

BRIDGES COLLABORATIVE MEMBER PROFILE

Elm City Communities



Organization type: Fair Housing Organization

Location: New Haven, Connecticut	Population ¹	
<p>Nearly 14,000 individuals and over 6,200 families with average annual income ranging from \$18,725 to \$19,869, served through low-income public housing programs and housing choice voucher programs</p>		
Size	Year Founded	
<p>Over 3,500 housing units distributed across 32 properties and various housing programs, including 5 low-income public housing complexes, 17 rental assistance demonstration sites, and 7 third-party managed sites.</p>	<p>1938</p>	



How does Elm City Communities work toward desegregation and integration?

Elm City Communities (ECC) is a quasi-governmental organization, with involvement of both public and private entities, that serves as the housing authority for the city of New Haven. It is a hybrid of three entities that perform different functions: a housing authority, a development corporation, and a property management company. These entities function together under the ECC umbrella to develop and make available quality affordable housing. This is done through a public housing program, the Housing Choice Voucher (HCV) Program (commonly known as Section 8), and the low-income tax credit program. In addition, ECC offers a host of support services directly or in partnership with other organizations to strengthen families’ economic advancement through ECC’s self-sufficiency provisions and to provide access to better housing options for themselves and their children. ECC’s desegregation and integration efforts work at multiple levels—on the ground with direct client-focused services and at a systems level as staff advocate for state and city policy changes to address root causes of residential segregation and remove barriers to desegregation and integration.

¹To categorize populations served, ECC uses “minority/non-minority” households in annual reporting documents. For the purposes of consistency across Bridges Collaborative member profiles, we categorize populations served using “white/non-white”.

ECC President Karen DuBois-Walton, Ph.D. says, *“As we’ve thought about the history of housing policy and the role that [housing authorities] have historically played, what do we want 50 years from now? [We] didn’t want it to be a story of actions that continued or deepened the segregation patterns that we see, as much as we wanted to just start doing things differently. It also required us to work to change local, state and even federal policy.”*



Organizational structure

ECC is predominantly funded by two federal programs administered under the US Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD): the Section 8 Program and the housing subsidy program. ECC’s housing authority was created in 1938 after the U.S. Housing Act enabled the state to take steps to eliminate tenement housing and instead invest in neighborhood development. The purpose of the housing authority is to offer support services and resources to families to help them access affordable housing through housing choice vouchers (HCV), low-income public housing, and low-income housing tax credits (LIHTC). In its early stages, ECC oversaw housing for low-income households. However, the level of federal funding provided was insufficient to invest in structural improvements, and many of these properties were located in high-poverty areas. ECC needed to decide how to reinvest in those properties, recognizing that federal funding would not suffice.

To achieve the level of investment required, ECC sought to create a development arm within the organization. Through a pipeline of redevelopment projects for existing public housing, ECC created a revenue stream that could also support and sustain their work as a housing authority. ECC started two 501c(3) nonprofit entities: The Glendower Group, which focuses on creating affordable housing communities and providing relocation services, and the 360 Management Group, which manages these properties. Both entities generate funds through fees and services, enabling ECC to be more nimble and take advantage of the strengths of combining public funding (HCV, LIHTC) and private funding (private investments) while compensating for the constraints on both types of funding. For example, moving properties out of the public housing funding stream and funding through the HCV program instead enables ECC to leverage these investments for future development opportunities and for residents eligible for HCV assistance. Further, when mortgage or other debt-based financing is unavailable, ECC can utilize alternative funding platforms to develop mixed financing (public and private) to fund redevelopment costs. When public housing is redeveloped, these properties accept families who are HCV recipients, and residents retain all the rights and responsibilities they had under the prior public housing program.

Once ECC acquired properties, either newly built or renovated, these properties were no longer considered public housing, so ECC created a property management arm to ensure that the housing was managed and preserved as affordable housing for low-income families and residents. ECC’s operations are guided by a commitment to ensuring respect, opportunity, and equity for the residents it serves. By taking on the development and property management roles, ECC could stay connected to the communities and preserve jobs there by hiring residents as staff. The development and property management components work in tandem with the housing authority component, which connects low-income families to the housing being created under the Glendower Group and being managed by the 360 Management Group.



