

Childhood Prosperity Lab
Ascend Together Co-Design Summary Report Part 2

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Childhood Prosperity Lab (the Lab) is a social innovation incubator and accelerator that supports the health, development, and well-being of children and families where they live, learn, work, play and pray. The Lab is a key partner of North Hartford Ascend, a prenatal-to-career initiative led by Connecticut Children's through the U.S. Department of Education's Promise Neighborhoods Grant Program. Ascend serves the Clay Arsenal, Northeast, and Upper Albany neighborhoods, i.e., the North Hartford Promise Zone.

CPL partnered with Rick Brush of Collective Health LLC to co-create the *Ascend Together* scale and sustainability plan with North Hartford residents, Ascend partners, and other key stakeholders. This summary documents the second co-design session.

Participants explored priorities: Shared Outcomes; Shared Infrastructure; Shared Investment; and Shared Commitment. These key findings came up throughout the conversations:

- **Shared Outcomes:** (1) strengthen the Pre-K and K-12 system, (2) address the root causes of neighborhood trauma and violence (3) increase access to workforce development programs and (4) increase awareness and access to youth mental health supports.
- **Shared Infrastructure:** (1) sustain Ascend Family Navigators (2) continue supporting cross-sector collaboration and (3) maintain and enhance Ascend's community and family engagement work to show value and impact. **Shared Investment:** (1) use community organizing to show funders that the community supports Ascend, (2) look at the strengths, resources, and needs in the Ascend system to find what we can build on and what still needs support after grant funding ends, and (3) identify what partners and community leaders need to keep building their skills after grant funding ends.
- **Shared Commitment:** (1) each organization to submit a letter of commitment that states their commitment to Ascend (2) share monthly updates and easy-to-read dashboards so partners can stay informed about Ascend's work, priorities, and impact; (3) review what is working well for Family Navigators and what support is still needed; (4) clearly identify and communicate roles and responsibilities of partnered organizations and community representatives; and, (5) keep community voices at the center of Ascend's work by making decisions together and helping more community members get involved.

Collective Health LLC used the findings from the session to improve the focus of the sustainability plan, including framing of the four strategic priorities.

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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.

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.

PROJECT OVERVIEW & SCOPE OF PARTNERSHIP

As North Hartford Ascend enters its fifth year of the 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 scale and sustainability 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 from 75 stakeholder interviews:

- (1) Value & Impact- *Demonstrate Ascend's impact and make its value visible and compelling*
- (2) Infrastructure & Governance- *Build a strong structure to coordinate and sustain Ascend*
- (3) Financing & Policy- *Secure funding for Ascend's future*
- (4) Community Ownership- *Ensure Ascend remains community-led and trusted as it grows*
- (5) and Scaling Strategy- *Expand Ascend citywide while maintaining its core values and community ownership*

This was the second of two co-design sessions. The first was facilitated November 2025 and brought together 30 stakeholders to refine the focus of the sustainability plan, including how the four strategic priorities are defined. The summary report of the session can be found on [North Hartford Ascend's website: northhartfordascend.org](https://northhartfordascend.org)

This summary report reflects the second co-design session, which was facilitated in December 2025 and brought together 41 stakeholders including: residents; Neighborhood Revitalization Zone (NRZ) leaders; community organizations; Ascend project and leadership team members; partners from the City of Hartford; Hartford Public Schools; members of Ascend's five thematic work groups; and others to shape key elements of the plan. Goals for the co-design session included:

- (1) Identify and document multi-stakeholder perspectives to shape the *Ascend Together* Sustainability Plan;
- (2) Strengthen and refine the *Ascend Together* so it is grounded in shared community priorities and ready for implementation in 2026;
- (3) Co-design how Ascend will implement the plan starting in 2026 — inclusive of clarifying roles, responsibilities, and how each stakeholder will contribute to the work; and
- (4) Affirm our shared commitment to moving forward together as a cross-stakeholder coalition — establishing the trust, structures, and activities needed to sustain this work beyond the initial grant period.

OUR APPROACH

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.

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Implementation Approach

The second and final co-design session focused on how to advance the recommendations from the first *Ascend Together* co-design session. The session was held at Parker Memorial Community Center. There were approximately 41 participants representing 36 affiliated programs, thematic work groups representatives, community representatives, and other key stakeholders.

Rick Brush provided a level-set of *Ascend Together* and presented a first draft of the co-designed sustainability plan to the audience to review the identified four strategic priorities. The draft plan was also sent to participants in advance of the meeting so they could become familiar with the content. This overview gave participants a shared understanding of the draft before the co-design session. It encouraged them to strengthen the plan by identifying key stakeholders and clarifying the roles, responsibilities, and commitments needed to put it into action in 2026.

