

Creating a Safer, More Connected Asylum Hill

How to Accelerate and Deepen Meaningful Conversations and Collaborative Efforts

Based on Community Conversations and Interviews
with People Who Live and Work in Asylum Hill

By The Harwood Institute for Public Innovation
in partnership with United Way of Central and Northeastern Connecticut

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About the Partners

This project is a partnership between The Harwood Institute for Public Innovation, and United Way of Central and Northeastern Connecticut. The project was commissioned and underwritten by The Hartford.

About the Harwood Institute for Public Innovation

The Harwood Institute is a national nonprofit that teaches and coaches people and organizations to solve pressing problems and change how communities work together. Our approach establishes the framework and tools to move communities forward. With a proven, 25-year track record, the Institute's practice has spread to thousands of communities across the U.S. and more than 40 countries world-wide.

About United Way of Central and Northeastern Connecticut

United Way is focused on advancing the common good by creating opportunities for a better life for all. Our community goals are based on the building blocks for a good life: a quality education that leads to a stable job, enough income to support a family through retirement, and good health. We work toward these goals by bringing people together to give, advocate and volunteer around a common vision of creating positive change and long-lasting results.

About The Hartford

With more than 200 years of expertise, The Hartford (NYSE:HIG) is a leader in property and casualty insurance, group benefits and mutual funds. The company is widely recognized for its service excellence, sustainability practices, trust and integrity. At The Hartford, we work hard every day to make a positive difference in the lives of others, from customers and agents to business partners and neighbors. Across the country our strategic focus on education, neighborhood revitalization and community support services guides our community investments. That same focus inspires our teammates who show exceptional character every day through volunteering and giving back to our communities.

Table of Contents

Introduction	Page 4
People’s Aspirations	Page 7
Key Concerns	Page 8
Strategic Questions for Further Conversation	Page 13
Thank You	Page 15

Introduction

This report has two purposes: first, to reflect the key insights learned from engaging people who live and work in Asylum Hill; and second, to help accelerate and deepen meaningful conversations and collaborative efforts to strengthen the neighborhood.

In reading this report, it is important to recognize that many individuals and groups are already hard at work in Asylum Hill. For some people and groups, their commitment to Asylum Hill goes back many years. Our hope is that this report will help to build on their good efforts.

The people who live and work in Asylum Hill want change. But not just any change. We know this because of what we heard from people who live in Asylum Hill and others connected to the neighborhood. This report lays out the directions that people believe are important to take to bring about positive change, and the conditions they hope can be created to foster that change.

Over the past six months, The Hartford and United Way of Central and Northeastern Connecticut partnered with The Harwood Institute for Public Innovation to engage a cross-section of neighborhood residents, community leaders and other stakeholders in a series of community conversations and in-depth interviews to uncover people's aspirations for the neighborhood; issues, concerns, and desires for change; and the best starting places to make progress.

The Hartford and United Way have been working with Asylum Hill residents and community groups for a number of years. During this time, the neighborhood has evolved, sometimes for the better, sometimes not. The Hartford and United Way remain committed to Asylum Hill. This engagement effort is part of their desire to better understand how they can best support the change that will benefit the neighborhood.

Three Core Messages

As you read this report, you will notice that three main themes emerge:

- 1. People who live and work in Asylum Hill want a safer, more connected community.** They want to be able to go out from their homes and workplaces to meet, socialize and work with others in the neighborhood. This all has to do with getting crime off the streets, creating safe places for interaction, and building trust – key ingredients for nurturing the kind of community they want.
- 2. Crime – or the threat of it – drives people's concerns about the neighborhood.** It undermines people's ability to come out from their homes, and it can make those who work in the neighborhood fearful of engaging. All this serves to block people's ability to come together and create the kind of neighborhood they want.

- 3. Trust in "change efforts" is key to residents.** Residents want to know that activities that seek to strengthen the neighborhood reflect their everyday challenges, and that the efforts are long-lasting and not sporadic (here today, gone tomorrow).