Spotlight on communication to support advocacy

Timely and effective communication is key to ensuring ECC's work is streamlined across different entities, including partners that offer support services to ECC's families. But to move the needle on desegregation sustainably and consistently, ECC has broadened its communication efforts by advocating for systemic change to ensure the sustainability of its desegregation work. According to Dr. DuBois-Walton, *"There is a balance between what Elm Cities can do for the families living within their housing right now, and what [we] need to be doing more broadly to change access and opportunity."* To achieve ECC's goals for systemic change, the organization is committed to playing a greater role at local, state, and federal levels and advocate for equitable housing policies, less restrictive land use regulations, changes in workforce investments to support economic mobility, and more investment in affordable housing.

ECC works with various entities and tailors its messaging to communicate effectively with different audiences, including the families they serve, legislators and political groups, the general public, other advocacy organizations, and its partners. The organization has built up a body of work related to policy, advocacy, and engagement. ECC's advocacy agenda is focused on local (New Haven) and state levels. The organization is also investing resources to communicate with policy makers and their constituents in other towns to identify strategies for supporting racial diversity and opportunities for addressing zoning laws.



Communication to build awareness and understanding

Recognizing that legislators and the public often misunderstand current segregation patterns, one aspect of the organization's communication strategy is to educate policy makers and other advocacy organizations on the drivers of modern-day housing segregation.

Dr. DuBois-Walton explains, *"I think we took away a lesson that we needed to spend more and more time educating people on the causes so that [legislators] could take the right actions and not just pass something small and be able to say, 'Yep, we're done with housing.' So, we need to do more and more [work] connecting people to the scale of the problem. The urgency of the problem requires bigger transformational things than what [policy makers] were willing to do. I think we had more education that we needed to do and more coalition building and a deeper political strategy that we needed to figure out."*

In 2023, ECC leadership provided in-person and written testimonies to the Connecticut General Assembly, providing perspective on a number of bills under consideration to address [housing affordability](#), [housing shortages](#), and [rent stabilization](#). In addition to advocating for specific policies, ECC is creating and implementing a new vision for affordable housing. For example, in collaboration with the Growing Together Connecticut coalition, ECC provided draft language to the Connecticut legislature describing the Housing Growth Fund, a proposal to incentivize the development of new housing. These efforts help increase awareness of the causes and consequences of housing instability.



Communication strategy and the role of local context

ECC's communication strategy and policy platform center on developing and disseminating ways of talking about housing solutions that are accessible to legislators, members of the public, and other relevant actors.

The need to tailor messaging about this work was a hard lesson to learn for Dr. Dubois-Walton and her team, who view affordable housing as a social justice issue. They realized that to advocate for legislation that supports affordable housing and housing policy reforms, ECC's messaging had to be *"about something other than ... righting the wrongs of racist history and racial wealth disparities and everything. It has to be framed as 'this is what's good for Connecticut growth,' or 'economic growth requires that we are preparing all kids for success and that we are expanding housing opportunities in every community.'"* ECC refined their messaging approach through numerous conversations with diverse individuals to understand the relative viewpoints and institutional affiliations that influence how a message is perceived by decision makers. For example, although current zoning legislation may be rooted in systemic racism, the priority for ECC is to highlight to lawmakers and the public that these zoning laws limit the places where housing can be built and thus drive up the cost of existing housing, making housing less accessible to families with low incomes. Focusing on inaccessibility due to low income illustrates how organizations can avoid potentially divisive language and use language that highlights shared concerns to achieve buy-in from the community and the local leadership.

In addition to tailoring their messaging, when communicating with legislators ECC uses research and data to share housing trends and recommendations for making the housing landscape more accessible. For instance, ECC produced the [Breaking Ground report](#) which lists key policy recommendations for addressing housing shortages and housing instability. ECC distributed the report to elected officials and to [New Haven community management teams](#), who serve as liaisons between the city of New Haven government and the public. To support continued momentum in channeling research and data on neighborhood segregation into policy recommendations, ECC recently hired a housing policy manager. This staff role helps ECC provide dedicated and targeted communications around favored policies while also helping to build relationships with and consensus among relevant stakeholders to further ECC's affordable housing agenda.



What factors support progress on communication and advocacy?

