

NEIGHBORHOOD GATHERING PLACE

A Multicultural Center



REPORT & RECOMMENDATIONS



INTRODUCTION

Many recent immigrants and refugees are making Hartford their new home. The city's Asylum Hill Neighborhood, located adjacent to and west of downtown, has welcomed large numbers of these new arrivals. Currently, 30% of the resident population is made up of immigrants and refugees who have moved into and/or have been resettled in the neighborhood. In response, the Asylum Hill Neighborhood Association (AHNA), which is comprised of representatives of the residents, businesses, faith communities, and institutions in the neighborhood, collaborated with the Hartford Public Library on the *We Belong Asylum Hill* initiative. In May of 2013, through this initiative, recent immigrants and long-term residents formed the AHNA Welcoming Committee, which supports new arrivals' transition to living in Hartford, helps them to feel at home, and creates opportunities for them to become involved in community activities.

During the summer and fall of 2013, the Hartford, a national insurance corporation located in Asylum Hill, contracted with the Harwood Initiative for Public Innovation to prepare a report on the quality of life in the neighborhood. Numerous Asylum Hill resident interviews were conducted by Harwood and the report was issued in October of 2013. A major finding of the report was that residents felt isolated and disconnected. In the interviews, many residents voiced their desire "to be able to go out from their homes and workplaces to meet, socialize, and work with others in the neighborhood". However, they indicated to the interviewers that there was a lack of settings in the area in which neighbors could gather for social, civic, and cross-cultural activities. This lack was cited as a contributing factor to the residents' feelings of isolation. It was suggested that a multi-cultural center, located in Asylum Hill, could be a key way to address this problem.

Together, AHNA, its Welcoming Committee, and the Hartford Public Library agreed to undertake a community engagement process to determine if a multi-cultural center would be an asset to the neighborhood and, if so, what activities might take place there and how residents might go about making the center a reality. The Hartford Public Library contracted with two facilitators, James Boucher and Linda Bayer, to assist AHNA and HPL to design and implement the community engagement process. The process was funded through a grant provided by Welcoming America, a national organization that promotes mutual respect and cooperation between foreign-born and native-born Americans.

More than 150 residents participated in the community engagement process and the conclusion was that a neighborhood gathering place – a multicultural center - should be developed in Asylum Hill. This report describes the process that was undertaken over the course of four months and the opinions and ideas expressed by the participants. It further sets forth the recommendations agreed to by the participants and adopted by the Welcoming Committee. The recommendations contain both an outline of the activities and services to be provided as well as a series of steps to be undertaken to bring the center to fruition.

II. COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT PROCESS

A planning process was developed which would not only address the question of whether there was a need in the neighborhood for a multicultural center, but which would increase the likelihood of sustainability and long-term impact if an initiative to create a center was undertaken. It was decided that there would be an initial meeting for all Asylum Hill residents where the process would be explained and begun. Residents would then have the opportunity to participate in one of a series of focus groups to give their opinions on whether a neighborhood center was needed and to give input on why, how, and where a neighborhood gathering place could be established. To ease communication, the groups were organized by age and language groups: youth, Arabic and Middle Eastern languages, Bhutanese and Nepalese, African languages, and Karen. (As the process was implemented, it was enhanced by adding a discussion as part of a regular monthly AHNA neighborhood meeting and a focus group at Capitol View Apartments, which has a large Indian population.) On-site interpretation would be provided where necessary. The results of the initial meeting and the focus groups would be shared at a dinner/celebration in mid-November and a written report of the findings of these efforts would be provided to the Welcoming Committee, the Asylum Hill Neighborhood Association, and the Hartford Public Library.

At each session, the facilitators invited attendees to introduce themselves, described the engagement process, presented information on multi-cultural centers in other parts of the country, asked participants to share their experiences with community gathering places in their native countries, and encouraged discussion on how a neighborhood center might best be structured and utilized. Participant input was reflected on flip charts and later transcribed. Below is a brief description of each group discussion that was part of the community engagement process.

Process Launch

The community engagement process was launched on September 16, 2014. More than fifty (50) Asylum Hill residents gathered at the Lincoln Culinary Institute for dinner and brainstorming about what they envisioned in a neighborhood gathering place. The international diversity of Hartford's population was well represented with attendees from the Ivory Coast, Ghana, Togo, Cameroon, Nigeria, Peru, Ethiopia, Burma, Thailand, Bhutan, Nepal, and Albania, as well as the United States. Participants enthusiastically generated a long list of possible uses for a communal gathering place, including a helping center for homework, a location for the elderly to congregate, a kitchen for preparing meals, spaces for studying, sports, cultural and arts events, dance classes, employment services, English and computer classes, community theater, and simply relaxing and visiting.



The group also discussed the steps that would need to be taken to make the center successful and sustainable, such as identifying the stakeholders, developing a mission statement, creating by-laws, determining how the center would be financed and supported, and who would operate the center.

