Childhood Prosperity Lab

Co-Design Summary Report: A Conversation on Housing

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A Conversation on Housing Co-Design Summary Report

Childhood Prosperity Lab & North Hartford Ascend

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Childhood Prosperity Lab (CPL) 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 has three core components that are unique to our 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.

CPL 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. Serving the Clay Arsenal, Northeast, and Upper Albany neighborhoods, i.e., the North Hartford Promise Zone, Ascend works alongside residents, community organizations, and cross-sector partners to improve child and family well-being.

In partnership with Childhood Prosperity Lab and Building for Health, a community co-design session focused on housing and neighborhood well-being was facilitated on May 19 at Parker Memorial Community Center. Using Human-Centered Design methodologies, residents reflected on strengths, challenges, and opportunities related to housing, safety, and quality of life in North Hartford.

The conversation revealed that neighborhood safety is the most pressing housing concern for residents and caregivers across the three Ascend neighborhoods. Participants shared fears related to gun violence, speeding vehicles, unsafe bus stops, and the condition of parks and playgrounds. Caregivers noted that these concerns impact children's ability to safely travel to school, play outdoors, and engage in their community. Residents also identified rising rent costs, substance misuse, and lack of accountability from property owners as ongoing challenges.

At the same time, participants emphasized the importance of community connection and social support. Residents described community events, youth recreation opportunities, and relationships among neighbors as important strengths that contribute to family well-being. Many participants expressed a desire for more frequent community events and resource fairs to rebuild neighborhood cohesion following the COVID-19 pandemic.

Through prioritization activities, the top themes identified by residents were:

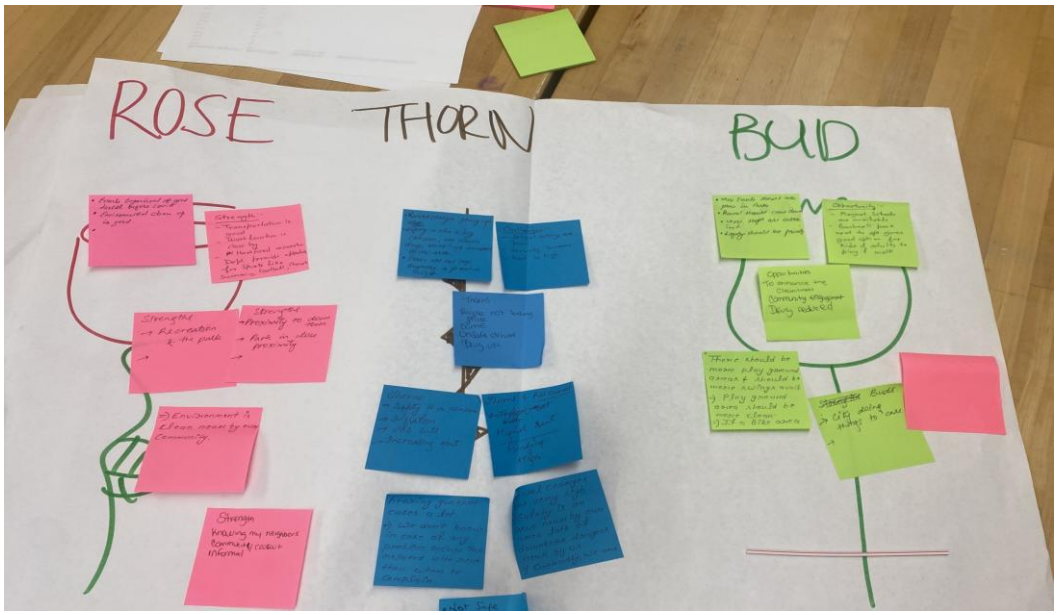
- Neighborhood safety
- Community events and social connection
- Cost of rent and housing affordability

Residents also highlighted trusted community resources already supporting families, including Wake Up Wednesday, Hartford Parent University, Hartford PAL, faith-based organizations, and North Hartford Ascend itself.

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Participant feedback reflected a highly positive experience, with 100% of survey respondents agreeing or strongly agreeing that the session was well facilitated, goals were achieved, and their voices were heard.

Findings from the session will inform future collaboration across Ascend work groups, including family navigation, partner engagement, data and evaluation, and community outreach efforts. Recommendations include elevating neighborhood safety as a cross-sector priority, increasing visibility of community resources and events, strengthening connections to trusted programs, and continuing to engage residents and youth in co-design efforts that shape community solutions.



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.