The Engagement Process

To date, United Way has facilitated sixteen community conversations with more than 140 people from throughout the neighborhood and, separately, with three groups of employees from The Hartford (see box on next page). Each conversation lasted about 90 minutes and included eight to fourteen people.

In addition to the group discussions, 18 in-depth interviews were conducted with community leaders from Asylum Hill and the Greater Hartford area (from neighborhood and church groups to non-profit organizations). In these discussions, we sought to learn more about the nature of life in Asylum Hill, to hear about efforts that are already underway, and to better understand issues and concerns still confronting the neighborhood.

We intentionally set out to hold *conversations* with these different groups so that people could express, in their own words, their aspirations for Asylum Hill, the challenges in meeting those aspirations, and the best starting points for making progress.

The structure and focus of these conversations have been used by The Harwood Institute in thousands of communities across the U.S. and in numerous countries worldwide. The conversations provide people with the opportunity to think about various issues and topics over the course of a discussion, to talk about their views and feelings in their own words, and to describe the underlying assumptions behind their views. Moreover, this approach helps to uncover the language people use and its underlying meaning. Such interaction is difficult – often impossible – to obtain through public opinion surveys, where people are asked to quickly react to pre-determined questions and responses.

There are, of course, limitations to these types of discussions and in-depth interviews. The observations we make in the following pages should not be mistaken for findings from a random sample survey. They are, technically speaking, *insights*. They are not intended to offer a definitive view of Asylum Hill, or to close-off future discussion. Instead, our main hope is that these insights can help spark future conversations and collaborative efforts.

Organization of the Report

This report is divided into three sections. Section I discusses people's shared aspirations for Asylum Hill. Section II reveals people's key concerns in moving toward those aspirations. And Section III offers questions for continued discussion and collaborative efforts.

Community Conversations – Group Discussions

Location	Participants
140 Woodland Street	Asylum Hill Neighborhood Association (AHNA) Members
Grace Lutheran Church	South Marshall Interfaith Coalition (SMIC) Board Members
Grace Lutheran Church	Community Dinner Participants, residents
Habitat for Humanity Office	South Marshall Street Association (Habitat homeowners)
Hartford Public Library – Mark Twain Branch	Library patrons, residents
140 Woodland Street	Residents, people who use the Park
Sigourney Mews Housing Complex	Residents
Salvation Army – Marshall House	Residents who live in and by the Shelter
West Middle School	PTO Board (Parents and Principal)
The Hartford	Employees
YWCA Hartford Region	AHNA Safety Committee and others

I. Aspirations

The Harwood Institute starts every engagement conversation with a question about people's aspirations for their community. We did this in Asylum Hill as well.

Asking about people's shared aspirations is a sharp departure from asking them to focus on the "problems" they see. The latter tends to lead people to focus on what's wrong, inevitably producing finger-pointing about who is to blame for the problems, and arguments over pre-set solutions. Starting with people's shared aspirations differs, too, from "visioning exercises" – those typically complex processes where people use "little yellow dots" to make their individual preferences known. Those approaches can short-circuit real discussion among people and at times lead to ideas that are disconnected from people's reality.

In Asylum Hill, when we started with people's aspirations, we discovered a common yearning for greater connectedness and a stronger sense of community among all of the participants we engaged: residents, employees of The Hartford and community leaders.

People in Asylum Hill want to live and work in a safe, connected community where they know their neighbors.

A common theme we heard from all the participants in the community conversations and in-depth interviews was a clear and strong desire for a safe and connected community. People want to get to know their neighbors and work together to make their community stronger, more attractive and safer. This, they said, is the starting point for creating the community they desire.

Residents want more visible community gathering places.