Methodologies & Facilitation

Following Rick's presentation, participants were intentionally assigned to breakout groups so that each group had cross-sector representation. Each breakout group focused on one specific strategic priority of *Ascend Together*. This ensured that each breakout group had a focused and structured discussion on:

- How to **strengthen and refine** a specific strategic priority;
- **Co-design an implementation strategy** for that specific priority; and
- **Identify key stakeholders positioned to contribute to the strategic priority.**

Each breakout group was supported by an Innovation Specialist from the Lab or a project partner from United Way. Six methodologies were implemented: *Rose, Thorn, Bud, Affinity Clustering, Concept Mapping, Stakeholder Mapping, Visualize the Vote, Bulls-eye Diagramming, and Importance Difficulty Matrix.*

Rose, Thorn, and Bud is a continuous improvement method that enables teams to identify the strengths, pain points and opportunities for a data set or focus (LUMA Institute, 2026). For the purposes of the co-design session, the method was adapted so that participants silently reflected on their initial reactions to the draft. Participants were prompted to organize their feedback through a color-coded system with pink sticky notes representing a *Rose*, the blue sticky notes representing a *Thorn*, and the green sticky notes representing a *Bud*.

- **Roses** represented what participants thought were **strengths**.
- **Thorns** represented what participants thought felt **missing**.
- **Buds** represented what participants saw as their or other partners **role** in implementation.



After independent reflection, participants were asked to round robin their reflections to the group. Responses were then organized into key themes and patterns with the guidance of a method called affinity clustering---a method used to analyze and synthesize data by visually grouping responses/concepts into thematic groupings to identify emergent patterns (LUMA Institute, 2026).

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Below are some of the key themes identified via the Affinity Clustering activity:

Roses	
Key themes: 1. Strategic priorities in the plan are reflective of community priorities. 2. Ascend's cross sector and collaborative approach has enhanced partners capacity. 3. Keep community voice and co-production at the center of Ascend's work.	Insights from Community: • "It (Ascend) works, and what works should be supported and scaled." • "Community engagement and leadership is consistent." • "Priorities were garnered from at least 100 engaged residents or partners."
Thorns	
Key themes: 1. Build deeper trust within the community by developing transparency practices (i.e., public dashboard) to communicate how work is executed as decision are made. 2. Broaden the number of community hubs engaged when implementing Ascend activities, specifically Family Navigation efforts.	Insights from Community: • "Assuming the present action items are well known and present during the sustainability planning process." • "More marketing and communications amongst the north end community." • "With working in health/wellness creating and supporting more community hubs for a place where everyone can come together."
Buds	
1. There is a need to regularly assess what stakeholders are missing from the Ascend system and facilitate outreach to those stakeholders. 2. Enhance Ascend's community and family engagement efforts so that Ascend becomes embedded into the fabric of the North Hartford community. 3. Engaging more youth voice across our collaborative framework.	Insights from Community: • "Community programs events and gatherings" • Lack of attendance of "parents and caregivers. Connect more people" • "We need to be at every event big or small" • "Not enough youth voices" • "Youth/ parent community voices as ambassadors of Ascend" • "Youth leadership/ students organized to lead initiatives"

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After participants engaged in the Rose, Thorn, Bud activity each breakout group was assigned a different set of additional activities to advance their work, guided by HCD methodologies and strategic priorities of each topic area (LUMA Institute, 2026):

