

Changing the Narrative: North Hartford, CT Community-Based Asset Mapping

In August 2020, Advocacy to Legacy launched a community-based **asset mapping** project to document what residents of North Hartford consider positive community and neighborhood strengths. The information collected will be used as the foundation to plan, to build and to grow targeted communities economically, socially, culturally and physically. Our goal was to gather community and neighborhood responses and then to codify and share what North Hartford residents see as well as how residents feel about their city.

North Hartford was defined as the areas covered by the Blue Hills, Clay Arsenal, Northeast and Upper Albany Neighborhood Revitalization Zones. The Meadows and Windsor Ave were not included. A portion of Downtown North (DoNo) was included as it is not part of an existing NRZ. Yet, our partners wanted to learn and hear how the DONO community was perceived by the North Hartford communities.

The **processes** used to collect information were walking tours (students walking the neighborhoods), focus groups, interviews and conversations (individual and group).

When outsiders -- non-Hartford residents -- spoke of Hartford, they talked about it as the capital-of Connecticut, but these non-residents also mentioned the city's challenges: poverty, crime, trash and blight. However, when Advocacy to Legacy canvassed residents about Hartford from an asset mapping perspective, their responses were among these:

The number one asset identified in North Hartford is the people. People spoke of the resiliency, creativity, industriousness, pride, determination and love that many residents have for the city. As an example, they mentioned Joan, who in her 90s still cuts her grass and weeds her garden so her home looks nice. A second example of city and neighborhood pride was a story about Willie, who is seen daily cleaning up his block on Blue Hills Avenue. They talked about people like Robert, who sells the Hartford Courant every Sunday morning on Coventry Street corner and of the many young people who are trying to make a difference for themselves and families by attending school and seeking to learn.

Residents talked about past heroes from the community like educator, Walter "Doc" Hurley, who was commemorated with the statue at Woodland and Ridgefield Streets; and Chief John Stewart, the first Black Fire Chief in the City of Hartford; and Collin Bennet, a realtor who helped hundreds of POC purchase their first home in the 1960's and 70's, or Julio Cesar Lozada, a youth who died when a vacant garage collapsed on him. A tragedy which led to the hiring of the first Spanish/ Latino firefighters. Residents talked of current community assets like Patricia Kelley, Founder of The Ebony Horsewomen or Dr. Andrew Woods of Hartford Communities That Care and the work the organizations do to support residents.

Residents talked about the diverse communities with many cultures, especially expressed in restaurants and Houses of Worship. Main Street (really called Restaurant Row) houses over 30 restaurants, with West Indian, African American, Spanish/Latino, Chinese and Vegetarian menus.

A significant number of Churches and Houses of Worship have a long-standing presence in the communities. Each represents a host of religions and religious denominations. The North end is also home to several cemeteries, including many of Jewish denomination cemeteries reflecting the city's past residents and their community history and migration.

The vibrant entrepreneurial spirit – whether selling DVDs or clothes from the trunk of a car or the many hair salons and barbershops – is alive and well in the North end. New businesses are opening. Examples are: Tzedeo Spices in Bravo Plaza or Do It All clothing store on Blue Hills Avenue. 3580 Main Street is the home to many small entrepreneurs and there is much hope for the newly developed Swift Factory. We have established businesses such as Tinker Insurance and Realty (Albany Avenue) or Mr. Pizza (Blue Hills Avenue) which have been operating since the 1970's. Residents have long used the supermarkets, corner stores or bodegas as their main food source. ACA has been on North Main Street since the 80s. Bravo Supermarket has served the community for many years, also. Many of the smaller establishments cater to specific ethnicities as each is bringing a taste of "home" to the residents.

Hair salons, barbershops and nail salons are staples along the main streets in North Hartford. When asked why there were so many, the response was, no matter the economy, people always want to look and feel good. There is a level of loyalty to the hairdresser or barber

Hartford has beautiful homes and architecture. Blue Hills area is known for homeownership (62%) and its many single-family homes - from the small ranches on Granby Street to the beautiful distinctive homes on Canterbury and Ridgefield Streets. Upper Albany has many multi-family homes – many 3-3-3 (3 family, 3 floors, 3 bedrooms each) still showcasing original stained-glass windows. Clay Arsenal is known for its "box houses" and older homes that could be listed on the historic registry with carriage houses in back. The Northeast houses several senior housing complexes.