Residents said repeatedly that they want to be able to go outside their homes and have safe, welcoming places where they can meet, socialize and work with their neighbors. One Asylum Hill resident said that there is "no way to get outside on a beautiful day. The parks are unusable." Another said, "If I got a chance to talk with and get to know my neighbors, that'd be great." Having the ability to gather with others is critical to building a neighborhood where people can support one another. Time and again in these conversations, residents expressed their desire for "more togetherness," the ability to "rely on our neighbors," and a place "where we all look out for each other."

Community leaders and employees from The Hartford focus on what will attract people to Asylum Hill.

Community leaders and employees also told us that they want a safe, welcoming Asylum Hill. But their comments focused on those things that would attract them and others to the neighborhood and change the perception of the community – such as "jobs," "retail stores," "restaurants," "events," "activities for kids," and "schools that are good enough to keep families here." As one employee from The Hartford said, "To draw us out of the building, there needs to be *something*."

II. Key Concerns

The people we engaged want to act on their shared aspirations and make progress toward them. There are a number of key concerns that they hope can be addressed. Central to these is a lack of trust in the neighborhood and a desire for deeper connection with one another. Most other concerns were tied directly to this theme. This is not to say, of course, that everyone was in agreement on how they viewed the neighborhood's challenges. There were, at times, significant differences in people's perspectives, the way they talked about issues, and their priorities. We indicate such differences throughout the section.

❖ **A Lack of Connection and Trust**

Through the community conversations and in-depth interviews, we found that there is little or no shared sense of trust in the neighborhood. There are many different groups who live, work or come into the neighborhood, and all those engaged through this process said that there is little connection, interaction, and conversation between and among them. There are three key points to consider here.

1. People invested in the neighborhood don't feel supported

Those who care for their properties can feel alone.

Homeowners and some renters in the conversations point out that while they try to take care of their properties, they do not feel supported in the neighborhood. One homeowner described the situation in this way: "Due to all the drugs, safety concerns, crime, cleanliness and prostitution, [homeowners] just have an uncomfortable feeling about the neighborhood." The homeowner continued, "They put all the hard work in their homes... and they don't think it is fair that they deal with everything else going on in their neighborhood and are looking for help from the city." Another added, "If we can create homeownership, we can create stakeholders." Still, not everyone will be able or want to own a home. Increasing people's sense that they have a stake in the neighborhood may come down to engaging renters differently. As one homeowner said, "If homeowners let the renters know, 'This is our home and we want to make it your home, too,' instead of just closing the door and calling the police."

People say that too many landlords fail to maintain their properties.

Homeowners, renters and community leaders all said that a lack of responsibility among landlords, in particular, works against efforts to keep the neighborhood looking good, clean and safe. They asserted that many landlords seem not to care about the neighborhood: "All they want is the rent check," said one resident. Repeatedly in these conversations, people complained that many landlords fail to keep up their properties, that trash surrounds too many properties and that some rentals become drug houses.

Residents feel the neighborhood is too transient and needs greater stability.

Asylum Hill is known for having a high number of residents who move in only for short periods of time. People said that they find it difficult to get to know, much less trust, their neighbors with all this coming and going.

2. The Hartford “Fence”

Residents believe that The Hartford employees stay behind the fence.

Residents feel that the fence that surrounds The Hartford sends the wrong message.

Further, they feel that employees of The Hartford seem to have the wrong perception of the neighborhood due to stories of violent crime and consistent talk about the neighborhood as needing to be "fixed." Since "most employees don't live in the neighborhood" one resident said, their "perspective is not an accurate one." Residents said that attracting employees to the neighborhood is difficult under these circumstances. As one resident said, "People who come into the city to work, and then they leave, aren't really invested."

The Hartford employees feel discouraged to come out from behind the fence.

Employees said that safety is a chief concern of theirs and that there is little there for them in the neighborhood (such as retail stores or coffee shops). They said that stories of crime routinely circulate within The Hartford, and that they are commonly reminded "to park their car close at night" and "not walk alone." In addition, some employees lamented that there is no real conversation between themselves and residents about things that they could do together. As one employee put it, "To draw us out of the building, there needs to be *something*."