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

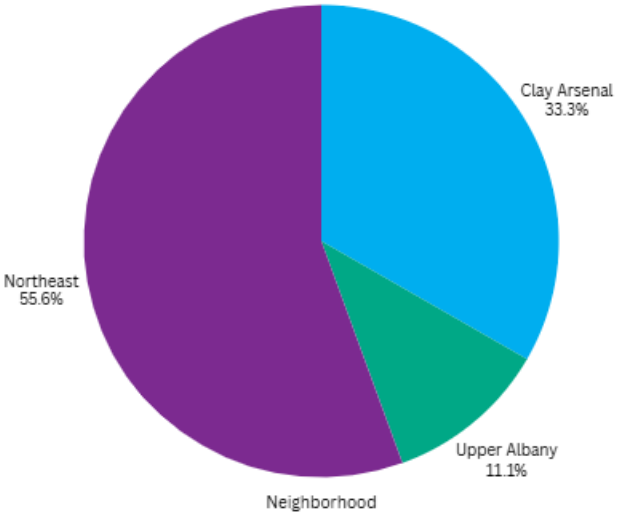
Childhood Prosperity Lab, North Hartford Ascend, and Building for Health (BFH) are three initiatives in Connecticut Children's Office for Community Child Health. BFH launched in 2019 to increase collaboration between the housing, health, and energy sectors with the goal of improving the overall health of children and families living in Hartford, Connecticut. In 2023, the Lab facilitated three co-design sessions with residents in Hartford to inform the current operating model of BFH today. The infrastructure of North Hartford Ascend is supported by a shared governance framework. Across work groups, Community Conversations, and the monthly Service Provider Meeting, partners and residents in the community elevated housing as a key priority. To meaningfully respond, Ascend's network of partners need to understand what facets are top of mind for community - such as affordability, quality, etc. Through co-design, the Lab and BFH collaborated closely with residents and community members to better understand this social driver of well-being and ensure that community-defined goals, needs, and priorities inform the future direction of Ascend.

OUR APPROACH: METHODOLOGIES & FACILITATION

The Lab team members are trained Human-Centered Design (HCD) practitioners. 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. Team members from the Lab are certified HCD Practitioners, specializing in the 36 methods that comprise the LUMA Framework.

A Conversation on Housing

Childhood Prosperity Lab engaged nine residents at Parker Memorial Community Center from 5:30-7:00 PM on May 19th. Of those that attended the session, 56% reside in the Northeast neighborhood; 33% reside in Clay Arsenal, and 11% reside in Upper Albany.



Before activities ensued, participants enjoyed a catered meal from a local restaurant. The Childhood Prosperity Lab Program Manager welcomed participants into the space, shared the agenda for the session, and relayed insights from previous co-design sessions focused on housing to elevate challenges community members previously identified. Providing context from former sessions outlined critical facets of housing, including: environmental health, affordability, and community safety.

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Methodologies

Participants were first prompted to individually reflect on the strengths, challenges, and opportunities as it relates to housing in their neighborhoods and broader community – framed by the *Rose, Thorn, Bud* methodology (LUMA Institute, 2026). Rose, Thorn, Bud is a color-coded system for holistically reflecting on a data set, resource, or lived experience. Participants document their feedback on pink, blue, and green sticky notes respectively. Individual reflections were collected by the Lab team and organized onto a large easel pad for a group report out.

The report out was structured by *Affinity Clustering*, a methodology for organizing inputs into broader themes and patterns (LUMA Institute, 2026). After reading each input aloud, the facilitator asked the group to identify patterns. Themes that emerged from the conversation as it relates to housing the community included:

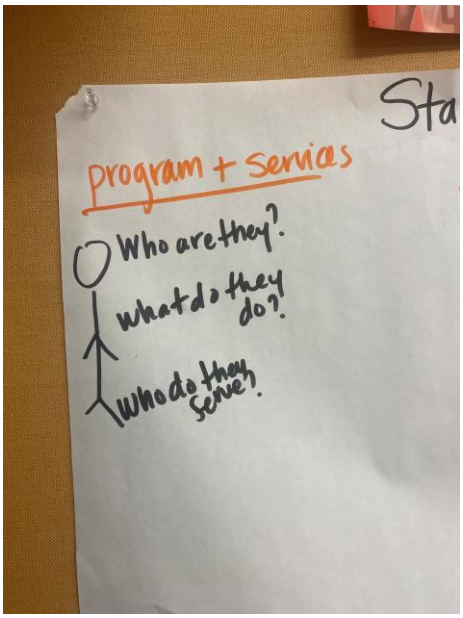
- **Roses (strengths):**
  - Community events that bring neighbors together
  - Transportation to commute across the City of Hartford
  - Opportunities for youth recreation
- **Thorns (challenges):**
  - Neighborhood safety – specifically fear of gun violence and pedestrian safety
  - Substance misuse in the community
  - Dirty playgrounds
  - Rising cost of rent and associated fees
  - Property owners take little accountability
- **Buds (opportunities):**
  - Install video surveillance in shared community spaces so that families feel more comfortable in the neighborhoods
  - Increase the frequency of community events to build social connection, neighborhood cohesion, and pride

