

New Haven preschool tackles housing crisis with free housing for teachers

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Abby Brone / Connecticut Public

Community volunteers work with Friends Center for Children to furnish a home designed and built for the center's Teacher Housing Initiative in 2023.

One of the first things preschool teacher Eric Gil noticed about his new three-bedroom home was the size of the closets.

Gil and his brother will have plenty of closet space, large windows and a wraparound deck. They're waiting for finishing touches to be put on the home before moving in. But they're already planning group dinners and decorating.

"Maybe some chairs, a small table to enjoy some coffee sometimes, looking at this beautiful view," Gil said. "Maybe a domino table to play. I love to play Domino, so it will be nice."

The New Haven home is being provided, rent-free, by Gil's employer, Friends Center for Children.

Gil is one of the latest preschool teachers who will benefit from an innovative new program, providing free housing for early childhood educators and their families.

Since moving from the Dominican Republic five years ago, Gil and his brother have lived with relatives. Once Gil moves in, he'll eliminate his two hour round-trip commute. That's one of the many benefits the home will provide for Gil and his brother, who is studying to be a nurse.

"It will give me and my younger brother our own space where my worries will be fewer and so that I can perform my job even better," Gil said.

The home is the second built as part of the program designed to help ease housing costs for early childhood educators. Charitable donations helped launch the program. The land, labor and supplies are donated.

Friends Center works with Yale School of Architecture students, who design and build the homes.

Early childhood educators and the wage gap

Teachers who work with preschool age children are severely underpaid, according to Allyx Schiavone, Friends Center's executive director.

“Early childhood educators across the country get paid less than they deserve, less than a livable professional wage,” Schiavone said. “In Connecticut, teachers, working with our youngest residents, earn an average salary of \$29,500 a year.”

Connecticut preschool teachers with college degrees typically earn about 30% less than their counterparts in kindergarten through eighth grade school systems, according to Berkeley’s Center for the Study of Child Care Employment.

Preschool teachers and day care providers are undervalued nationwide, for various reasons, including the industry’s market being based on how much parents are willing or able to pay for care, a history of women and people of color taking on the roles and the perception less education is needed for the jobs, according to the study.

Friends Center first developed the idea for the free teacher housing program in 2019. By the 2021 launch, the need for the program was exacerbated by the COVID-19 pandemic. Schiavone said the program targets two competing crises, housing and child care.

“If we can find a way to think about workforce housing for the early care and education industry, across our country, we then can solve part of the problem overnight,” Schiavone said.

How the free teacher housing program works

Friends Center teachers earn about \$18,000 more a year compared to other early childhood educators in the state – and some of that is because of the cost savings from rent-free housing, Schiavone said.

With donated land, labor and supplies, there were no upfront costs for the Center to establish the program. Additionally, since Friends Center is a nonprofit, it doesn’t pay property taxes on buildings owned and used for the school, including education and teacher housing locations, according to Friends Center administration.

The Center is able to pay teachers a higher salary because it owns the homes and buildings where the school operates. This allows the center to save money since there’s no rent or mortgage payment.

Paris Pierce was one of the first Friends Center teachers to receive free housing. She moved into a home with her three children about two years ago.

It’s more than just housing, Pierce said, the program encourages self-improvement. She’s working with a financial coach provided by Friends Center to improve her credit score and establish a rainy day fund.

“Friends Center teacher housing initiative isn’t just about us living rent free,” Pierce said. “We figure out goals to reach, mines was saving a certain amount of money.”

Yale Architecture students pitch in

Preschool teachers aren’t the only ones benefiting from the free housing program.

Students in the Yale Architecture School’s master’s program help design the homes based on criteria provided by the Friends Center. Architecture student Jessica Chen was part of the cohort that built the first home.

“My first job was also in early childhood education,” Chen said. “This is sort of a way for me to try and give back, and something that I want to definitely see through till the end, all the way down to the furniture, not just the building.”

Chen says this was the first time she and other students were able to execute their designs on such a large scale.

“When you’re an architecture student, and you’re so focused on the design,” Chen said. “I might be able to draw how a detail of something might come together. But when it comes to actually doing it, a lot of times I find a little bit of apprehension.”

The first house, built by the Yale students last year, was designed for two families to share, with private living quarters and a shared common space.

The second home, completed this fall, is designed to be more versatile, with a single-bedroom side and a two-bedroom side, sharing dining areas. However, the home has the option to be used as a single-family, three-bedroom home.

The free teacher housing program’s future

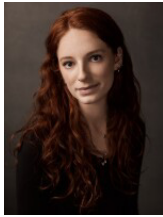
By 2028, Friends Center intends to provide housing for 24 of its educators.

The partnership with Yale is set for five years, but Schiavone, the Friends Center executive director, would like it to continue indefinitely.

Schiavone wants the housing program to be a model for federal or state governments and philanthropic agencies to reevaluate ways to invest in child care providers, rather than relying on individual schools to take initiative and create a similar project.

“We had a delegation from Michigan come in to learn about what we're doing, and the Kellogg Foundation is supporting their work, so we're really excited about that,” Schiavone said. “We've also had inquiries as far as Australia into what we're doing.”

Providing teachers with housing is about taking care of the people who are taking care of the next generation, Schiavone said. It's kind of like planting a garden – instead of focusing on one season of flowers, it's about planting perennials so that they bloom year after year.



Abigail Brone

Abigail is Connecticut Public's housing reporter, covering statewide housing developments and issues, with an emphasis on Fairfield County communities. She received her master's from Columbia University in 2020 and graduated from the University of Connecticut in 2019. Abigail previously covered statewide transportation and the city of Norwalk for Hearst Connecticut Media. She loves all things Disney and cats.