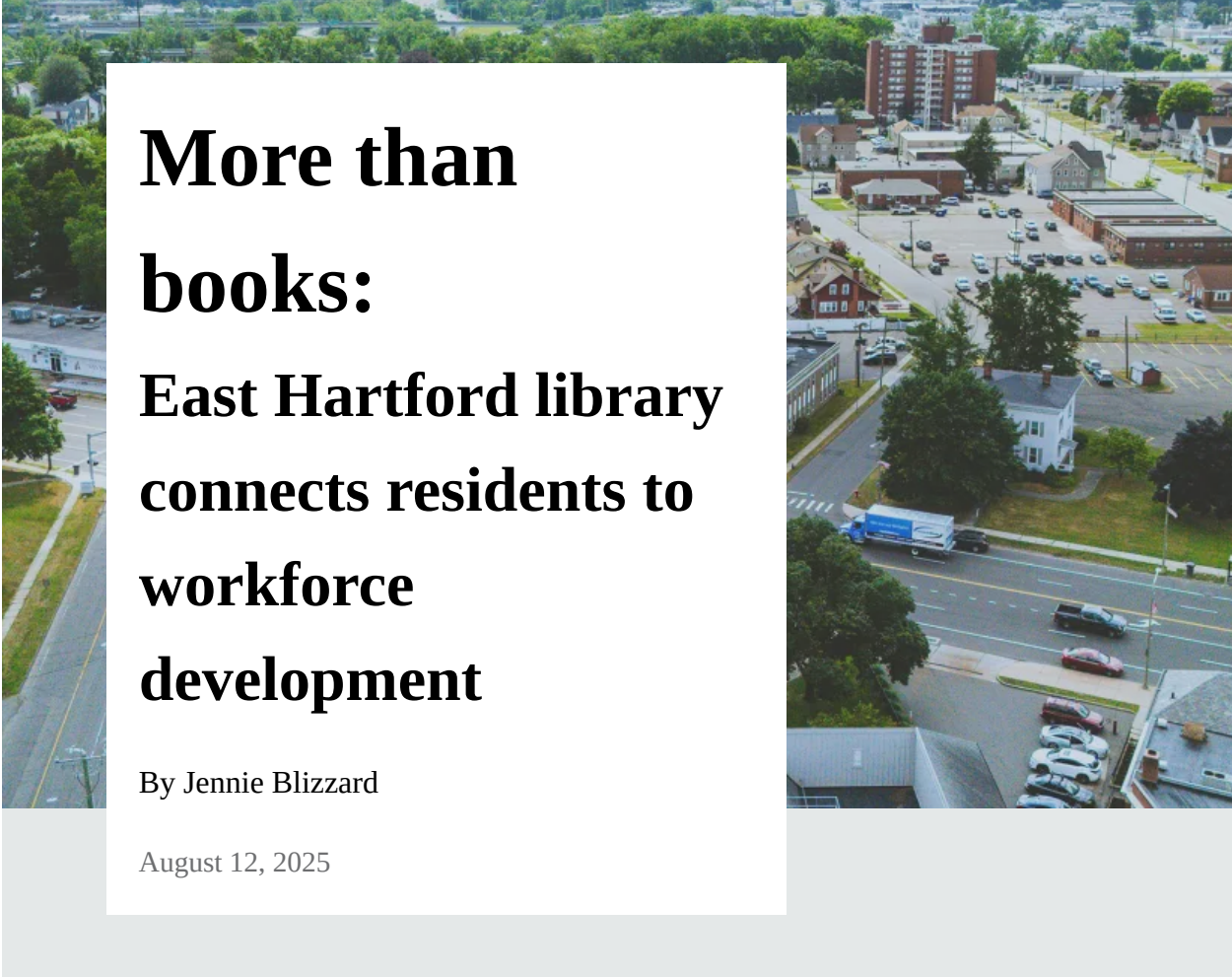


An aerial photograph of East Hartford, Connecticut, showing a mix of residential and commercial buildings, parking lots, and green spaces. The image is used as a background for the article's header.

More than books: East Hartford library connects residents to workforce development

By Jennie Blizzard

August 12, 2025

Aerial view of East Hartford, Connecticut
Photo: Steve Osemwenkhae

Sweeden Patterson is only 19 years old. Thanks to Connecticut's [East Hartford Works!](https://www.easthartfordct.gov/workforce-development-digital-inclusion-wddi/pages/east-hartford-works-career-services) (<https://www.easthartfordct.gov/workforce-development-digital-inclusion-wddi/pages/east-hartford-works-career-services>) (EHW) program, she's prepared for the workforce. "When I first got into the program in 2020, I didn't know anything about networking and how important it is professionally," said Patterson, now a communications student at the University of New Haven. "One important lesson that I learned is if I want to keep progressing in employment, I have to consistently put myself out there for others to know who I am and what I'm interested in."