After themes were identified, the facilitator asked each participant to select the cluster that was more important or relevant to them. While all of the themes are important, the goal of this activity was to build consensus, if any, on what might be highest priority for residents. The activity was inspired by *Visualize the Vote*, a methodology for real-time prioritization and facilitated as a *Round Robin* so that everyone's voice could be heard (LUMA Institute, 2026). The top three themes that emerged through votes included: **Community Events, Neighborhood Safety, and Cost of Rent**. The need for neighborhood safety was upvoted by all participants.

The last activity, *Stakeholder Mapping*, naturally built on the conversation. Participants were asked to identify partners and resources in the community who are addressing neighborhood safety. The first participant to respond cited Ascend – sharing that they check Ascend's social media every day to stay abreast of information, resources, and community events. Others highlighted the positive impact of Wake Up Wednesday, Hartford Parent University, Hartford's PAL program, and faith-based organizations. These programs and resources were elevated as those that are building caregiver capacity and connecting families to services available in the community.

KEY LEARNINGS & FINDINGS

It became clear throughout the conversation that residents and caregivers in the three Ascend neighborhoods are most concerned about **neighborhood safety**. Caregivers do not feel comfortable allowing their children to walk to school, expressing fears of gun violence and cars speeding through stop signs. One caregiver brought to the groups' attention that strangers will linger at bus stops, too, so they need to remain present until their children safely get on and off the bus, which conflicts with their employment schedule. Caregivers highlighted that they are most concerned about neighborhood safety after hours, when it is dark. Physical safety at parks and playground was also elevated as a priority, noting they are often dirty, and, litter like cigarette butts can be a deterrent for use. These conditions impact child health, development, and well-being because these community spaces are where youth play, connect, and exercise.



While neighborhood safety is top of mind for residents, it was clear that families are looking to connect with one another at **community events**. Participants noted that the number and frequency of community events have declined since the COVID-19 pandemic, and they are hoping to see events return. Residents are looking for events that increase awareness of programs and services available to them in their community, as well as those that promote social connection amongst neighbors. These aspirations are reflective of an input from the Rose, Thorn, Bud activity; a participant cited "knowing my neighbors and informal community cook-outs" as a strength of their housing and community at large. Caregivers agreed that safe and stable housing is an essential social driver of well-being that pave the conditions of success in school and life.

PARTICIPANT FEEDBACK & IMPACT

At the end of the session, participants were asked to provide their feedback through a quality and satisfaction survey. A total of five participants completed the survey as of date.

Of the feedback collected on the Service Provider meeting feedback survey:

- 100% strongly agree or agree that their voices and perspectives were heard.
- 100% strongly agree or agree that the meeting was of high quality.
- 100% strongly agree or agree that the meeting goals were achieved.
- 100% strongly agree or agree that the meeting was facilitated effectively.



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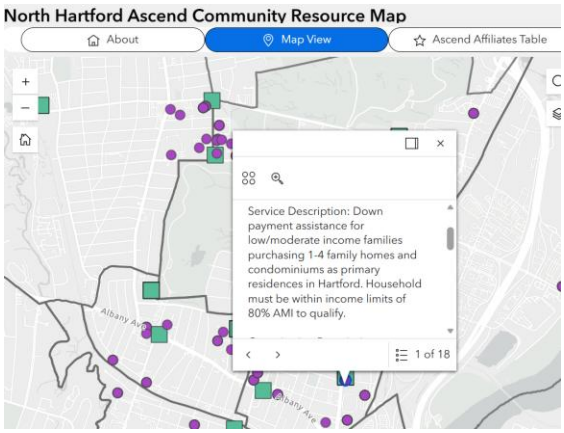
RECOMMENDATIONS & NEXT STEPS

The following recommendations are informed by the feedback from residents who participated in the co-design session. The recommendations are intended to be concrete next steps in the short-term for North Hartford Ascend and their network of partners:

