

## The Friends Center for Children expands free housing facilities for low-wage educators

*Two new single mothers and their children will move into the newest complex sponsored by the Teacher Housing Initiative.*

BROOKLYN BRAUNER 12:50 AM, NOV 06, 2023

STAFF REPORTER



Brooklyn Brauner, Contributing Photographer

Members of the Teacher Housing Initiative, a program that is run through the Friends Center for Children, have expanded their free housing facilities for early childhood educators and are prepared to welcome two single mothers into their newest housing complex.

The Teacher Housing Initiative provides rent-free housing to early childhood educators on a need basis. The early education sector, both within Connecticut and across the country, organizers told the News, experiences a constant give and take between pushing for increases in teachers' wages and pushing to reduce the expensive cost of childcare.

"We operate in a system that is designed for all of the constituents to fail," Allyx Schiavone, executive director of Friends Center for Children, said. "It fails the parents, it fails the teachers, it fails the providers, and most importantly, it fails the children."

Schiavone said that the current early education system fails because it is "based on the premise of a free market system," and because of this, providers can typically charge consumers the total cost of producing a good or service.

She added that this free market system is not present in the early education sector because the cost of running a quality childcare system far exceeds what local families can afford. As such, Schiavone said, the wages of early childhood educators are significantly cut to offset the difference between what it costs to run a facility and what the community can pay.

"Because of this situation, where we do not have enough cash coming in to pay educators fair wages, the women who work in childcare are actually subsidizing the entire country, the entire economy, and the entire state," Schiavone said.

In light of this dilemma, the Friends Center for Children began to instead look at ways to reduce teachers' expenditures.

In 2019, the Friends Center for Children assembled a council of 29 teachers and asked them to each list their four biggest expenses. After consolidating their answers, the top expenses included housing, food, transportation and utilities.

The Friends Center for Children decided to address these expenses in that order to reduce financial stress on low-paid early childhood educators.

Organizers told the News that after speaking further with these teachers, whose ages ranged from 22 to 65 years old, they came to realize that only one of the 29 educators owned their home.

"In an economy where wealth is transferred through property, these teachers were unable to invest in themselves and their future," Schiavone said.

Through donations from Greg and Susan Melville, the Friends Center for Children was able to establish the Teacher Housing Initiative, a program launched in 2021 that offers eligible teachers rent-free housing as a salaried benefit.

To accomplish this task, the initiative partnered with the School of Architecture through the Jim Vlock First Year Building Project program to construct five adjacent houses for the Friends Center by 2027.

Construction began in May, and the first of the five newly built houses is now ready for move-in. The organization held a furnishing event in the first home on Wednesday. Two new single mothers and their children will move into the newest complex.

Volunteers at Wednesday's furnishing event commented on the collaboration between the early education teachers and the architecture students.

"Here we have students from an elite institution interacting with women who have been historically ignored and marginalized, so there is an inherent power differential," Schiavone said. "It was amazing to see the architecture students listening to the input of our teachers, and furthermore, watching the shift in the teachers after their ideas were validated and implemented."

Aundrea Tabbs-Smith, the Friends Center's emotional well-being coordinator, emphasized the importance of these interactions, calling attention to the benefits of such community support.

Tabbs-Smith said that through her role with the housing program she meets with the single mothers for monthly tenant meetings. These meetings, she said, will last throughout the housing process to help the new tenants navigate their new environment.

"My job is really to build relationships and be part of the community," Tabbs-Smith said. "I am here to support in any capacity possible as people are experiencing all the things that life brings. It is important for all of us to feel cared for, nurtured and valued."

In an interview with the News, program volunteer Steffi Frias, who owns a home-based family daycare, spoke about the burden that housing shortages and rising costs have put on early childhood educators.

Frias said she believes that rent-free housing is one of the most effective ways to mitigate the negative consequences of low wages.

"Learning from the lived experiences of those directly impacted is the most important thing our program can do, and I truly hope that we can alleviate some of the obstacles currently facing early educators," Frias said.

The newest complex is located in the Fair Haven Heights area, walking distance from the previous complexes.

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