With the mission to engage, educate, and employ, EHW aims to increase workforce development opportunities and job skills training for the town's residents. "We're about more than circulating books. We're an anchor in the community," says Sarah Kline Morgan, director of the East Hartford Public Library in Connecticut, which houses and coordinates many of EHW's workforce development activities. "We're proud that we have programs that support a variety of youth and adult employment initiatives and other resident engagement activities."



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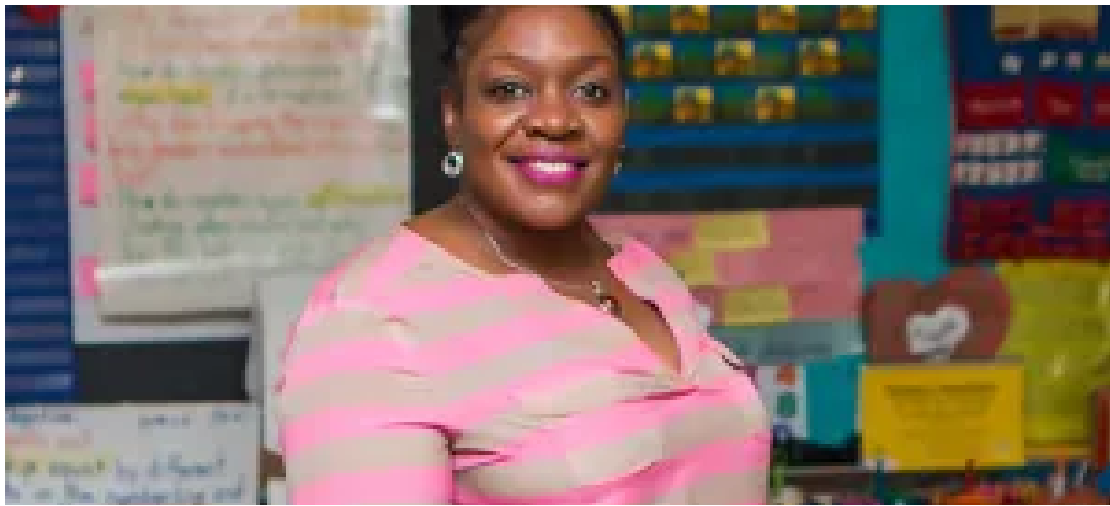
– Sarah Kline Morgan, director, East Hartford Public Library



Spurring ideas for collaborative change

EHW's story began in 2018, when a group of community stakeholders in East Hartford applied to participate in the Federal Reserve Bank of Boston's [Working Cities Challenge \(WCC\)](https://www.bostonfed.org/workingplaces/cities-challenge.aspx). (<https://www.bostonfed.org/workingplaces/cities-challenge.aspx>) A **place-based initiative**, the WCC supports leaders in New England's towns and smaller cities in building collaboration to create sustainable change. Strengthening human capital and economic growth supports the Fed's dual mandate. The Federal Reserve understands that healthy communities and well-served consumers help support and drive economic growth. The initiative brings together a cross-sector team including public, private, and philanthropic investors to award grants for local leaders to plan for and fund ideas for collaborative change. The Boston Fed does not provide funding for these projects. Instead, it offers technical support and convenes participants.

EHW, then called East Hartford CONNects, was one of five groups in Connecticut selected to participate in WCC. One of the group's first tasks was to decide on which community challenge to address. Sebrina Wilson, who was a community consultant to the project, helped to survey the community to get a sense of its priorities.



“We knocked on doors throughout East Hartford to find out what residents thought we needed to improve in the community,” said Wilson. “We heard about the needs for job skills training, child care, and transportation. But job training emerged as the priority. We ultimately wanted to come together as a community around this issue.”



Sade Smith (center) has utilized multiple workforce development opportunities that East Hartford Works offers. Aujahdai Ambrose (left) and Sarah Eiseman (right), continue to find ways for EHW to engage residents in job skills training like the Digital Navigator program that focuses on digital access.

Workforce development and digital access

Between 2018 and 2022, [East Hartford CONNects \(https://www.easthartfordct.gov/east-hartford-works\)](https://www.easthartfordct.gov/east-hartford-works) operated within the town's school district. The school district served as the backbone of a cross-sector task force that included local employers, the Connecticut Center for Advanced Technology (a local nonprofit innovation hub and workforce development entity), the town's economic development department, several residents, the library, the school district's adult education department, and the Connecticut Department of Labor.

EHW decided to leverage what it learned from WCC to apply to participate in another place-based initiative, the Philadelphia Fed's [Reinventing our Communities \(https://www.philadelphiafed.org/community-development/reinventing-our-communities-roc-cohort-program\)](https://www.philadelphiafed.org/community-development/reinventing-our-communities-roc-cohort-program) program. The East Hartford cohort, led by Amy Peltier from EHW, chose to focus

on digital access challenges. Available data showed that East Hartford residents had lower computer ownership and lower broadband subscription percentages than the statewide average, but the group wanted to know more. The resulting survey received over 800 responses and provided a much more detailed picture of a community need.

