# Childhood Prosperity Lab

## Co-Design Summary Report: Engaging & Partnering with Faith-Based Organizations

## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Coordinating a cross-sector initiative to drive prenatal-to-career (P2C) systems change requires ongoing engagement and partnership with community-based organizations, institutions and programs that serve children and families. In response to a community-identified priority, Connecticut Children's Childhood Prosperity Lab (CPL) partnered with North Hartford Ascend (Ascend) to build meaningful relationships with faith-based organizations in the North Hartford Promise Zone.

To accomplish this, CPL facilitated a co-design session, bringing together residents of all ages to collectively explore three foundational goals:

1. Understand the assets and impact of faith-based organizations in North Hartford.
2. Identify faith-based organizations to guide partnership and initial conversations across the P2C system.
3. Co-create ideas and solutions for how to engage faith-based organizations in North Hartford Ascend.

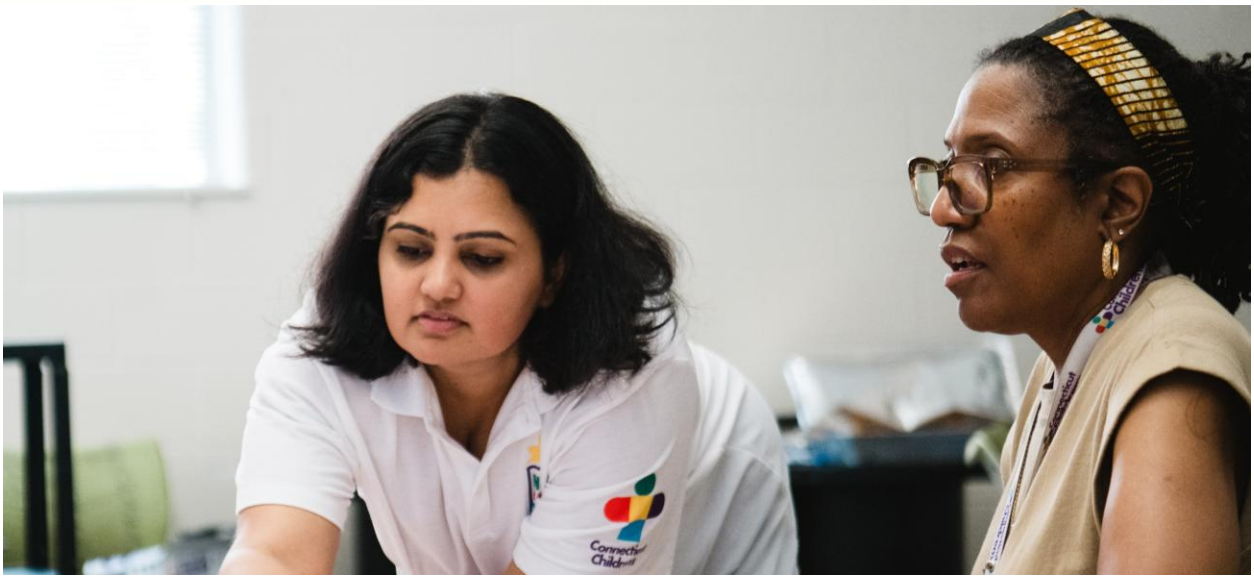
The co-design session was facilitated in September 2026 and engaged five participants, two youth and three adults. They engaged in human-centered design (HCD) activities that provided insight rooted in live experience, and, contributed to actionable recommendations. The co-design session unearthed the following insight: **faith-based organizations are more than a place of worship, they are institutions providing enrichment opportunities, services, and basic needs for residents in the community**.

