



## 5 Questions (and Answers!) about the New Center for Housing Equity and Opportunity

Launched in March 2023, the Center for Housing Equity and Opportunity is leading a coordinated, regional response to the housing affordability crisis in Eastern Connecticut. Organizers envision a future where every resident, regardless of income, race or ethnicity, has access to a safe, affordable home — the foundation for a stable, fulfilling, and healthy life.

The Community Foundation is one of seven founding partners of the Center. Below, **President and CEO Maryam Elahi** answered questions about this promising new initiative.

### 1. The Center collaborators intend to “lean into the significant housing challenges facing thousands of households across Eastern Connecticut.” What are the most pressing challenges?

“One in four households in Eastern Connecticut is struggling with housing affordability. People can’t afford to rent or buy, and they can’t afford to live near their work places. They end up with longer commutes and higher transportation costs. This is impacting our region’s employers and residents’ health.”

### 2. What does “equity” look like in housing?

“Access to safe affordable housing is a basic human right. Our country’s history shows that people of color were blocked — in many different ways — from accessing housing that would have helped them accumulate wealth and live in safe neighborhoods. Despite working really hard, many people have been unable to overcome these unfair structural obstacles. There are many challenges to attaining affordable housing. Customized solutions will be necessary — one formula will not fit all. Housing equity means working with intent to undo past injustices in this regard.”

### 3. What is essential to the success of the Center for Housing Equity and Opportunity?

“This work needs to include the voices of people who are most impacted — local residents — along with policymakers, municipal leaders, service providers, business leaders, and real estate developers. Solutions need to be worked on from the ground up, rather than dropped from on high. It will take patience and more time to listen.”





*Center for Housing Equity and Opportunity strategic partners (L to R):*

*LaMar Coleman, Eastern Connecticut State University  
Katherine Bergeron, Connecticut College  
Beth Sabilia, Center for Housing Equity & Opportunity  
Dina Sears-Graves, United Way of Southeastern CT  
Sean Ghio, Partnership for Strong Communities  
Amy Dooling, Connecticut College  
Maryam Elahi, Community Foundation of Eastern CT  
David Rich, The Housing Collective  
(Missing from photo: Regional Plan Association)*

*Cover photo: Attendees gather at the launch of the Center for Housing Equity and Opportunity on March 16.*

*Learn more at [CTHousingOpportunity.org](http://CTHousingOpportunity.org).*

#### 4. What have you heard from Eastern Connecticut residents about the prospect of housing changes in their communities?

"Some residents take great pride that they've looked the same for 200 years. They don't want any change. Other residents say, 'You know, we would love to attract a younger, more vibrant population.' They have concerns that their kids can't afford to live in their town. They also would like for those who provide services in their communities to be able to live in their towns. They view it as a 'win-win' if their town can make housing more affordable and look favorably on mixed development."

#### 5. The Community Foundation has been focusing on "systems change philanthropy" to make Eastern Connecticut a better place to live and work. How does the new Center fit into that strategy?

"Traditionally, community foundations have focused on putting band-aids on deep scars. The root causes of issues like unaffordable housing, environmental injustices, racism, and educational inequalities have gone unaddressed. Systems change philanthropy involves directing our donors' generosity to the core of these issues. We believe we can improve early childhood education, food security, school quality, and other issues by leveling the playing field in housing."

### The Community Foundation of Eastern Connecticut

#### VISION

A healthy, thriving, sustainable Eastern Connecticut with greater equity for all.

#### MISSION

Collaborate with partners to put philanthropy into action to address the needs, rights and interests of our community in Eastern Connecticut.

#### VALUES

Integrity, Equity, Respect, Courage, Empathy

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Published twice yearly, *Compass Points* aims to inform and engage donors and community partners across Eastern Connecticut.





*“Ricky gave it all away and that’s what he wanted. It was one way he could find joy and make people happy at the same time.”*

— Stephen Taylor

**“He was always the first to volunteer for everything.”**

### THE RICKY MARTIN MEMORIAL FUND

It wasn’t unusual for Waterford’s Stephen Taylor to be awakened at 4 a.m. by the whirring of an electric mixer. It was his husband, Ricky Martin, who loved to rise early and whip up extravagant cookies, cupcakes, and cheesecakes. Most were donated to fundraisers for local nonprofits.

“Ricky gave it all away and that’s what he wanted,” Taylor explained. “It was one way he could find joy and make people happy at the same time.”

