

EARL EXUM COMMUNITY RESOURCE CENTER AT ASYLUM HILL CONGREGATIONAL CHURCH
Frequently Asked Questions (FAQs)

What is the genesis of the plan to create a community resource center at AHCC?

The lower-level or garden-level space of our church building became unusable due to extensive flooding from severe rainstorms in 2021. We have remediated the mold that made it unsafe to use the lower level, and we have successfully tackled the underlying causes of flooding and water infiltration by improving exterior drainage and enhancing building envelope waterproofing to protect against future weather events.

But we decided not to stop there. Reflecting AHCC's mission, core values, and historic commitment to engaging with and supporting the Asylum Hill neighborhood, and in response to a specific and inspirational challenge from our Senior Minister, we decided to seize the opportunity to go beyond remediation and restoration.

In September 2023, Rev. Erica Thompson called together a group of ten AHCC volunteers and staff members to explore how best to re-purpose the largely vacant garden-level space (including the former Thrift Shop) in order to do something new. In boldly reimagining how AHCC connects with and serves our Asylum Hill neighbors, the group was challenged to discern what God might be imagining for AHCC at this time. *What is God calling this wonderful church in the heart of the city with a heart for the city to do next? In what new ways can our building be an asset for ministry and a space to love our neighbors and live out the gospel throughout the week?*

Thus began a months-long visioning process that culminated in a set of recommendations presented first to the Board of Deacons and then shared with the AHCC community at our June 2, 2024 annual meeting.

Why a community resource center?

At its very first meeting, the Task Force agreed it would develop ideas and recommendations within the framework of a set of guiding principles. The group affirmed that any future use of the garden-level space should:

- connect to AHCC's values as a faith community and to identified needs and priorities of the neighborhood;
- provide opportunities to engage current church members and opportunities to connect with our neighbors; and
- serve as a model for other faith-based institutions.

The Task Force also was committed that its recommendations would reflect a thorough assessment of what the local community needs while also taking into consideration what organizations are already doing and providing—so that whatever AHCC might do with its garden-level space would fill identified service gaps rather than be duplicative of services already available or being planned by others. During the visioning and planning phase of this project, our outreach and the data we gathered made clear that Asylum Hill residents and their families have many needs—some of which are being met by current service providers, others of which are not being met fully enough, and some of which are not being met at all. It also was clear that some of the currently available services are not as well-known, as accessible, or as coordinated as they could be.

In May 2024, members of the task force shared their recommendations with the board of deacons and then with the congregation, and they received enthusiastic affirmation of a plan to convert what were primarily corridors, storage rooms, and a former daycare area into an adaptable community space that meets the diverse needs of our neighbors. By transforming AHCC's unused lower-level space into a welcoming hub, we could help

neighbors in Asylum Hill access essential resources and find the support they need to build a stronger, more connected community.

What is the vision for this new Center at AHCC?

In a nutshell, the underlying vision, or motivation, is to improve the quality of life and social mobility of Asylum Hill residents by creating a safe, welcoming and well-equipped space for programs, services, and activities that fill identified service gaps; align with priorities identified by the City and residents; engage and connect Hartford-area nonprofit partners; and ultimately yield improved outcomes for residents.

From the beginning, we have envisioned that the Community Resource Center would house a variety of services and programs that will directly or indirectly improve quality of life, build community and human capacity, and help level the playing field in ways that promote equitable human/social outcomes and beneficial economic outcomes.

Is creating a community resource center aligned with our core mission as a church?

AHCC has long been known for supporting its neighbors and fostering a spirit of hope in the Asylum Hill community, in addition to serving the spiritual needs of its members for 160 years.

- In the 1970s and 80s, church members helped start Hartford Interval House for abused women, Loaves and Fishes to feed the hungry, and ConnectiKids to link Hartford students with dedicated tutors.
- In the 1990s, AHCC launched a mentoring and tuition assistance program to help sixth graders in West Middle School get into college.
- In the 2000s, AHCC provided money and volunteers to help Habitat for Humanity and NINA (a non-profit neighborhood housing development group) build eight owner-occupied homes next door to the church for lower-income households. It also launched and housed the School for Young Children on Asylum Hill.
- In 2014, the church raised \$170K to start up and help run a volunteer center at West Middle School.
- More recently, during the pandemic, AHCC began offering free community meals every Sunday to 100 neighbors and serving as a heating or cooling shelter in extreme weather.