## RECOMMENDATIONS & NEXT STEPS

- **Mobilize cross-work-group collaboration to translate resident insights into action.** Elevate key findings from the session across the North Hartford Ascend Work Groups to identify shared priorities and define actionable pathways for collaboration. More specifically:
    - **Integrate resident insights into Ascend's faith-based partner engagement strategy.** Share findings from the session with the Partner Engagement Work Group, particularly the subgroup responsible for developing and implementing a coordinated approach to engaging faith-based organizations. The subgroup should use these insights to inform partnership priorities, identify opportunities for meaningful collaboration, and ensure engagement strategies reflect residents' experiences, trusted community relationships, and identified needs.
    - **Elevate the role of faith-based organizations as community hubs for outreach and engagement to the Community and Family Engagement Work Group.** Residents highlighted the summer programming, enrichment activities, and other community events hosted by faith-based organizations as valuable assets that strengthen social connection and concrete support. The Community and Family Engagement Work Group should explore opportunities to partner with these organizations to increase Ascend's visibility and presence in the community, including tabling at existing events and integrating Ascend information into established community programming. In July 2026, CPL facilitated a co-design session with youth and adults to understand the characteristics of a community hub. Participants identified faith-based organizations as community hubs that are trusted, welcoming and frequently utilized. This is an important insight for the Ascend system as it continues to promote community and family engagement activities, create opportunities for informal and formal information sharing, and build a network of affiliated partners committed to serving families prenatal through career.
    - **Strengthen connections between faith-based organizations and Ascend's family navigation infrastructure.** Residents identified faith-based organizations as trusted sources of information and support for meeting basic needs. The Family Navigation Work Group, in collaboration with the Partner Engagement Work Group, should initiate conversations with 2-3 initial faith-based leaders to explore formal affiliation and opportunities for sustained collaboration. These partnerships could elevate the services and resources faith-based organizations already provide, strengthen connections to Ascend's network of supports, and increase awareness of family navigation processes and referral pathways across the system.

# Engaging & Partnering with Faith-Based Organizations

***Childhood Prosperity Lab & North Hartford Ascend***



## CHILDHOOD PROSPERITY LAB

Childhood Prosperity Lab (CPL) 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.

CPL 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.

## NORTH HARTFORD ASCEND

North Hartford Ascend (Ascend) is a prenatal-to-career family navigation system designed 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.

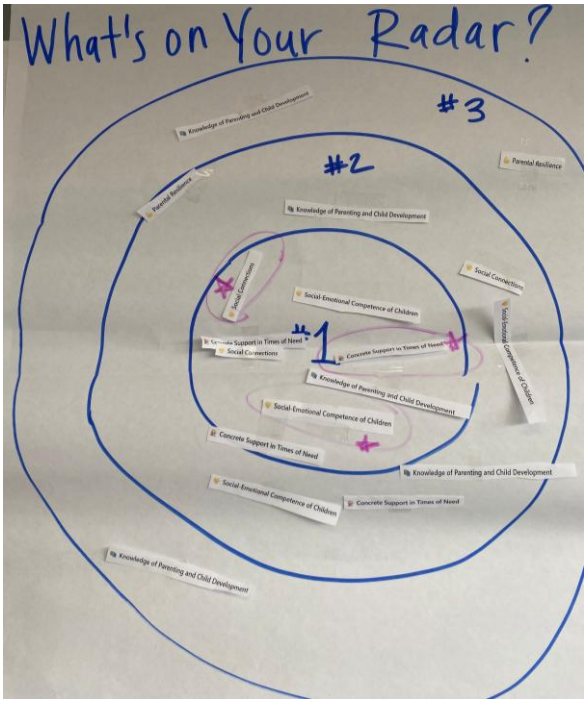
## PROJECT OVERVIEW & SCOPE OF PARTNERSHIP

North Hartford Ascend and Childhood Prosperity Lab are two initiatives of Connecticut Children's. The infrastructure of North Hartford Ascend is supported by a shared governance framework and range of community and family engagement activities, including co-design sessions.

## OUR APPROACH

### *Session Location and Structure*

Sessions were facilitated at Parker Memorial Community Center. The session was 1.5-hours, running from 5:30pm to 7pm and followed CPL's common format: networking, dinner from 5:30pm to 6:00pm, followed by HCD activities and co-design from 6:00pm to 7:00pm. The session concluded with a brief wrap-up, reflection and incentive distribution.




### *Incentives*

Participant received a $50 Amazon gift card for participating in the session. A meal from a local small business was provided.

