

**CityBeat**

## A new partnership is leveraging Cincinnati's community learning center model to extend housing opportunities

*A nationally recognized CPS community learning center model is launching an ambitious new project: a partnership with Habitat for Humanity that will rehab seven single-family homes in Lower Price Hill.*

NICK SWARTSELL — OCT 12, 2016 9 AM



Two years ago, an after-school tutor at Oyler School in Lower Price Hill told administrators that one of her students was living with his family under the viaducts that pass near the neighborhood. It was a heartbreaking, but not surprising, revelation in a community where many live in poverty.

It also illustrated one of the biggest needs many students and their families in Cincinnati face outside the classroom: a secure and affordable place to live.

"That really gave us insight into the need for housing," says Darlene Kamine, executive director of the Community Learning Center Institute (CLCI), of the student's now-remediated situation. "It became a very pressing reality we had to do something about."

The Cincinnati-based CLCI has been nationally recognized as a pioneer of the community learning center model, a concept that places schools in the middle of efforts to aid low- and moderate-income families. That means providing so-called "wrap around" services not usually associated with education, such as mental health care, food pantries and eye care centers.

Now, the organization is launching an ambitious new project: a partnership with Habitat for Humanity that will rehab seven single-family homes around Oyler in an effort to provide homeownership opportunities to families in Lower Price Hill.

CLCI will kick off that partnership at an Oct. 15 event designed to recruit applicants to the program. The first two houses to be renovated are on Burns and Staebler streets, nestled right next to the school.

"Our goal is to build the right learning conditions for our students so they can have success," says CLCI Director of Housing Development Adelyn Hall. "We've found that inside the school, we have a really good set of partnerships and all these things in place to make sure they succeed. But when we talk about distressed neighborhoods and dealing with poverty, you can't separate that from housing."

Cincinnati Public Schools adopted the community learning center model nearly 15 years ago, after an Ohio Supreme Court order directed Cincinnati to rebuild its struggling public schools. Today, all CPS schools are designated community learning centers, and 45 have resource coordinators who manage various community partnerships.

In a city where more than 50 percent of children live below the poverty line, Oyler has been one of CLCI's highest-profile success stories. Today, it hosts students K-12 and a number of community services, neighborhood activities and after-school programs. It received a high-profile, \$21 million renovation in 2012 and in 2015 appeared in a nationally touted documentary about its turnaround.



**CLCI Executive Director Darlene Karmine talks with staff at the Luxottica One Sight Vision Center.**

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As Kamine led a recent tour through the halls of the school, she highlighted its Freestore Foodbank pantry, Luxottica One Sight Vision Center, Cincinnati Health Department clinic, Delta Dental Center— a surprising favorite with students, staff say — and mental health wing, the result of a partnership with St. Aloysius orphanage. Each is run in collaboration with various partners who receive use of the space for free so long as they agree to see all students, insurance or no.

There have been big changes at Oyer following the gradual implementation of the community learning center model. In the 1990s, as many as 80 percent of the school's students dropped out. Now, it boasts a 74 percent graduation rate, according to its Ohio Department of Education report card.

But Lower Price Hill's struggles go beyond the school. The small neighborhood is nestled on a hillside west of downtown just above the industrial Queensgate enclave. Lower Price Hill was originally built to house working-class German immigrants and has since seen a number of demographic changes, including an influx of poor whites from Appalachia throughout the 20th century and a recent surge in immigrants from Mexico and other countries. Today it has fewer than 900 residents, according to 2014 American Community Survey data, many of whom live below the poverty line. The median household income in the neighborhood is just \$15,000 a year, half the city's median of about \$30,000.

Hard times have left many of the neighborhood's buildings vacant. A cruise along main thoroughfares reveals a number of boarded-up buildings and sagging structures. More than a quarter of Lower Price Hill's 452 residential units are empty. Others buildings are occupied, but some of them are "absolutely places you wouldn't feel comfortable having children," Karmine says. That's a big barrier to education and efforts to move out of poverty.

"Having stable housing has huge impacts on your ability to be successful," Hall says.

Thirty-one-year-old Steve Stanley can attest to that. Stanley grew up in Lower Price Hill and went to Oylar, and one of his three children also attends the school. Last year, the family was living in a rented house in Lower Price Hill and facing eviction because its owners wanted to repurpose it. Hall and Kamine were working with Stanley to find new housing options when they hit upon a bold solution.

"One day Darlene (Kamine) got this great idea," Stanley says. "She said, 'Why don't you go ahead and buy a house?' I was like, 'Me? Own a house? No way.' "

CLCI helped Stanley connect with Habitat for Humanity, which enrolled him in its program. Stanley spent the required 250 hours helping renovate a house, and in February the family moved into the three-bedroom home in East Price Hill.

"It's great," he says. "No one's coming to say, 'You gotta move out.' "He was paying \$600 a month to rent his old place in Lower Price Hill. Now he pays \$352 for his mortgage, taxes and insurance.

Getting his own house was a catalyst, Stanley says. Before starting the Habitat process, he had been getting various government assistance, including disability. But the push toward owning a home and want for a better life for his kids motivated him to take courses that allowed him to get a full-time paid job as a security guard at Oylar. These days, he also coaches basketball at the school and works down the street at the neighborhood's new laundromat.

"He's so resourceful and amazing," Karmine says. "It was the housing process that gave him that motivation, I think."

Stanley's involvement in Habitat also stoked interest among other residents around housing issues in Lower Price Hill.



**This currently-vacant house (middle) across from Oyler School is one of seven that will soon receive a Habitat for Humanity rehab.**

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Late last year, CLCI held a series of public meetings designed to explore ideas about development in the neighborhood. That process involved more than 140 Lower Price Hill residents, who participated in mapping exercises and activities envisioning what the community should look like as it rebounds.

"The very central thing that came out was a want for more single-family homeownership in the neighborhood," Hall says. "That's how this all started."

Kamine and Hall say this level of community participation is extending into the partnership with Habitat. The neighborhood's "matriarchs and patriarchs," Kamine says, are helping promote the program to potentially eligible residents.

CLCI hopes that many will turn out for the Oct. 15 event, which will take place at 9 a.m. in Oyler's auditorium.

But they're also thinking bigger. "For this event, we're really focusing on the seven homes that are being rehabbed in Lower Price Hill," Hall says. "But Habitat for Humanity has homes all over the city. We've invited all of our schools to come and to help us recruit." ©