- **Concept Mapping** is a way of depicting the relationships between various concepts (i.e., attendance and engagement, early childhood readiness, academic progress, postsecondary/workforce pathways, family stability, community voice and trust, and system coordination) in a given topic area (i.e., shared outcomes) (LUMA Institute, 2026). This enabled participants to explore how *Ascend Together* strategic priorities might interact with various people and systems.
 - The Shared Outcomes breakout groups used concept mapping to identify what shared outcomes would be important to support *Ascend Together*.
 - The Shared Infrastructure breakout groups used concept mapping to identify the essential parts of Ascend that help the system work effectively.
 - The Shared Investment breakout groups used concept mapping to identify possible sources of short-term bridge funding and long-term sustainable funding for Ascend.
 - The Shared Commitment breakout group used concept mapping to identify what is needed for coordinated action in 2026.
- **Stakeholder Mapping** is a way of organizing a network of people who have a stake in a given system (LUMA Institute, 2026). This HCD activity helped to map what stakeholders and/or systems should be involved in advancing identified workflows.
 - The Shared Outcomes breakout groups used stakeholder mapping to identify the key stakeholders Ascend will need to engage to adopt the established shared outcomes.
 - The Shared Infrastructure breakout groups used stakeholder mapping to understand how community ownership would help sustain Ascend's infrastructure.
 - The Shared Commitment breakout groups used stakeholder mapping to identify how we might ensure resident and youth leadership have a meaningful role in *Ascend Together* and governance.
- **Visualize the Vote** is a way to quickly poll collaborators to reveal preferences and opinions (LUMA Institute, 2026). As potential workflows are identified, visualizing the vote helped to understand what patterns or priorities are emerging while building agreement in real time.
 - The Shared Outcomes breakout groups used visualize the vote to identify the greatest opportunities for joint action based on the shared outcomes the group created.
 - The Shared Infrastructure breakout groups used visualize the vote to understand what the Hartford community needs from a long-term backbone organization.
 - The Shared Investment breakout groups used visualize the vote to identify the steps needed in 2026 to position Ascend for long-term funding.
- **Bulls-eye Diagramming** is a way of ranking items in order of importance using a focused concentric circle diagram (LUMA Institute, 2026) to help prioritize the workflows that were co-created and establish a cohesive sequential process for implementation.
 - The Shared Outcomes breakout group used bulls-eye diagramming to understand how Ascend can strengthen the link between shared outcomes and shared investment in 2026.
 - The Shared Infrastructure breakout group used bulls-eye diagramming to understand how Ascend could scale while staying aligned with the shared outcomes.

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- o The Shared Investment breakout group used bulls-eye diagramming to understand what elements of the shared infrastructure must be funded first to maintain momentum as federal funding ends.
- **Importance Difficulty Matrix** is a chart for plotting items by relative importance and perceived difficulty (LUMA Institute, 2026). This HCD activity helped partners visualize how important each action item is compared to how difficult it would be to implement.
 - o The Shared Commitment breakout group used importance difficulty matrix to identify what accountability check-ins, commitments, and operating routines will ensure that the work stays on track in 2026.

All six groups then reconvened and shared the key insights, themes, priorities, suggested revisions for the plan, potential implementation strategies, and proposed commitments to present to partners.

KEY LEARNINGS & FINDINGS

Breakout groups were pre-assigned to ensure cross-sector representation. This approach was applied so that all voices were weighted equally and a depth of perspective and lived experience was represented when co-designing the *Ascend Together*.

Shared Outcomes Breakout Groups

Two Shared Outcomes Breakout Groups were tasked with creating a set of clear, citywide prenatal-to-career (P2C) outcomes that align partners around a common direction, strengthen honesty and trust, guide continuous learning and improvement, and demonstrate the collective value of North Hartford Ascend.

Breakout group participants engaged in a series of activities to reflect on questions including but not limited to:

1. What shared outcomes (previously proposed or new) might draw cross-stakeholder support?
2. How might Ascend refine the outcomes to ensure the needs, goals, and priorities of the community (i.e., families, HPS, the City of Hartford and other partners) are captured?
3. What stakeholders need to formally adopt and use these shared outcomes – and what will it take to make that happen in 2026?

The following priorities and next steps emerged:

1. **Strengthen the Pre-K and K-12 systems so that they foster a culture and social environment that the whole community will benefit from.**
 - a. Enhancing after-school programming options will help support both adult and youth mental health. The lack of after-school programming impacts youths' ability to foster social connections and limits the number of safe spaces they have in the community to learn and grow with concrete support. Participants noted that after-school programs would have a positive impact on adults in the youth lives as well, as it would give caregivers the time and space to address their personal and professional needs and priorities. Key stakeholders identified as well-positioned to advance this work are the Little Owls program at Weaver High School, Connecticut Children's, and the City of

Hartford. Participants shared that a coordinated approach across organizations is needed to fill the gap that currently exists and they view the Ascend system as being able to close that gap.