“A church in the heart of the city with a heart for the city,” AHCC offers a range of community programs, including food assistance, youth outreach, educational programs, and resources for low-income individuals and families. In partnership with local organizations, we have initiated projects aimed at reducing homelessness, enhancing access to education, and providing safe spaces for community gatherings. Annually, we support over 1,000 residents through these initiatives, providing meals, shelter resources, and educational workshops that directly address the needs of Hartford’s underserved population.

The need to remediate space in the church’s lower level presented an unexpected opportunity to rethink and refresh AHCC’s longstanding commitment to loving and serving our neighbors. Creating a community resource center seemed to be both what our neighbors would want us to do and what God was calling us to do.

How will we pay for the design and redevelopment of the lower level to create a community resource center?

To cover the cost of remediating mold and making necessary improvements to prevent flooding in the future, AHCC received \$25K from insurance and \$78K from the City of Hartford; the City of Hartford funds were the result of a successful grant application submitted by AHCC in hopes of securing external funding support to augment the insurance money. The balance was paid with funds set aside each year to support capital/larger repairs.

In March of 2025 we announced that AHCC had been awarded \$3.79M through the State of Connecticut's Community Investment Fund (CIF) to support the creation of the Earl Exum Community Resource Center. Funding from the CIF grant is expected to cover fully the anticipated costs of the construction drawings and engineering expenses as well as buildout for the Community Resource Center's space (6,300 square feet), technology, and indoor and outdoor furnishings; the project budget includes a 10% contingency.

The funding was approved by the State Bond Commission as part of its sixth round of CIF grants. The Community Investment Fund, established in 2022 by Governor Ned Lamont and the Connecticut General Assembly, supports capital projects and economic development in historically underserved areas. AHCC's award is part of \$77 million in state funding distributed to 35 projects across 21 municipalities in this latest round of grants. The grant we received will allow AHCC to transform its garden level into a hub of essential services in Asylum Hill and have a transformative effect on both the neighborhood and the quality of life for its residents.

Why is it called the Earl Exum Community Resource Center at AHCC?

The Board of Deacons voted to name the Community Resource Center in honor of Earl Exum, a beloved member of our church and the wider community and AHCC's moderator at the time of his death in 2023. In weeks preceding his passing, he and Rev. Thompson had initiated conversations about whether and how AHCC might reimagine the church's lower level in such a way as to make it a manifestation of AHCC's commitment to its city and neighbors and a vibrant expression and extension of AHCC's outreach ministries.

Earl's oft-stated belief that "we work better in community than alone" has guided our plans for the Center. The deacons believed, and Earl's wife Tammy later affirmed, that the vision and goals for the Community Resource Centers are ones Earl would wholeheartedly embrace. And the project is of course deeply meaningful for Tammy herself, who shared the following statement after the CIF grant was announced:

"The last conversation Earl and I had about AHCC was centered on the vision for this project. He dreamed of it becoming a welcoming place of belonging—not just for church members, but as a vital hub for the entire Asylum Hill community and beyond. Although he will never see the Earl Exum Community Resource Center come to fruition, I am deeply honored that it bears his name, a beautiful tribute from the congregation. The generous support from the Community Investment Fund will empower AHCC to realize this vision, transforming our church into a beacon of hope and service for those who need it most. Earl would be thrilled to know that this Center will expand the church's commitment to uplifting our community."

What are our broad goals for the Center?

It is our expectation that the Community Resource Center will become a vital neighborhood hub, providing essential resources, fostering connections, and empowering residents to build a stronger, more connected, and resilient community. The Center will offer, or provide connections/referrals to, resources, programs, and professional services focusing on key areas of identified need.

Early in the visioning process, the Garden Level Task Force established certain criteria that continue to inform program planning for the space. Specifically, the Task Force recommended:

- AHCC should not create new services or become a service provider itself but rather should provide space for existing groups that are currently serving our neighbors and either need more space or are seeking to establish a more accessible presence in the Asylum Hill neighborhood.
- AHCC should continue to be (and be seen as) a welcoming place and seek to promote community engagement; therefore, our reimagined space (to include the outdoor space that currently is a

playground) should include space for community gatherings, either community-generated or AHCC-organized.