Arabic and Middle East Focus Group

On September 23rd, at the offices of the Urban League of Greater Hartford, residents from the Arabic-speaking community met and shared their opinions and ideas on the concept of a diverse community center. They agreed there was a need for the center. They identified the following desired activities: English classes, cooking classes, job training, driver's license training, and information about medical, financial, and housing services. The discussion also revealed other concerns of the residents, such as their current living conditions and lack of awareness of resources available to newcomers.

Bhutanese and Nepalese Focus Group

On October 1st, at the headquarters of Connecticut Public Television, the Bhutanese and Nepalese community met to share their ideas and opinions. The main theme that arose among the attendees was that of having a center with adequate space. They would like to see a large gathering space where celebrations and traditional ceremonies could be held. Residents shared that, while they greatly value maintaining their cultural identity and celebrating special traditions, they also appreciate that a neighborhood center would bring people together from diverse backgrounds and would encourage new friendships and learning about one another's cultures. Overall, residents would like to see a safe, accessible center offering such programs as after-school tutoring, citizenship classes, and cultural events.

AHNA Monthly Meeting

As a part of the regular monthly meeting of the Asylum Hill Neighborhood Association on October 6th, a discussion was held on the benefits of creating a neighborhood gathering place and the types of activities that might occur there. It was noted that having a safe place where everyone – newcomers and longer-term residents - can be woven into the fabric of the community is an important goal. The types of activities identified included producing and selling crafts, learning about and maintaining one's culture, recreation and education for children, access to information and services, e.g. health care, citizenship, learning about American culture, cooking and sharing meals, art classes and exhibits, meetings, and visiting each other. It was noted that there are a number of nonprofits in the neighborhood and it should be determined what services and space are currently available before creating new space.

African Nations Focus Group

Residents who have moved to Asylum Hill from the many African countries came together on October 9th, at the Urban League offices. Attendees expressed the need for a space with large rooms for meetings and art exhibits and a safe space outside for sports and tent festivals. They reported that they have rented spaces in the past for activities, but they have been expensive and not entirely adequate. The residents currently have multiple organizations that are meeting, including the Togo Association of Connecticut, the Nigerian Women's Association, the Guyana Community, and the Liberian Community, and these groups are in need of space for



their meetings, events, festivals, and holiday celebrations. The residents indicated that they are very involved in the betterment of their community and they believe that a neighborhood place would also address safety concerns. The participants felt strongly that a gathering place must be inclusive of all cultures. They stated, “If we don’t come together, we will never know how alike we truly are.”

Karen Focus Group

The Karen residents met on October 15th, at the Hartford Public Library Mark Twain Branch to share their ideas about a neighborhood center in Asylum Hill. They agreed on the need for a central place where the community can go to seek help and assistance and which could also be used as a venue for ceremonies and celebrations. The residents expressed their need for a place to learn English, to learn how the “system” works, and how to find medical and dental care, job training, or a job. They also expressed a desire to learn about American culture as well as to preserve and express their own culture. The center might also be a place where they could connect to the local business economy to sell their crafts and goods and create jobs. Another concern expressed was the safety of their children and their need for a place to play soccer and other sports.

Youth Focus Group

Asylum Hill youth met on October 21st and shared their needs and desires. They discussed the need for more activities such as basketball, soccer, a pool for swimming, and outdoor space for other games. Because many of the children have come from refugee camps in which they were given an English education, they can communicate in English but have some difficulty with American colloquialisms. Therefore, they would like to have a greater understanding of the American English language. They would appreciate having access to tutoring in their schoolwork, as they see education as their way to succeed in America and most plan to attend college. They would like to have college preparatory classes and someone who can guide them in finding answers to their questions concerning career choices.

Capitol View Apartment Residents

About 20 individuals, most of them from India, attended a focus group at their home in Capitol View Apartments on October 30th. Many of these residents have come to Hartford as a result of being recruited by corporations for long-term, temporary jobs. They indicated that space for events, such as festivals and other celebrations, was important to them. They suggested that a neighborhood center should be a safe place to get together and should include a welcoming program for newcomers, space and programs for children to play and learn, the opportunity to take English classes, space for workshops, dance, music, arts, crafts, cross-cultural education, and movie nights, and culinary training in an on-site kitchen.

Update Meeting and Celebration

On November 19th, the community met in a Thanksgiving celebration at the Mark Twain Branch of the Hartford Public Library. After dinner, the facilitators shared a summary of the ideas generated



at all of the group discussions. The consensus in all groups was that a neighborhood gathering place or multicultural center should be developed in the Asylum Hill neighborhood for the benefit of everyone, including long term residents and new arrivals, including native born Americans, immigrants, and refugees. The center should be, above all, a place for creating community. It should have space for celebrations, children's activities, cultural events, art of all kinds, adult learning, assistance in accessing services, help in finding a job, community meetings, opportunities for civic and political engagement, and socializing with one another. The facilitators also recommended short- and long-term action steps that AHNA and its Welcoming Committee could take in order to bring the creation of a neighborhood multicultural gathering place to fruition. Attendees gave feedback on the findings and were assured that their input would be incorporated into the final recommendations.