Employees of The Hartford say they want to engage with the neighborhood.

The Hartford employees we engaged were energized by these conversations. Many said that they want to become better connected to, and more involved with, the neighborhood. As one stated, "We are 6,000 people on this campus, we should be able to do a lot in the community." Some suggested that employees could help host or lend a hand to events such as block parties, concerts, and picnics in "our park"(Hartbeat Park).

3. Lack of Trust in Community Organizations

Residents say that support for organizations in Asylum Hill doesn't seem to impact their lives.

Residents said that the attention Asylum Hill receives from the city government, The Hartford and Aetna, among others, seems to focus mainly on support for organizations, not people. They lamented that such support doesn't seem to translate into a positive impact on their own lives or on the neighborhood. While good programs and efforts may be taking place throughout the neighborhood, people either don't see them, or they don't see them as being relevant to their lives.

Residents could not name any organizations they trust.

Employees of The Hartford and community leaders named in our conversations various organizations and nonprofits they trust, including churches (Grace Lutheran and Asylum Hill Congregational) and the Boys and Girls Club. But most residents did not mention any of these or any other organizations as groups they trust. Many residents feel that community groups at times gloss over the neighborhood's challenges and hype positive results.

❖ Crime Drives People into their Homes

As already mentioned, we discovered in these conversations a real longing among residents to be more comfortable going outside their homes and engaging with their neighbors. Asylum Hill residents yearn to do everyday things like take a walk down the street, let kids play outside, gather with friends in the park, talk with neighbors, enjoy the outdoors. But crime – or the threat of it – can keep them closed up inside. This condition frustrates and angers many of them, and it is always on their minds.

Crime undermines the *daily* lives of residents.

Residents said that they see people they identify as prostitutes and drug dealers hanging out on the streets. Several said they have friends and family members who have recently had their cars broken into. Crime in the neighborhood is a common topic of conversation, and the presence of crime negatively affects how people live their daily lives. One resident said, "The drugs are everywhere and visible to children and everyone on the street. I don't feel safe because of the drugs."

Asylum Hill seems to be two different places – during the day and at night.

While residents and community leaders say that the daytime Asylum Hill may be reasonably safe and improving, the nighttime Asylum Hill is not. Residents said that most criminal activity, especially drug dealing and prostitution, happens after dark. One frustrated resident said, "The drug dealers are knocking on doors at all hours of the night." Another added, "I would like peace and quiet at night."

Crime prevents people from building community.

Crime and the perception of crime, according to residents, is one of the key barriers to creating the sense of community they want. It's simple, said one resident: "When you feel safe enough to walk outside, people will become more neighborly." Instead, crime has the effect of keeping people isolated and apart from each other.

Some community leaders seem to be out of touch when they talk about crime.

Residents told us that community leaders seem out of touch when they say things such as, "Crime is way down and people have to understand it's isolated." Though leaders may declare that crime is down, and implore residents to change their perception of what is happening in the neighborhood, residents argued that the issue is not limited to perception alone. Crime is part of their daily reality.

Residents long for safe places to connect.

People in the community conversations expressed a desire for places in the neighborhood where they can meet and get to know each other. As one person said, "There isn't really a gathering place" at present. Another resident remarked: "The park – people won't go there. There is no community feeling like you know your neighbors. That doesn't exist." In these conversations, people listed several possibilities for community-building places: parks, a coffee shop, and community events, among others. Importantly, their goal is not merely to create new destinations. The public visibility of these places and the very interaction they help to create is the goal -- not their mere existence.

❖ Forge Stronger Connections between Police and Neighbors

Some residents in the community conversations expressed real trust and respect for individual police officers and believe they have a hard job given the circumstances in Asylum Hill. Others felt the police are not doing an adequate job. Either way, residents of Asylum Hill commonly believe there needs to be a stronger connection between the police and community. How the police experience the community, and their perspective on how to forge stronger police-neighbor connections, is a topic for future conversations.