- In identifying both potential users and usages of our space, AHCC should focus on what have been traditional areas of mission-aligned activity and priority: the arts, education, and wellness (mind, body, and soul).
- In some appropriate way, AHCC should address the need for a central source of information and referral about, and coordination among, existing services for individuals and families.

We also are committed to aligning our plans for the Community Resource Center with priorities already identified – for example, in the City’s Asylum Hill Neighborhood Plan and the Asylum Hill Neighborhood Association’s 2022 strategic plan. These priorities include:

- equipping residents for improved economic self-sufficiency through training and education programs to nurture the hard and soft skills needed to access gainful employment
- a healthy, safe, and active community in Asylum Hill
- greater awareness, accessibility, and better coordination of existing services
- availability of additional services to address residents’ social, economic, and health needs

We intend for the Community Resource Center to support each of these priorities, always with a view toward removing barriers and empowering residents while avoiding service redundancy and promoting collaboration among existing providers.

What is the design plan, and how will the repurposed space be used?

We are transforming 6,300 square feet of underutilized space into a vibrant, accessible, and sustainable community hub. The renovation will prioritize flexibility, functionality, and inclusivity to accommodate a range of activities. The redesigned space will include offices that can be used on a rotating/shared basis or more permanently; large and small meeting rooms; and multi-purpose gathering spaces and communal areas that can be used by area residents and organizations alike.

We plan to renovate the interior, take advantage of the existing infrastructure, and create small offices and larger meeting areas, updating to code as required. We will relocate restrooms and a kitchen and replace the exterior playscape with a relaxing multipurpose, green gathering space. The space will include Wi-Fi and meeting technologies, ensuring that service providers and community users have access to modern tools and resources. AHCC expects adjacent outdoor space could become a regular stop for a mobile farmers’ market, a mobile library, food trucks, a community health center van, and/or other mobile providers of services and goods that residents would appreciate having easy access to.

The redesigned space will serve two key purposes: (1) providing programming, support, and gathering spaces for community members (residents and nonprofit organizations), and (2) offering flexible office and meeting space for professionals (e.g., financial advisers, immigration and housing attorneys, employment coaches, therapists, social workers) who could use the space on a shared or rotating basis and thereby establish an accessible presence in the neighborhood a few hours or days each week.

Specific programming plans are still being developed and refined based on what our Community Connections task force is learning through outreach to both residents and Hartford-area nonprofit organizations and other service providers. We already have learned that there is exciting potential for the Earl Exum Community Resource Center to add value by leveraging, complementing, augmenting, and connecting the strengths and offerings of many existing organizations.

And we certainly affirmed the need for an organization such as the EECRC to fill one particularly critical need: the need for connection. Asylum Hill residents need help connecting to existing services they may need but do not know about; and existing service providers want to connect with more residents and with each other to enhance individual effectiveness and collective impact.

What specific services will be offered and what organizations will use the space?

The church is continuing to do outreach to identify specific organizations and professionals that might need space to address areas of mutual interest, such as employment and workforce readiness, housing, education, physical and mental wellness, food insecurity, youth programming, cultural enrichment, and other human-service and community-building needs. The Community Connections task force has been in touch with local nonprofits and community-based organizations to explore—one-on-one and at a group summit meeting last October—ways to enhance and expand support for Asylum Hill residents through coordinated, collective impact. The October summit was attended by 70 people representing 40 agencies who all were eager and excited to connect and collaborate.

Most recently, these 40 organizations received a survey asking them to provide us critical input. These organizations were asked:

- What type of space can you envision your organization using in the EECRC?
- How specifically (for what purposes/types of constituent services) do you imagine using the space(s)?
- How often can you imagine using the space?
- How strong is your interest in exploring, and giving further definition to, the possibilities for new or expanded services you might provide Asylum Hill residents in the future using EECRC space?

Input we receive from these organizations, both in response to our survey and in the one-on-one conversations members of the Community Connections task force are having, will be critical as we take next steps to finalize plans for how and by whom space in the EECRC will be used and what its final design will be. As part of an ongoing process, the 40 agencies will reconvene at AHCC for a second summit later this spring or summer. A primary focus will be further developing the “hub” service-delivery concept or model.