- b. Evidence of academic progress will help to change the narrative around Hartford Public Schools. Markers of success would include a continuous decrease in absenteeism, an increase in early childhood readiness, increase in literacy rates, increase high school graduation rates, and increase in college enrollment and retention. Participants expressed that these trends would demonstrate the value of Hartford Public Schools and lead to the retention of more students within the school system.
2. **Neighborhood trauma and safety (evictions, incarcerations, violence) has had a negative impact on the health and well-being of the North Hartford community.** Participants shared the need to identify what the root causes are of safety concerns and neighborhood trauma. They highlighted that improving the overall quality of life, i.e., the social drivers of health, will strengthen community well-being and reduce the stressors contributing to trauma. Stakeholders identified policy advocacy and reform as the appropriate strategy to address the root causes of this systemic issue, since unmet basic needs are contributing factors. Participants identified Compass Youth, The Village for Families and Children, and Advocacy to Legacy as potential stakeholders in the work as they have community trust, content area expertise, and believed to be well-positioned to advance this work.
3. **Increase the accessibility of workforce development programs and exposure to various career pathways.** Career readiness and social mobility are major social drivers of health that impact health outcomes and overall well-being. Participants shared that the lack of a strong, coordinated and well-resourced system to support the career development of youth has contributed to social conditions and well-being of North Hartford residents today. Participants believe that better coordination of resources in North Hartford would give young people more opportunities to explore careers. They believe this could help reduce community violence and economic hardship by helping families meet their basic needs. They identified Compass Youth, The Village for Families and Children and Advocacy to Legacy as potential stakeholders in the work as they have community trust, content area expertise, and are believed to be well-positioned to advance this work.
4. **Mental Health Support for youth (i.e., Question Persuade Refer Training (QPR), crisis support) was flagged as an emergent need to support young people.** Participants echoed the need for service providers to be trained in Question, Persuade, Refer (QPR) and Bystander trainings to better support youth. Participants also mentioned that the cost of preventative and ongoing mental and behavioral support is often a barrier to accessing care. They suggested that financial assistance programs and financial literacy courses would help lessen the impact of this barrier. Hartford Promise, The Village for Children and Families, and the Connecticut Children's Injury Prevention Center were elevated as possible stakeholders to advance this work.

Overall, these two groups believed that strengthening the overall Ascend system requires continued cross-sector collaboration between state and local government, Hartford Public Schools, community-based organizations, healthcare institutions, parents, residents, funders, colleges and universities, and youth. By bringing everyone together, Ascend would help organizations work together to better meet community's needs and priorities.

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Shared Infrastructure Breakout Groups



Two Shared Infrastructure Breakout Groups were asked to create a plan to sustain the systems and resources that help partners, residents, and organizations work together to provide consistent and coordinated support for every child and family.

Breakout group participants engaged in a series of activities to answer questions including but not limited to:

1. How might we identify the parts* of the P2C system that are foundational to the systems' operation? (*See "Five Pillars of Hartford's P2C Infrastructure" in the plan.)¹
2. What role should community play in Hartford's shared P2C infrastructure?
3. How might we approach scaling the P2C system, while maintaining fidelity of outcomes?

The following priorities and next steps emerged:

- **The Family Navigation system was identified as a key function of North Hartford Ascend because it helps the coordination between organizations, programs, and services so that they can better serve community.** As Ascend advances the *Ascend Together* plan, the Social Network Analysis and other data should be raised to demonstrate this impact.
 - A key part of the Family Navigation system is connecting families to **childhood community programs, services and resources** in North Hartford. Stakeholders said it is important to continue providing this support.
- **Cross-sector collaboration was highlighted as a strength of the system.** School transitions are a vulnerable time in children's lives. Residents reminded providers that this is often a time when important social, emotional and developmental warning or delay signs can be missed. Strengthening the system by deepening the relationship, trust and collaboration between the City of Hartford and Hartford Public Schools will help the system to provide greater concrete support to students and families.
- **Maintaining and enhancing Ascend's community and family engagement work was a top priority.** The collaborative governance and community-driven framework of Ascend is a strength of the system. Participants discussed the need to expand reach of Ascend by deepening its relationships with civic groups, parent groups, and other groups that are in alignment with Ascend's mission and could serve as trusted ambassadors of our work. They believe this will support Ascend in becoming a permanent part fabric of North Hartford while strengthening community ownership.

Shared Investment Breakout Group

¹ (1) Relational & Community Infrastructure; (2) Integrated Navigation & Family Support; (3) Shared Data, Evaluation & Learning Systems; (4) Coordinated Operations & Systems Standards; and (5) Physical Infrastructure: Community Hubs & Third Spaces.

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Two Shared Investment Breakout Groups were asked to develop a long-term funding plan to support Ascend, invest in community-led solutions, and bring together funding from public, private, and philanthropic, and community partners.

Breakout group participants engaged in a series of activities to answer questions including but not limited to:

1. What elements of the shared infrastructure must be funded first to maintain momentum as federal funding ends?
2. Where should the 2026–2029 bridge financing realistically come from?
3. What long-term (2030+) sustainable financing should we pursue?
4. What specific steps must we take together in 2026 to position ourselves for these long-term financing streams?