Martin pitched in for an array of community groups, especially during the years he served up drinks at New London’s longtime gay bar, Frank’s Place (now closed). From drag shows to comedy nights, Martin co-organized events to benefit lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender (LGBT) causes. All the while, with his easy smile and humble manner behind the bar, Martin nurtured a space for patrons to gather and feel safe.

Sadly, after 30 years together, Taylor lost Martin to cancer in 2022. To carry on his legacy, Taylor established The Ricky Martin Memorial Fund at the Community Foundation. It aims to support the LGBTQ+ community and youth across Eastern Connecticut’s 42 towns.

Taylor plans to award the Fund’s first grant to the Alliance for Living in New London, an HIV/AIDS service organization

and resource center that also assists people challenged by homelessness and substance use disorders.

Martin volunteered for years on the Alliance’s board of directors and baked countless confections for its fundraisers. In recognition of his remarkable dedication and service, later this year the organization plans on renaming its building in Martin’s honor.

*Photo: Ricky Martin took part in Sully’s Toy Run to raise funds for child cancer research. “He was always the first to volunteer for everything,” Taylor said.*



[Learn more at  
TheRickyFund.org.](https://TheRickyFund.org)





*“You can make a good living and feel rewarded creating something with your own hands.”*

— Sean Barnes

## Building Paths to Better Lives

### NEIGHBORHOOD RENOVATIONS AND TRAINING PROGRAM

Sean Barnes was a 17-year-old new immigrant from Jamaica striving to attain a high school equivalency diploma. He had an inspiration. “I was on a New York City bus, and I said to myself, ‘I wish there was some kind of training program that could help me get some hands-on skills in construction to begin my career pathway.’”

Now, years later, Neighborhood Renovations and Training Program (N RTP) does just that for residents 18 to 22-years-old who face barriers to employment or a college education. Barnes is N RTP’s founder and (volunteer) executive director — and a skilled builder and teacher.

“If you can’t go to college, and especially if you have a tough time reading, memorizing or writing, construction is a great alternative,” he said.

After 10 weeks of classroom instruction, N RTP trainees apprentice under Barnes, renovating homes for low-income residents of eastern Connecticut referred by Habitat for Humanity.

A Community Foundation grant — to support job readiness skills for youth — funded three Norwich apprentices from last year. One installed new drywall insulation, flooring, kitchen cabinets, and doors in a home that had been flooded and gutted. Others built a wheelchair ramp (*pictured*) for an older man who hadn’t been able to leave his house in months.

N RTP graduates often move on to well-paying jobs — and a path to self-sufficiency.

Corinne, a mother of three, wrote, “As far back as I can remember, I wanted to learn carpentry, but those dreams had to be put on the back burner. After graduating from N RTP, I got two construction job offers. Mr. Barnes helped me to be more confident and to believe I can do anything I put my mind to.”



Photos courtesy of Neighborhood Renovations and Training Program



# For Culinary Entrepreneurs, Opportunities are a CLiCK Away

## COMMERCIALLY LICENSED CO-OPERATIVE KITCHEN (CLiCK)

Take a stroll through the Willimantic Street Fest and you'll get a taste of the mouth-watering international flavors infusing the local food scene. The entrepreneurship of immigrants and their cooking talents are on full display — and fueling the local economy.

Willimantic-based CLiCK is a huge resource for them, starting with "ServSafe" food safety certification classes — required for anyone starting a culinary business large or small.

CLiCK's executive director, Leigh Duffy, says there's an abundance of skilled cooks, particularly from the Latino/a community, who've settled in the area. But, in Willimantic, "cost, location, and language" often stand in the way of food safety certification.

So, with Community Foundation support, CLiCK waives the six-hour ServSafe training cost and offers hands-on classes locally and in Spanish and English. And, with the health department, it guides participants from food safety certification to licensing their businesses.

Thirty-seven food business owners, nearly all Latino/a and lower income, earned ServSafe certificates through CLiCK in the last year.

"Many people of color hold low-paying jobs in the food industry in this country," noted Chelsea Cherrier, CLiCK's community programs manager. "They're washing dishes, stocking shelves. They have families to support. We create a safe space and remove barriers so they can start and grow a business and get better pay."

CLiCK offers other resources, too, including shared commercial kitchens and gardening, culinary arts, and nutrition classes.

Duffy points to success stories like Fermin Juarez, the proud owner of Tacos El Compadre, whose delicious tacos are well known to many in the Willimantic area. He persevered for five years to get a food truck license. "That was one of the best moments we've ever had here," Duffy said.