Housing affordability as a legislative priority

Housing affordability is a concern in New Haven and across the United States. In Connecticut, constituents expressed their concerns during legislative sessions, which facilitated ECC's conversations with legislators. As Dr. DuBois-Walton noted, *"We were supported in this [legislative] session by the fact that Connecticut, like most of the country, is experiencing a housing crisis right now around affordability. So, what had maybe historically felt like a problem that only impacted 'those people over there' suddenly was a problem that legislators were hearing about from constituents across all towns. Now, what to do about that? People were saying, 'it's getting harder and harder for me to live in this town. It's getting harder and harder for me to live in Connecticut.' Every legislator was expected to fix [the problem]."* A continued awareness of the legislative agenda each session enables ECC to identify opportunities to share their expertise and advocate policy change. ECC tries to align their

communication strategies with their advocacy priorities and strategies to ensure cohesion in their messaging to different audiences.

Building relationships with local media is a critical part of ECC's communications plan. Local radio and newspapers have published op-eds and run stories on housing issues. Dr. DuBois-Walton explains, *"Our local NPR public radio, our online media and our print media, all devoted a lot of time to talking about housing issues. I think that all played in our favor."* ECC has also engaged the Narrative Project, Connecticut's only anti-racist public relations agency, to support ECC's communication efforts related to addressing residential segregation which is rooted in systemic racism.

Partnerships

Partnerships support ECC's communication and outreach strategies. ECC partners with organizations in other sectors – including public education, social services, and workforce development – that share a common vision for addressing housing affordability and stability. ECC works in partnership with individual schools to provide funding for services, such as tutoring at school, to help address the educational needs of community residents. ECC also partners with the school district by integrating its support into existing processes surrounding outreach. For example, some ECC staff serve as community volunteers and conduct door-to-door canvassing at the start of the school year to ensure families understand the importance of regular attendance. Also, when the school district created a tutoring program, ECC helped by putting out a call for volunteer tutors. This means that a lot of the communications and advocacy work is manifested in the partnerships that ECC forms with other relevant actors, like the local school district. In addition, ECC runs a Teacher in Residence (TIR) program that funds housing for a teacher in exchange for tutoring services for students who live in one of their housing developments.

Advocacy coalitions

At the state level, ECC collaborates with several groups: planners and fair housing organizations, coalition groups – including Growing Together Connecticut and Desegregate Connecticut, tenant rights groups, civil rights groups, and faith organizations. Together, these coalitions created a legislative agenda focused on key topics, such as tenant protection, rent caps, protections against discrimination, and limiting application fees. ECC also advocated for increased urban investment to offset disinvestment due to redlining and pushed to require the local government to change zoning laws to allow for multi-family housing. Dr. DuBois-Walton explains, *"And this [grassroots advocacy] is not necessarily the role of Elm City Communities. But in coalition with other groups, like, we need real political organizing...the way they win a campaign, right? That grassroots level, door-to-door approach. And as a quasi-governmental organization—that's not what we do. But in coalition with others where we can be a part of a group that is already doing that...I think we need more of that."*

Staff capacity

ECC has hired staff to fill the communications specialist and housing policy manager roles. Their responsibilities include maintaining relationships, getting updates on what advocacy and grassroots work coalition partners are doing, and staying in touch with the community. Each ECC housing development has an active tenant resident council (TRC) funded by ECC whose membership includes residents of that development. The TRC offers a platform for residents to voice their concerns and

contribute to decisions made about their residence. ECC staff members collaborate with TRCs to understand residents' concerns and priorities, ensuring that their input is factored into the policies developed around affordable housing.

Data

Data collection informs ECC's strategy by helping the organization better understand the current housing landscape, shedding light on the problems residents face and the changes they wish to see, and informing policy recommendations. ECC also polls community residents on topics like zoning and residential segregation to see what language resonates with them and how they are affected by these topics. ECC uses the data from sources like the residential polls and school district student achievement outcomes to highlight how cross-system structures can further disadvantage low-income households. After identifying the causes of housing unaffordability, the organization works to craft appropriate policies, educate the public and elected officials about these causes and their effects, and promote ECC's proposed solutions. Moreover, ECC has executed data-sharing agreements with New Haven public schools to assess students' academic achievement. ECC works with the school district to use the data to identify interventions that both partners may implement to better address student needs, including programs to increase school attendance.



What are the obstacles to making progress on communication and advocacy?

Local context

Connecticut school and housing policies are largely informed by decisions made at the local, state, and federal level. By statute, in the state of Connecticut, housing authorities can only work within their town or city boundaries unless they are explicitly invited to work in another community by an act of the local legislature. Connecticut is divided into 169 towns and cities, each of which has its own local government. ECC's work is confined to the 18 square miles of New Haven. Understanding the local political context and the attendant limitations is critical to expanding affordable housing. *"This work would look different in Texas, which has a much bigger footprint to operate in and is not constrained as significantly by local land use control. Legislators need to understand the context in order to form the right solutions,"* says Dr. DuBois-Walton.