The following priorities and next steps emerged:

- **Community organizing** to advance the Ascend mission and framework is important to grow a critical mass of support and facilitate sustainability because it will signal to partners and potential funders that community supports Ascend.
- **Asset mapping** the Ascend system was recommended to understand pre-existing inherent strengths, resources, and talents that the system can use as the network implements the sustainability plan. It will also reveal what resources and/or investments are still needed to sustain Ascend past grant funding.
- **Funding capacity building efforts within partner organizations and community leadership tables** was raised as an important function that needs to be sustained by the system. Recommendations included an analysis of the current capacity building activities and their impact and understanding what is needed to continue that work.

Shared Commitment Breakout Groups

The Shared Commitment Breakout Group were asked to brainstorm how to maintain and evolve shared governance, shared responsibility, and shared accountability across residents, community organizations, City and HPS leaders, funders, and institutions. This will make sure Hartford's prenatal to career system is co-owned, community-centered, and sustained for generations to come.

To achieve this goal, the breakout groups applied the HCD methods of concept mapping, stakeholder mapping, and importance difficulty matrix to answer the following questions:

1. How might we identify shared governance needed to drive coordinated action in 2026?
2. Should we have four work groups (aligned to the four strategic imperatives)?
 - a. If so, how would these connect to/integrate with the existing Ascend work groups?



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- b. How would Ascend ensure that cross-stakeholder leadership can make coordinated, timely decisions?
3. Does Ascend need additional project management or other resources to implement the plan?
4. How might Ascend ensure resident and youth leadership have meaningful influence in 2026 implementation and governance?
 - a. Which decisions should residents and youth leaders have formal authority over (not just advisory input)?
 - b. What support (training, stipends, meeting prep, facilitation) is needed to ensure that resident and youth participation is meaningful and sustainable?
5. What accountability measures, commitments, and operating activities will ensure that the work stays on track in 2026?
 - a. What formal commitments do we need from partners (e.g., support beyond the grant, funding match, adopting shared outcomes, MOUs)?
 - b. What cadence of meetings (work groups, leadership table, quarterly public updates) will keep the work coordinated without creating excessive burden?
 - c. How does Ascend build a culture of transparency, shared learning, and movement-building that will continue beyond the grant?

The following priorities and next steps and recommendations emerged:

- **Each organization should submit a letter confirming its commitment to the mission of Ascend and remain accountable for its agreed upon role and responsibility within the system.** Additionally, organizations should assess their capacity to ensure they can send representatives to all Ascend activities.
- **Public data sharing practices through regular, i.e., monthly, reports or dashboards so stakeholders can be up-to-date and informed on Ascend activities, the four *Ascend Together* strategic priorities, and the general impact of Ascend in a quick accessible way.** Implementing these practices will help build community trust, engage new community champions, and empower current community ambassadors to be well-informed of Ascend's progress.
- **Family Navigators were highlighted as a key part of this prenatal to career system.** This breakout group noted the importance of assessing the Family Navigators' current organizational capacity and needs. They believe that a strong Family Navigation system is essential to Ascend's long-term success. They said the needs of family navigators should be addressed early so the entire Ascend system can be strengthened.
- **Clearly identify and communicate roles and responsibilities** of partnered organizations and community representatives to create a healthy ecosystem of accountability and transparency that builds community trust and ownership.
- **A community-driven agenda** is a key feature of the Ascend system and was elevated as a strength that should be sustained via collaborative governance and enhanced through more grassroots community organizing efforts.

IMPACT

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Collective Health LLC used 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, *Ascend Together*: (1) Shared Opportunity, (2) Shared Outcomes, (3) Shared Infrastructure, and (4) Shared Investment.

A quality and satisfaction feedback survey were distributed to participants. Five participants formally completed the post-session feedback survey. All participants responded positively across all indicators either strongly agreeing or agreeing with the statements

Of the feedback collected:

- 80% agreed and 20% strongly agree that there was a sense of community, and their voices were heard in the workshop.
- 40% agreed, 20% strongly agree and 40% somewhat agreed that human-centered design was useful for them.
- 60% agreed and 40 % of participants strongly agreed that they were engaged in a group setting.
- 80% agreed and 20% of participants strongly agreed that the activities were engaging.

Participants were also asked for any other feedback for improvement. Their responses were:

- “I felt yesterday was an amazing meeting and lots of things got done.”
- “The facilitator was great. She kept the conversation focused on the task at hand and re-centered us when steering off topic.”
- “Thank you for sharing and the excellent facilitation efforts by you and the larger team! Looking forward to continuing the collaboration.”

To stay up-to-date on *Ascend Together* please visit the Ascend [website](#).

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