Gardens (floral or vegetable) in the front and backyards of homes not only bring beauty but also nutrition and exercise to the families that tend them.

North Hartford is home to the jewel of the city – Keney Park. It is the largest city park in New England with its many playing fields (cricket, football, soccer), basketball courts, playgrounds and playscapes. It has a pond stocked with fish, a beautiful fountain for viewing and a swimming pool, a renowned golf course with restaurant and many acres of land for picnics and outdoor activities. Smaller parks are scattered throughout the city. They bring nature and play areas to residents.

There are many cultural and social organizations – reflecting the interests and heritage of the residents. The most prominent is Artists' Collective known for producing or nurturing some of the best jazz musicians in the country. Many of the social organizations in the North end reflect the West Indian Community which is the largest immigrant group in the city and mostly settled in the Blue Hills and Upper Albany neighborhoods. One example is the West Indian Social Club (celebrating 80 years).

There are many non-profit resources such as the Women’s League (daycare), YMCA on Albany Avenue (fitness, education, training), the Blue Hills Civic Association now known as Building Hartford through Community Action on Homestead Ave, Upper Albany Neighborhood Collaborative (UANC) on Albany Ave, The Northwest Boys & Girls Club on Nahum Drive, Peacebuilders on Main St and Mt Sinai Rehabilitation Center at Tower and Blue Hills Avenue.

One of the best things about Hartford is its public transportation system and roads. Albany Avenue (Route 44), Blue Hills Avenue and Main Street are main arteries that can take you through Hartford to surrounding towns (West Hartford, Bloomfield, Windsor). Albany Avenue is being renovated – streets paved, sidewalks laid, and trees planted. City busses (and their covered bus stops) are big assets that meet the needs of those who use public transportation.

Several **media news companies** inform the community about news, events and activities. Print media sources include: Inquiring News, The West Indian American News, The Northend Agents newspapers and The Jamaica, Inc. magazine. Radio media include: WQTQ FM (broadcasting from Weaver High School on Granby Street) and BUSY Radio on Main St.

There are **hidden gems** throughout the city: The Cricket Hall of Fame (First in the World), Free libraries (in front of homes and churches) and the Keney Park Sustainability Project providing agriculture awareness and ways toward teaching good nutrition to our communities.

There are also artwork displays (murals/graffiti), many reflecting the residents’ feelings, thoughts, culture and values while some just support businesses.

There were a few **surprises** found from these conversations. Check cashing places were considered assets because of the various services they provide (check cashing, purchase of money orders, utility bill payment centers, the sale of bus passes, a place to re-load a credit card). Also, a distinction was made between “prepared foods” and “fast foods”. Prepared food restaurants were an asset because they provided meals that tasted good, were filling, were served quickly and at a low cost. Popeyes and Kentucky Fried Chicken were included in the group, but not McDonalds. Another surprise was the Homestead Ave & Walnut Street corridor. Few of the many businesses/organizations located on those streets were mentioned even though they have been there many years (Salvation Army, Tires Unlimited).

“There but not there” are what were labeled the organizations/buildings that are in the community that were mentioned because they were there, and had a large footprint, but residents did not really feel they were integrated into the neighborhoods. Some of these were the University of Hartford, Mt Sinai Rehabilitation Center and The Chrysalis Center.

Significant Survey Responses that were Learned:

- Residents have a **wealth of knowledge** and are willing to share the history of their neighborhoods and the changes through the years. Many neighborhoods have residents who have lived in them over 35+ years.

- Communities have **different levels of engagement** with their residents. Events held such as community clean ups, cook-outs and walks, foster a sense of community and pride.
- **Neighborhoods are siloed.** People stay within their neighborhoods and do not walk or know what is going on outside their neighborhoods.
- **Residents have a unique perspective** of their neighborhoods based on lived experiences that outsiders would not have. It is the resident's opinion that non-residents are limited because of their external experiences and preconceived perceptions. An example of this is how check cashing establishments are viewed.

We hope this summary and the accompanying documents will be the starting point of a discussion on how to maintain and strengthen assets that currently exist in North Hartford. Further discussion should help the residents, community organizations, the NRZs, the City of Hartford identify more areas and resources in the hope of growing or developing neighborhoods and communities based on residents and their participation with surveys and data collection that offer "grass roots" perspectives.

This work was initiated by HartfordNEXT, the coalition of Hartford's 13 Neighborhood Revitalization Zone organizations and sponsored by United Way of Central and Northeastern Connecticut.

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