**click**  
Scan to watch video



Fermin Juarez with his food truck license (Photo by CLiCK)



# Caring for the Social and Emotional Health of Windham County's Young People

*Supported by the Women & Girls Funds*



*Above: Woodstock Academy students volunteered at the Covenant Soup Kitchen*

## **THE WOODSTOCK ACADEMY, WOODSTOCK**

Middle and high school girls were inspired to be smart, strong, and confident leaders and build healthy habits through the "I am Me" empowerment program, supported by the Northeast Women & Girls Fund. They took part in yoga and meditation, discussions on nutrition, hygiene, and healthy relationships, and projects to give back to the community.

## **NORTHEAST OPPORTUNITIES FOR WELLNESS (NOW), PUTNAM**

Developed in response to the COVID-19 pandemic and funded through the Northeast Women & Girls Fund, the "Strong Like a Girl" teen empowerment group brought 30 girls together from six northeastern Connecticut towns to form meaningful relationships and develop a toolbox of coping strategies. With compassion and empathy, a teen life coach and clinical social worker guided the group's candid conversations and emotions. The girls developed self-care, learned the importance of accepting differences, and gained the skills to take action through community service.

*The COVID-19 crisis disproportionately affected the mental health of our youth, creating a "second pandemic" that they are still struggling to navigate through.*

*Thanks to programs like these, young people are building confidence and learning the skills of self-care towards a brighter and healthier future.*

## **WINDHAM COUNTY 4-H FOUNDATION, POMFRET CENTER**

For some children, a week away at camp experiencing the great outdoors is the highlight of their summer. For others, camp is just a dream. It may be unaffordable for their family, or the registration process can be hindered by language barriers or lack of computer skills. Through grants from the Northeast and Windham Women & Girls Funds, 15 girls received camperships to help their families pay for them to attend the 270-acre Windham-Tolland 4-H Camp (*at right*). Each girl spent a week reveling in activities from archery to water sports, growing their independence and self-confidence while forging new friendships.







“Wow! We want your students!”

### THREE RIVERS COMMUNITY COLLEGE, ENVIRONMENTAL OPPORTUNITIES PROJECT

Environmental engineering technology students at Three Rivers Community College are making the most of unique internships — and are leaving their mark on Eastern Connecticut communities.

Alongside mentors, they’ve rolled up their sleeves for water quality assessments in Salem and Lyme. On their Norwich campus, they’ve installed bat and bird houses and added solar power to a greenhouse. And in Stonington, they’ve mapped Barn Island’s salt marshes to shed light on the habitats of endangered saltmarsh sparrows.

Professor Diba Khan-Bureau, Ph.D., is the dynamo behind the program. With three years of grant support from the Community Foundation in hand, she offers students paid internships as they pursue associate’s degrees.

“They’re getting hands-on experience working with real scientists at places like Audubon Connecticut and the

Department of Energy and Environmental Protection (DEEP),” she said, noting that paid internships like these for community college students are rare.

Most of Khan-Bureau’s interns (*pictured*) are non-traditional or “first-generation” — the first in their families to go to college. “I’ve had grandparents in my program, and they hung out with the kids. I loved it!,” she laughed.

“These interns are smart and hardworking,” she added. “They learn math and technology, how to use surveying equipment, and how to use a drone for GIS (geographic information system) mapping. When employers see all that, they say, ‘Wow! We want your students.’”

“Students today are really concerned about climate change, their water and food supply, and other species besides humans,” Khan-Bureau observed. “They know these things will impact their lives as they get older, and they are willing to do something about it.”





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of Eastern Connecticut

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## Build a Fund at the Community Foundation

Did you know that you can create a permanently endowed fund and build it up over time? You can start a fund and add to it over 3-5 years to reach the \$10,000 minimum (\$25,000 for scholarships). You can then add more as circumstances allow. A long-term plan might include a legacy provision in your estate plan or naming your fund as a beneficiary of a retirement plan or life insurance policy.

## CONNECT YOUR PASSION TO A PURPOSE

Contribute to your own or an existing fund and/or promote your Community Foundation's work through these funds:

- **Fund for Racial Justice** advances racial equity, supports racial justice organizing and advocacy, and allocates flexible resources to organizations and movements led by people of color.
- **Community Leadership Fund** helps us to build powerful partnerships that strengthen our region's nonprofits in their work within our six priority areas.
- **President's Discretionary Fund** enables us to provide leadership when needed and to back innovative projects as they emerge.
- **Women & Girls Funds** help to empower women and girls wherever you choose in Eastern Connecticut.

Contact Lauren C. Parda, Director of Development, at [lauren@cfect.org](mailto:lauren@cfect.org) or 860.442.3572 for a confidential conversation about achieving your charitable goals through the Community Foundation.