Adding to the challenge is that many towns surrounding New Haven are developing affordable housing at a slower rate than New Haven. If surrounding towns are not "doing their part" to help those with limited resources, the demand for ECC's services will outpace its capacity, resulting in a growing housing voucher waiting list. A third of the families on the ECC waiting list for affordable housing come from surrounding towns.

Despite being a housing developer, ECC also faces barriers to building new housing on land in other towns. While surrounding towns have more land that could be developed into housing, they have land use regulations that only allow for single-family homes, constricting housing options in the area. For example, in some states, developers can independently purchase land in another town; however, ECC is required to secure legislative approval for such land acquisitions. Furthermore, some residents prefer to keep neighborhoods the same as when they bought their properties and thus resist new

development. There is also pushback from those concerned about the impact on local governance – including local residents and elected officials – and the potential transformation of their town, housing, and schools due to new development. Limited representation for low-income and urban neighborhoods in the Connecticut legislature can pose difficulties in enacting significant legislation that establishes tenant protections and broadens the accessibility of affordable housing for residents with low incomes. ECC aims to educate and connect people across the urban–suburban divide so that everyone understands the scale of the problem. The organization seeks to instill a sense of urgency, that is more likely to lead to bigger and bolder solutions. More coalition building and a deeper strategy are needed, including illuminating the connection between the plight of the area’s unhoused population and the limited availability of affordable housing.

Capacity limitations

ECC’s comprehensive approach to housing desegregation has enabled them to work across three different streams—housing authority, property development, and property management—to ensure systemic progress on housing accessibility and affordability. But focusing on communication and advocacy while also building the organization’s capacity in other areas has been challenging. *“It’s hard to prioritize advocacy when there are continuous fires to put out,”* Dr. Dubois-Walton notes. ECC requires significant resources to fully pursue the grassroots organizing and campaigning that has become more and more meaningful in their advocacy work. This kind of work requires more coalition building on ECC’s part, which ECC is currently pursuing, to ensure that their advocacy results in meaningful change. It requires time-sensitive communications, maintaining relationships with partners, developing new relationships, and being aware of ongoing policy developments. Furthermore, ECC has created new positions, including a housing policy manager and a communication specialist, as part of ongoing efforts to have dedicated staff members who can focus on advocacy work. Finally, ECC is also pursuing collaborations with existing grassroots coalitions to further support the housing equity movement.

Organizational structure

ECC’s classification as a quasi-governmental entity introduces specific challenges linked to local land use control policies. These challenges have the potential to impede property development opportunities in regions that could otherwise benefit from increased housing options. Dr. DuBois-Walton explains, *“Since we are quasi-governmental, we have the benefit of having this steady flow of federal resources. But we also have the constraints that come with that—we’re governed by some rules that limit what we can do. So that becomes a challenge to navigate.”*

Ultimately, ECC would like to have the ability to purchase property like any other developer. Dr. DuBois-Walton says that *“local zoning laws have to change to create the opportunity for the development of [fair] housing. Without this, you end up with resource hoarding in the suburbs, while local governments in urban areas try to provide support without having the same tax base to do so.”*



Lessons learned

- Get clear about your local context and relevant legislative and policy constraints to better understand capacity and opportunity to implement specific housing programs.
- Leverage alternative organizational structures, such as a private-public or quasi-governmental structures, to broaden and enhance funding sources for supporting a range of desegregation initiatives, ensuring their expansion and sustainability.
- Adopt programs and opportunities that complement or enhance the impact of existing programs. For instance, ECC's Moving to Work is integral to its policy and advocacy efforts.
- Communicate with legislators to help them understand root causes of housing segregation so they can generate applicable solutions. Understand their points of concern and present a shared understanding of housing issues to facilitate buy-in for proposed solutions.
- Continuously evaluate your organization's barriers to progress; then think about what needs to change to address those barriers.
- Create a staff role dedicated to researching the focal points of your advocacy platform, conceptualizing the issues for different audiences, and communicating about the issues.
- Prioritize partnership and collaboration with other organizations that may have similar goals and can help you overcome capacity gaps in your own programs.
- Building relationships and coalitions with entities that share common interests can enhance your efforts and expand available resources enabling you to take advantage of collaborative communication opportunities such as town hall meetings and joint press releases.