Police actions can undermine a sense of community.

Some residents talked about how the police sometimes break up groups that are gathered on the streets or elsewhere and tell people to go inside their homes – actions, they believe, that keep neighbors from connecting with one another. As one resident said, "Too many people in one area are viewed as sign of trouble. Even in the park – forget it – police break it up and ask people to go inside." Another person said in frustration, "Good people aren't able to congregate because the cops are worried about the bad guy."

Residents want more police and they want to have a real connection with them.

Many residents believe there isn't enough of a police presence in the neighborhood, especially at night. Trust is also an issue. As one resident said, "Police have a huge job developing trust with citizens." Some residents suggested that the police do not seem to understand their daily challenges or respond to their calls; and that they do not feel they can talk to the police. In addition, there are residents who feel that discussions with the police seem to be with community leaders more than with residents themselves. One resident put a fine point on the issue of trust and connection: "The police are hostile and treat you with disrespect until they figure out who you are." Meanwhile, some community leaders said that they like the community policing approach now in use, and they like the current officer. As one community leader said, "I love our CSO officer. He doesn't have a marine voice... but most don't have that approach."

❖ "Outsiders" Here Today, Gone Tomorrow

Many residents believe that outside groups only pay attention to Asylum Hill in bursts. To them, it looks as if these groups come into the neighborhood to make a public relations splash, only then to leave with little or no ongoing commitment or follow up. Even worse, some groups are perceived only to care about the neighborhood when it advances their own interests.

Sporadic interventions by outside groups frustrate residents.

Residents told us that it appeared that attention from the city only occurs when there is an election or a crisis. And they felt that outsiders pay attention only when it is convenient or helpful for them, not for the neighborhood. For example, one resident said, “The mayor shows up for pictures, then we never see him.” Another resident expressed a similar frustration with the police, saying, “We want the police presence to be consistent and for them to do their job – unless something dramatic happens they won’t show up.”

Trust and effectiveness depend upon consistency of effort.

Residents complained that the lack of consistency, in both human and financial resources, from outside groups can lead to distrust and prevent progress. They stressed that ongoing engagement is linked to trust. One explained, “Follow up is critical in order to maintain trust in the community. If you say you are going to do something, do it!” At the same time there were residents who were not aware of smaller daily actions that are taking place on an ongoing basis, such as volunteer readers in the schools.

❖ Making a Difference Can Be Overwhelming

In these conversations, many residents wanted to talk about how they could assume greater ownership and responsibility to help strengthen the neighborhood. They said that they and their neighbors would need to help move the neighborhood forward – and they felt certain that many people would get involved in these efforts. But they sometimes grappled with how to get started, how they could work together with other groups, how they might gain a sense of momentum.

Residents want to know how to move forward.

Many residents in the community conversations saw real barriers to themselves and their neighbors bringing about change and then sustaining it. They often talked about too much transience in the neighborhood, which can make it difficult for people to be invested in taking action; difficulties in communicating with individuals and families that speak different languages; the weariness that burdens many people who work two jobs; and the challenges of going outside and getting together. Still, many residents insisted that they must find ways to move the neighborhood forward. As one resident stated, “We have to trust ourselves to get it done as best as we can and hope that the city, police and corporate partners do their part.”

Residents also want greater confidence that things will go in the right direction.

Throughout the conversations, it was much more likely that people would point to missed opportunities for change, or efforts that have taken the neighborhood in the wrong direction, than any positive movement. Some talked about the fact that there were once more police on the streets, but not any longer. Or, they were pessimistic about good developments. They appreciate the newly renovated Sigourney Park, but they expressed doubt that it will be policed or kept safe, clean and welcoming for them. By and large, they could not name examples of wins, even small ones. People don’t seem to see many models or pathways for success to get beyond the challenges confronting them and the neighborhood.