### *The Session*

The session was thematically informed by recommendations from service providers connected to the Ascend system and residents in the community. The session was an opportunity to hear from youth and adults about their experiences with faith-based organizations, understand the assets faith-based organizations provide to the community, and generate ideas for how to engage faith-based organizations in the North Hartford Ascend system. Table 1 summarizes the HCD methodologies deployed. A total of two youth and three adults participated.

*Table 1: Session 1 HCD Methodologies, Definitions, and Purpose*

| HCD Method | Definition | Purpose |
|---|---|---|
| Stakeholder Mapping | A methodology for seeing a system as a whole to reorient a team's approach. By asking questions like *Who is involved? What do they care about? How much influence do they have?* we ensure that they people served will be considered throughout the design effort (LUMA, 2026). | Identify faith-based organizations in the community and inventory the kinds of services they provide across social drivers of health. |
| Creative Matrix | A methodology for generative and open-ended brainstorming (LUMA, 2026). | Understand the assets of faith-based organizations from a resident and community perspective. |
| What's on Your Radar? | A methodology for providing a template where people can organize items within a given scope based on how important or relevant, they consider them to be (LUMA, 2026). | Understand which protective factors (i.e., parental resilience, social connection, concrete support, knowledge of parenting and child development, social emotional competence of children) faith-based organizations strengthen the most through programming and services. |
| Statement Starters | Statement starters jump start discussions toward solving the right problem. Statement starters encourage restating problems as invitations for exploration (LUMA, 2026). | Explore how North Hartford Ascend and Faith Based Organizations might partner to ensure all families have what they need to thrive in the North Hartford Promise Zone. |

***Key takeaways from the session include:***

- Faith-based organizations foster social connections by offering activities to the community that are fun. Families shared that some institutions offer free piano lessons to kids, Double Dutch, and art activities.
- Faith-based organizations serve as a concrete support by offering families support with basic needs including clothes and coats during the holidays, haircuts, food, and other necessities that contribute to health and wellness, as well as resources to navigate everyday life such as applying for a passport.
- Residents are interested in learning about different cultures and faith in the community and enjoy participating in events that are hosted by different places of worship including temples, mosques, churches and other entities.
- North Hartford Ascend and faith-based organizations might partner on hosting back-to-school events specifically given the educational goals of Ascend and the backpack and school supply drives faith-based organizations run.
- North Hartford Ascend might increase visibility of programs, services and resources available at faith-based organizations through their marketing and communications channels.

## FEEDBACK & IMPACT

At the end of the session, participants were asked to provide their feedback through a quality and satisfaction survey. A total of four responses were documented.

Of the total feedback collected:

- **100%** strongly agree or agree that they felt a sense of community, a protective factor for social connection.
- **100%** strongly agree or agree that there was ample opportunity for participation.
- **100%** strongly agree or agree that the activities were interactive and engaging.
- **100%** are interested in future opportunities to participate again.

The following anecdotes were collected from residents and community:

- *“It was really nice I had fun learning.”*
- *“Very good and engaging.”*

## RECOMMENDED CITATION

Anderson, A., Rose, J., Sawant, M., Sowell, A. (2026). *Engaging & Partnering with Faith-Based Organizations.* Connecticut Children's Office for Community Child Health.

## ACKNOWLEDGMENT

This report was created by Connecticut Children's Childhood Prosperity Lab and North Hartford Ascend. This document was developed with support of the U.S. Department of Education Promise Neighborhoods Grant Program.

## 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

- **North Hartford Ascend Website:** Home - North Hartford Ascend
- **Family Navigation Email:** *ascend@thevillage.org*
- **North Hartford Ascend Instagram:** @northhartfordascend
- **North Hartford Ascend Facebook:** North Hartford Ascend

## APPENDIX

***Appendix A:*** The flyer that was developed to market the session, designed with youth recommendations and feedback from June 2026.




## Building Bridges: Faith, Family & North Hartford

Meals & gift cards provided!

**We want to hear from youth and caregivers in our community!**

- **Share** what faith-based organizations mean to our community.
- **Explore** faith-based organizations to **connect with** and build relationships with.
- **Imagine** new ways to **build strong partnerships** with faith-based organizations.

Monday September 14 5:30-7 PM

Parker Memorial Community Center

Register