Welcoming Committee

The final recommendations were presented to the Welcoming Committee on December 11, 2014 and adopted unanimously. Committee members then attended and spoke in favor of creating an Asylum Hill multicultural center at the Hartford Court of Common Council's public comment period on January 12, 2015. The recommendations were distributed to the Council members and the process of developing the recommendations was explained. At the invitation of the Welcoming Committee, members of the Commission on Refugee and Immigrant Affairs also attended the session and spoke in support of the work and recommendations of the Welcoming Committee.



III. RECOMMENDATIONS

Core Recommendations

1. A **Neighborhood Gathering Place**, *servicing as a multicultural center*, is needed in Asylum Hill to support the empowerment of residents and encourage connections between long-term residents, new arrivals (including native born Americans, immigrants, and refugees), businesses, nonprofits, and institutions. The Neighborhood Gathering Place should be a multi-cultural home for events and activities of varying types and sizes, including services that open up greater opportunities for center participants. Types of activities are listed below.
 - a. **Creating Community:** A place where everyone learns from each other, shares with one-another, and knows each other.
 - b. **Celebrations:** A place that can accommodate large gatherings, at no or low cost, by groups, families, and immigrant communities for celebrations such as festivals, weddings, and religious or other holidays.

- c. **Children:** A place that contains indoor and outdoor space where children are safe and secure and can participate in a variety of activities, including sports, games, studying, learning, and technology.
- d. **Culture:** A place where immigrant communities can express and promote their culture and where they can assure that the culture continues to be understood and valued by their children.
- e. **The Arts:** A place where a wide variety of visual and performing arts flourish, through classes, exhibits, practices, and performances.
- f. **Critical Services:** A place where residents in need of services (e.g. health, financial, child care, transportation, etc.) may either access them on-site or obtain referrals to such services that are available in the community.
- g. **Adult Learning:** A place where residents may take classes in a variety of subjects, such as technology, English, citizenship, orientation to American culture, access to computers, and navigating everyday life (e.g. understanding the school system, learning to drive)
- h. **Socializing:** A place where individuals and families can get together to meet other people, share ideas, or eat a meal together and where groups might gather at any time of day, e.g. women may meet in the morning, children may drop in after school, or men and women may gather in the evening.
- i. **Immigrant Assistance:** A place where recent immigrants may get answers to questions, solve problems, and obtain referrals to other organizations.
- j. **Jobs:** A place where individuals may obtain referrals to jobs and job skill training.
- k. **Meetings:** A place where groups of neighborhood residents and neighborhood organizations may hold meetings, discussion groups, and planning sessions.
- l. **Civic & Political Engagement:** A place where residents can learn effective ways to be involved in the city's community, civic, and political life.

In filling volunteer and paid positions in the development and operation of the center, priority will be given to neighborhood residents. Free access to the center by the community will also be a priority.

- 2. The **Neighborhood Gathering Place** should be developed in the Asylum Hill neighborhood, with priority consideration given to a site along the Farmington Avenue corridor. A number of development options have been suggested, and the most suitable of these are, ***in order of priority***:
 - a. An existing underutilized or vacant building that has the capacity to be converted to the Gathering Place,
 - b. Co-location at an existing non-profit, faith-based, or other institution, where sufficient room exists to locate the Gathering Place, or
 - c. New building construction

Short Term/Immediate Action Steps

3. A sponsoring committee shall be created, composed of Asylum Hill residents, including both long-time residents (including immigrants and U.S.-born individuals), and new arrivals (including voluntary immigrants, refugees, and U.S. born individuals), as well as AHNA leaders. This committee will create a Governance Committee.
4. The Governance Committee will carry out the following tasks and report to AHNA:
 - a. develop a management structure for the Gathering Place
 - b. oversee the site selection process
 - c. oversee building design,
 - d. support the development of funding, and
 - e. serve as liaison and ombudsman to the City's Commission on Refugee and Immigrant Affairs.
5. The Governance Committee shall support the creation of a preliminary design, including space utilization requirements and cost estimates.
6. The Governance Committee shall prioritize programs and activities outlined in Section 1 above and begin implementation of several programs or activities in existing neighborhood space while planning and design for a facility is occurring.
7. The Governance Committee shall bring issues needing immediate advocacy to AHNA and/or the Commission on Refugee and Immigrant Affairs for attention and resolution.

Long Term Action Steps

8. The Governance Committee shall also consist of a group of public and private funders to support the financial plan and resources for the planning and development of the Neighborhood Gathering Place and for ongoing operation of the center. It is recommended that this group include the Mayor (or designee), Council President (or designee), State Representative (or designee), State Senator (or designee), representatives of Aetna, the Hartford, and St. Francis Hospital, and two representatives of the AHNA Executive Committee, and the Welcoming Committee.

Summary

A collaboration of the *We Belong Asylum Hill* initiative, between the Asylum Hill Neighborhood Association (AHNA), the Hartford Public Library, the AHNA Welcoming Committee and other stakeholders, engaged more than 150 residents participating in a community engagement process that concluded with a recommendation that a "Neighborhood Gathering Place" – a multicultural center - should be developed in Asylum Hill. It was determined that such a multi-cultural center would be an asset to the neighborhood with a diverse and comprehensive range of activities and services that would take place, as identified earlier in this report.