integrated into the *Abstraction Laddering* (LUMA Institute, 2025). Statement starters help to shape a question by providing the first few words such as “how might we...” or “in what ways might we...” to spark open-ended dialogue. Statement starters, importantly, invite creative brainstorming and promote divergent thinking. Participants were asked to respond to the statement starter “how might we...” as they

moved down the ladder to help narrow the problem scope. They used their sticky notes to individually reflect and then placed them on a ladder rung as we narrowed the problem scope.

The second methodology employed was *Abstract Laddering*. Each breakout session had a large poster paper with a ladder drawn on it. On the center rung of the ladder was the breakout group's assigned strategic priority focus framed as a problem statement (i.e., the Value and Impact group had the question: How can Ascend best demonstrate its impact?). Then the facilitator prompted participants to widen the scope of the problem by asking *because* to move *up* the ladder. As we expanded the scope new questions and themes started to arise (i.e., the importance of making Ascend's impact more visible and feel more tangible to community). Then the facilitators guided participants by asking them to examine the solutions they brainstormed and ask "*how might we...*" to help narrow the scope of the question. This narrowing of the scope enabled participants to think deeply about how we can operationalize these co-created goals (i.e., a compelling marketing and communications campaign).

The group then transitioned to the third HCD methodology, *Affinity Clustering*. The methodology prompts participants to sort items according to similarity so they can begin to visualize emergent themes. At the beginning of the breakout groups a notetaker and report out person were identified. At this stage facilitators asked participants to look at the solutions to the problem they generated and try to come to a consensus about the emergent themes they have identified.

## KEY LEARNINGS & FINDINGS

### Value and Impact, Breakout Group 1

This multi-stakeholder breakout group was tasked with developing recommendations and identifying key actions to demonstrate Ascend's impact and make its value visible and compelling. Participants reflected that Ascend needs to become a natural part of the community, which requires trust and demonstrative impact by showing the data that demonstrates the impact and explaining how Ascend strengthens programs and services to better help families.

### Infrastructure & Governance, Breakout Group 2

This multi-stakeholder breakout group was tasked with developing recommendations and identifying key actions to build a strong, durable structure to sustain Ascend. Participants proposed that after the U.S. Department of Education grant concludes, that 1) the education system takes on a backbone role, 2) that governance reside with community, 3) family navigators are retained, 4) quarterly convenings similar to this co-design session are held, and 5) that Ascend becomes integrated into the City of Hartford budget.

### Financing & Policy, Breakout Group 3

This multi-stakeholder breakout group was tasked with developing recommendations and identifying key actions to secure diversified and institutionalized funding for Ascend's future. Participants brainstormed sources of potential diversified funding: the City of Hartford, Hartford Public Schools, United Way, local private institutions, U.S. Department of Education, and the State of Connecticut through building

intentional partnerships. Participants proposed this be done via development/grant writing, advocacy and lobbying (leverage partners and use data to demonstrate Ascend's impact to bring in funders).

### Community Ownership, Breakout Group 4

This multi-stakeholder breakout group was tasked with developing recommendations and identifying key actions to ensure Ascend remains community-led and trusted as it grows. As participants reflected, they identified that ensuring community is fully integrated into all Ascend activities and are kept aware of the Ascend opportunities available to them would be a critical step to build trust and name recognition. It would enable community at large to better understand what Ascend is and how it functions as system. Participants suggested operationalizing this via targeted marketing campaigns, continuing community governance, and building partner and community representative capacity to maintain the work being done and strengthen trust.

### Scaling Strategy, Breakout Group 5

This multi-stakeholder breakout group was tasked with developing recommendations and identifying key actions to expand Ascend citywide while maintaining fidelity and community ownership. Key actions identified in this breakout group were: socializing Ascend outcomes and benchmarks with wider audiences, being intentional about scale (assess feasibility), measuring the processes that are needed to sustain Ascend, determining the capacity of affiliated organizations, and ensuring the North Hartford residents have a voice in how, when, and if Ascend decides to expand.

Five themes emerged when participants were asked to define what sustainability means to them.

1. **Growth & Evolution:** Building brand awareness and increasing reach of Ascend emerged as a theme. Residents voiced that Ascend needs to integrate itself further into the community (i.e., engaging in non-Ascend community activities and events, and/or strengthen the messaging of Ascend affiliated programs and services to build name recognition and trust within the North Hartford community.
2. **Measurable Outcomes and Clear Goals:** Residents encourage Ascend partners and leaders to clarify how impact is being measured, and to clearly articulate the goals of the initiative. Residents believe that thoughtful messaging and deliberate storytelling around the impact Ascend has had in North Hartford will be a vital strategy to building credibility and trust within the community.
3. **Become a Community Institution:** Engrain Ascend in the “fabric of the community” by remaining responsive to community needs, goals, and priorities; by demonstrating accountability and transparency; and continuing to build trust.
4. **Community-Ownership:** Three populations we identified as important community owners of Ascend: (1) North Hartford residents – as they should continue to shape/inform the focus, goals and priorities of Ascend, (2) Affiliated Organizations- need to remain reliable and accessible, (3) Partner Organizations- have the responsibility to be accountable, transparent, and collaborative with community and affiliated organizations.

## IMPACT

Collective Health LLC leveraged the findings from the session to further refine the focus of the sustainability plan, including framing of the four strategic priorities identified in the final document: (1) Shared Opportunity, (2) Shared Outcomes, (3) Shared Infrastructure, and (4) Shared Investment. These four priorities served as the focus for the next co-design session on December 18<sup>th</sup>, 2025 and the *Ascend Together* plan.

## STAY CONNECTED

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