For the library, the survey provided much-needed direction for their digital navigator program, begun in 2021 with pilot funding from the Connecticut State Library. “Digital access challenges are a major need, aligned with workforce challenges we were seeing with people,” Morgan said. Through our digital navigator program, we helped people sign up for home broadband, distributed computers to people, and provided one-on-one digital literacy training.”



Amy Peltier, was instrumental in leading EHW's efforts to bring jobs skills training and workforce training opportunities to East Hartford.

Evaluation and sustainability

After the WCC grant ended in 2022, East Hartford CONNects assessed and evaluated how to continue the momentum gained from its place-based work. Stakeholders worked with town leadership to transition East Hartford CONNects from the school district to the municipality as a standalone department located at the library to capitalize on the high traffic and multitude of

resources that the latter provides. The library repurposed physical space to accommodate adult learning services such as GED classes.



Ava Pham, a recent participant in East Hartford’s Summer Youth Employment Program, continues to develop and refine her job skills as an administrative assistant for East Hartford’s Parks and Recreation Department.

“This was a very good fit for us because the programing supported youth employment initiatives, adult employment initiatives, and some other resident engagement and educational programing that were aligned with what we were already doing at the library,” Morgan said. “And it was wonderful because we saw many job seekers dropping in to receive reference services or to use our computers. We could refer them immediately to a career navigator or East Hartford CONNects programs.”

That year, East Hartford CONNects was renamed to EHW to more broadly reflect the vision to strengthen systems that contribute to economic prosperity for all residents in the town.

Public health and human services

In 2023, town leaders wanted to create better customer service for residents and break down silos and align programs in key areas. That year, East Hartford created a Health and Human Services (HHS) Department that combined public health operations, youth services, and social services. HHS became responsible for the youth employment services of EHW's efforts.

"In this realignment, we saw taking on youth employment programming—particularly those looking for summer employment—as a natural fit for our department," said Laurence Burnsed, director of East Hartford's HHS. For EHW, the library handles adult workforce development services. HHS operates youth employment services.

Burnsed has seen firsthand how public health and human services are intertwined. In East Hartford, departments are encouraged to think about how they can better the lives of the town's residents.

"Four years ago, I was very green to human services and did not see its connection to public health. But I learned quickly that they're closely related," Burnsed said. "I remember a client who was struggling financially. We were not only able to connect him to financial assistance but to financial literacy training and workforce development training through EHW. "

— Laurence Burnsed, director, East Hartford Health and Human Services Department



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Youth employment success

In 2024, 58 students participated in EHW’s summer youth employment program. Participants received mentoring and learned interview techniques. They also learned how to build a resume and leverage social media like LinkedIn to connect with professional organizations. Youth accessed personality assessments to better understand their strengths and weaknesses and how they could use or improve them in the workplace.

Burnsed attributes the success of the youth employment program to local employers who are eager to participate and case workers who have a background in workforce development. “Case workers understand that it’s not about just giving an assignment with an employer and showing up to work on a schedule,” Burnsed said. “You have to mentor and educate youth. You have to talk with them more than you would an adult. It’s great to see how the youth grow and understand their role during a job placement and move on to other opportunities.” For example, Patterson, who worked in a gardening program during her youth, is now working part time with East Hartford Mayor’s Office for the summer. As

a communications intern, she produces infographics, the town newsletter, and updates for its social media channels and website.

“I think EHW is great for students who haven’t had a job before or don’t know the first thing about getting a job,” Patterson said. “I think EHW is a great way to gain the skills needed before going into the workforce.”



Daniel Lozado (left), a youth employment specialist and Astrid Calderón (right), the youth services program supervisor, work with residents like Edgardo Vega (center) to find opportunities through EHW’s summer youth employment program.

Hard work with sustainable benefits

Those involved with place-based initiatives readily admit that they take resilience, commitment, and patience to make them work. Getting multiple stakeholders from various groups to come together and agree on how to allocate resources and efforts toward a shared goal and vision can be complex.

But results like those achieved by East Hartford are possible in other communities and places. “I think there were several inflection points where we could have been like, ahh, this is too hard. This is too complicated. It’s not perfect,” said Morgan. “But we realize that coming together to focus resources and goals toward a bigger goal is part of the process, and it has gotten our work to a more sustainable place.”

“Not only do they continue to increase participation in the local economy, but they’re also intentional about engaging new partners, improving local systems, listening to their community, and learning and adapting to get closer to the long-term result they seek.”

– Colleen Dawicki, director, Federal Reserve Bank of Boston



Colleen Dawicki, director of community and regional outreach at the Boston Fed, worked directly with the East Hartford community during the WCC. She says she considers the town as one of the most successful collaboratives when it comes to implementing place-based economic development initiatives. “Not only do they continue to increase participation in the local economy,” Dawicki said, “but they’re also intentional about engaging new partners, improving local systems, listening to their community, and learning and adapting to get closer to the long-term result they seek.”

Acknowledgements

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