III. Strategic Questions for Further Conversation

Beyond reflecting the key insights learned from engaging people who live and work in Asylum Hill, our hope is that this report will help to accelerate and deepen meaningful conversations and collaborative efforts to strengthen the neighborhood.

Toward that end, we offer here a series of strategic questions that can help to focus such conversations and perhaps lead to new collaborative efforts or strengthen existing ones. The questions reflect various key insights outlined in the report. They also reflect the experience of The Harwood Institute for Public Innovation and its work, which has now spread to thousands of U.S. communities and numerous other countries.

❖ **Safe Gathering Places**

Throughout the report, those who live and work in Asylum Hill express their desire for safe gathering places where they can meet, get to know each other, and find ways together to strengthen the neighborhood.

1. How could safe gathering places be created in the neighborhood? What places already exist, and where can new ones be developed?
2. When residents say that it is important for these gathering places to be publicly visible, to be safe and to help build trust, in what ways might these goals be achieved?
3. How can safe gathering places bring together people who may not otherwise interact, so that a deeper understanding of one another, stronger bonds of trust, and a greater investment in the neighborhood can come about?

❖ **Existing Pockets of Change**

Many residents say they cannot identify positive actions being taken in the neighborhood. But such positive actions do exist, and new ones are being created.

1. How can existing efforts be more prominently featured so that residents can see positive signs of progress?
2. What would it mean to focus on those efforts that genuinely address people's aspirations and daily concerns – and not end up in a public relations effort that glosses over challenges or hypes results?
3. How can the talents of both those who live and work in the neighborhood be leveraged to strengthen existing or new pockets of change?
4. How can different groups come together to work more collaboratively?

❖ **Small, local actions**

Asylum Hill residents seek ways to engage with each other and get things done to improve their own lives and the neighborhood.

1. What are small actions that people who live and work in Asylum Hill could do *together* that would make a visible difference?
2. How can space be made, in all of these efforts, for people to make decisions about what to focus on, set goals, and figure out how to move ahead together – all so they can take greater ownership and pride in the neighborhood?
3. What could be done to provide ways for people to stay engaged once they become engaged?

❖ **Strong Police-Neighbor Connections**

Crime, and the threat of it, has at least three important effects on Asylum Hill. It undermines the daily life of neighborhood residents, especially at night. It can lead to people being driven off the streets in an attempt to make the streets feel safer. And it inspires fear that keeps others away from the neighborhood.

1. What would it take to develop stronger connections and relationships between the police and Asylum Hill residents?
2. How might the police and neighbors work together to fight crime, especially at night?
3. How can the police help to ensure that gathering places are safe and that people aren't driven away from them?

❖ **The Asylum Hill Story**

The stories people tell to themselves and to one another shape how we see ourselves, our community and what is possible. Neighborhoods that seek to strengthen themselves inevitably face a competition between an ingrained negative narrative and a new emerging narrative of possibility.

1. What actions – or "proof points" – in the neighborhood are moving people closer to their shaped aspirations, and how can those actions be highlighted?
2. Who are the individuals and groups that people trust, who can spread stories of new possibilities to those who live and work in Asylum Hill?
3. How can the individual stories be connected into a larger narrative so that people have a coherent sense of the new path the neighborhood is on?
4. How can you tell stories and a new narrative without over-selling progress or any single individual's or group's contribution – so that trust is built and not undermined?

IV. Thank You

We are grateful to the many people who live and work in Asylum Hill who took the time to participate in the community conversations and in-depth interviews. It is clear from these conversations that many residents, employees of The Hartford and community leaders hold a deep commitment to the neighborhood and want to find ways to strengthen Asylum Hill.

Our hope is that this report provides key insights into what is important to the people who live and work in Asylum Hill, and the kind of neighborhood they seek to create; and that it helps to accelerate and deepen meaningful conversations and collaborative efforts to bring about such change.

We look forward to finding ways to support these efforts.