What about the space downstairs that ConnectiKids used to rent before it moved its operations to the upper floors at AHCC? Is this space part of the EECRC?

The 3,000 square feet of space previously rented by ConnectiKids will not be part of the EECRC but rather will continue to be revenue-generating rentable space for use by a community-based organization. Last year The Village for Families & Children signed an agreement to become our next tenant and began making plans to redesign and outfit the space to serve its plans to offer training for in-home daycare providers. Unfortunately, construction costs were higher than expected, and after six months the contract with The Village ended in February.

We are actively seeking a new tenant for this space and are encouraged by the interest expressed by three organizations currently engaged in dialogue with our Community Connections task force.

Are we working with an architectural firm? How are we paying for these services?

In April 2024, AHCC secured the *pro-bono* (free) services of a local architectural firm, Maier Design Group, to document as-is conditions and create conceptual design drawings reflecting identified programming needs in ways that maximize use of existing walls and plumbing to minimize renovation costs. This engagement with architects made it possible for AHCC to arrive at construction cost estimates with a high degree of confidence.

Architectural fees associated with the next phase of the design process – finalizing the design concept and preparing construction documents – will be paid for with funds received as part of the grant AHCC received from the State of Connecticut’s Community Investment Fund (CIF).

When will construction on the EECRC begin, and when will its doors open to the community?

As a critical initial step in the redesign and construction process, the Department of Economic and Community Development (DECD), which oversees projects funded with State of Connecticut CIF grants, must appoint a project manager for our project. DECD has informed us that we should expect a project manager to be assigned any day, and certainly by mid-March. This good news, which implies final authorization to proceed, will allow AHCC to resume work with our architects. The next step with Maier Design Group is design finalization and preparation of construction drawings.

It is our hope and expectation that we will put the project out to bid, review proposals, and select a contractor this fall and begin construction in the winter. If all goes according to plan, we anticipate completing construction and celebrating a grand opening in the fall of 2027.

What will be AHCC’s financial commitment once the Center is open and operational?

AHCC will be responsible for all operating costs, including utilities and maintenance as well as salary for at least one staff member.

We do not intend to cover these costs by adding them to the existing AHCC operating budget. From the beginning our intention has been to raise approximately \$3M for a special endowment fund that will generate investment returns and sufficient income for us to cover all EECRC operating costs. Last year we took steps with the Hartford Gives Foundation (formerly Hartford Foundation for Public Giving) to establish a new and separate EECRC endowment fund. All funds raised once our campaign is launched will be deposited directly into that endowment fund, income from which fund annual operations in the Center on an ongoing basis.

We are currently in the process of planning and preparing to launch our fundraising campaign in the fall. Success will depend on generous support from individuals and institutions that embrace the vital mission of the EECRC and understand that their investment in the Center will generate enormous returns as “measured” in social and human impact. Based on many factors, some historical and some current, we are optimistic that members of our congregation and the wider community will embrace the opportunity to have an impact by donating generously to the EECRC fundraising campaign—while continuing to support AHCC’s operating costs through participation in the annual every-member canvass.

More information about how to support the EECRC fundraising campaign will be shared in the fall, but it is not too soon to begin imagining and planning now for how you might want and be able to participate!

Will AHCC members have opportunities to volunteer once the Center is open?

Yes! As noted in response to an earlier question, several guiding principles informed the visioning process that led to plans to repurpose the garden-level space as a community resource center. One of those principles was that our repurposed space should, among other things, provide opportunities to *engage current church members and opportunities to connect with our neighbors*.

Many of the community-based organizations that have been in conversation with us about the potential to use EECRC space to advance their missions and connect directly with Asylum Hill residents will need volunteers. This will create new and exciting opportunities for AHCC parishioners to become meaningfully engaged.

In addition to the helpful dialogue with area nonprofits, members of the Community Connections task force are also meeting with each of the ministry teams at AHCC to explore ideas and gather insights about ways to connect their work and their volunteers with the work we expect will be happening under EECRC auspices. Anyone who is interested in connecting to one of AHCC's ministry teams now is encouraged to explore the array of options available by visiting the web site, where you can learn about the teams and sign up if there seems to be a good fit: [Ministry Teams](#).