- **Elevate neighborhood safety as a housing priority to North Hartford Ascend's thematic work groups to engage partners and providers across sectors in a comprehensive response plan.** The insights from the co-design session have direct implications for the Family Navigation, Data and Evaluation, and Partner Engagement work groups:
    - Family navigation is a trust and relationship-based support 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 in school, at home, and in life. The ***Family Navigation Work Group*** is charged with coordinating an integrated network of support for families – which includes connecting them to services across sectors and streamlining service delivery. During an upcoming work group meeting, Innovation Specialists from Childhood Prosperity Lab will elevate the community priority of strengthened neighborhood safety to work group members. Equipped with this deeper insight, members might have more focused conversations with families on how they might support social drivers of well-being that emerged from the session – including rental assistance options.
    - Ascend's data and evaluation approach tracks how well the initiative is improving outcomes for North Hartford families. It uses three pillars of data: community-level, program-level, and individual-level data to understand neighborhood conditions, measure the impact of services, and monitor progress for residents and students. The ***Data and Evaluation Work Group*** collects data and monitors trends across ten Government Performance Measures (GPRAs) determined by the U.S. Department of Education. One of the GRPAs measured through Ascend is *students feel safe at school and in their community*. Data that has been collected to date through the initiative can be found on pages 21-24 of the North Hartford Ascend Data Summary Report published in December of 2025. The data shows that while students' perception of safety at school has increased, perceptions of safety to and from school has decreased. This data point collected from the School Climate and Culture Survey (SCCS) administered by the Hartford School District (HPS), is aligned with participant concerns expressed about neighborhood safety during the co-design session. The insights from residents and caregivers at the co-design session will provide the work group with qualitative context for the data collected, highlighting the importance of lived experience. Through discussion, the participants unearthed other social drivers of health that are impacting perceptions of safety.
    - The ***Partner Engagement Work Group*** convenes service providers across sectors serving children, youth and families in the North Hartford Promise Zone to strengthen partnership and collaboration. The work group might consider inviting

the programs and services identified by residents and caregivers (i.e., Wake Up Wednesday, Hartford Parent University, Hartford's PAL program, and faith-based organizations) to one of their monthly Service Provider Meetings (SPMs). The SPM is a designated space for cross-sector providers supporting families in the North Hartford Promise zone to network, set strategies for deeper collaboration, and co-create events and projects that are implemented within Ascend, such as thematic Community Conversations. In this setting, providers can collaboratively explore how to partner more effectively with one another in a joint effort of improving community health and safety.

- **Consult 211 Child Development (211 CD) on whether the programs and services elevated by residents are integrated into their resource directory.** 211 CD is a partner of North Hartford Ascend and an integral component of the Ascend family navigation system. Importantly, the Ascend Community Resource Map, which was co-designed with residents in 2024, is powered by the 211 CD resource directory. It is important that community feedback from this session is shared with the 211 CD team so that the programs and services aforementioned are integrated as resources that families can independently access and/or explore with a family navigator.



- **Increase the visibility of community events and resource fairs through diverse marketing and communications efforts.** In the co-design session, community events were identified as a strength in regard to housing and health. North Hartford Ascend hosts monthly Community Conversations that not only serves as a conduit to connect families to resources, but to network with neighbors and providers within the community. Additionally, partners affiliated with North Hartford Ascend – including the City of Hartford and Hartford Public Schools – frequently share their events with the Ascend marketing and communications team to disseminate the opportunities broadly across community. Social connections and concrete support are protective factors for family health and well-being. The Childhood Prosperity Lab team will inform the Ascend marketing and communications team of the continued need to promote community events and engagement activities. In June of 2026, Childhood Prosperity Lab will facilitate a co-design session with youth in the three neighborhoods to explore their priorities for the initiatives' social media, marketing and communications – inclusive of how they want to be involved in shaping the work. The goals of the conversation will include:
    - Understanding how youth are currently receiving information about programs and services available in their community;
    - Identifying what youth are most interested in learning more about in their community;
    - Understanding what marketing/communications strategies would successfully reach them;
    - Understanding how Ascend might incorporate more youth voice and storytelling into the initiative.

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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***

RESOURCES

- For concerns surrounding rental increases, contact the Fair Rent Commission – City of Hartford
- To report blighted properties: Report a Blighted Property – City of Hartford
- For the blighted playgrounds, they can contact **311** at (860) 757-9311
- Resources for residents who want to be involved in the beautification of the city: Love Hartford: A Citywide Resiliency and Civic Pride Initiative – City of Hartford

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