Civic, cleric & community leaders meet in 1939; in 1941 the Community House is incorporated

Editor’s Note: Today, the IRS designated not-for-profit West Haven Community House is among the largest employers in the city of West Haven with an annual budget of more than $6.6 million. It has more than 180 full and part-time employees and in 2016 the agency will be celebrating its 75th anniversary in West Haven.

WEST HAVEN (Oct 6, 2015) - The Community House’s humble origin began in 1939 when a group of concerned West Haven citizens from various walks of life began meeting to discuss community needs. By early 1941 the group began calling itself the “Group Work Study Committee” and in August 1941 the non-profit private agency was incorporated, just months before America’s entry into World War II.

In the ensuing 74 years, the West Haven Community House in its history has offered a variety of services for all members of the family, young and old.

Community House’s services today include a school readiness Head Start program for at-risk 3- and 4-year-olds, before and after school services in the public schools for students K-6, and, a Day service program as well as Residential homes for adults with disabilities.

Although the West Haven Community House is not legally affiliated with the city of West Haven, the agency’s first funding commitment in 1941 came from city’s Finance Board in the amount of $2,000. It was closely followed by a grant of $2,400 from the Community Chest, the forerunner to today’s United Way of Greater New Haven.

Nearly 75 years later, it can be said that these investments were well made, as today, Community House programs are funded by a variety of sources including state and federal grants, user fees, net proceeds from special events, and contributions from individual, businesses and foundations.

However, it was the seed funding provided by the city of West Haven and the current United Way of Greater New Haven via the Community Chest in late 1941 and early 1942 that enabled the agency’s first programming.

At that time, the combination of civic, religious and community leaders and concerned citizens of West Haven perceived “a growing problem of juvenile offenses,” as reported by police and the courts.

At the Group Work Council’s second meeting on May 27, 1941, the Rev. Edwin Settle Jr. “stated that the purpose of the group was to become acquainted with the recreational needs of West Haven” with a focus on teen youth and children, and the “prevention of delinquency.”

Among those attending were Dr. R.D. Boaz, the Rev. Brian Ban, Father John C. Digman, E.M. Hamilton, H.M. Hodges (Park Board), Mrs. Otto (Pauline) Lang, George S. Binen, Fay Simmons, Mrs. Carl Hartshorn, and Winifred S. Greene.
At that meeting, the Rev. Settle was named chairman, and Miss Greene the group’s secretary, and speaking for the Park Board, Hodges told the May 27 gathering that the Park Board had just met with the city’s Board of Finance and heard a “report from the West Haven probation officer that there had been 400 cases of juvenile delinquency” in the prior 10 months.

In order to address West Haven’s increasing youth delinquency rate, Hodges said, “The Board of Finance was interested in financially backing the Park Board” in funding an additional youth worker position in West Haven.

Also present at the meeting was Mr. Appleton, the West Haven Probation Officer.

The Work Group Council members then agreed that “a plan with a budget of $4,000 or $5,000” should be formulated and presented to both the Community Chest of New Haven and the West Haven Board of Finance to fund the proposed “youth worker position.”

“It was also suggested that three meeting places for youth were needed – one in the center of town, one in Allingtown, and one in the present Boys Club.”

Mrs. Lang was then appointed chairman of the “committee to formulate needs,” joined by Miss Simmons and Miss Greene.

Evidence of the growing civic and community support for the effort was contained in Lang’s “Needs Committee” report presented on June 20, 1941, the group’s third meeting. Mrs. Lang told the group that the committee had met with representatives of the Park Board, West Haven schools, Boys Club, Jewish Community Center, the YMCA and YWCA, Boys Scouts, Girls Scouts, the Minor Park Improvement Association, churches, library, Garden Club and the local PTA, among others.

Others present at the June meeting in addition to those attending in May were Elsa Montgomery (Community Chest and Farnum House), Myles MacMillan (Farnum House), Charles Vacca (Allingtown), Maurice Katzman (Jewish Center), Franklin Robinson (PTA), Homer Borst (Community Chest), Frank Smith (Catholic Church), Etta Hamilton and Tracy Redding (YMCA).

By the end of the June meeting there was a consensus growing to form a new organization. “Resources and sources of leadership” are needed, Mrs. Lang said, and the hiring of “a trained person in charge” was emphasized.

The “qualities” necessary for the “trained person in charge” were also deliberated as “... a person who knows how to work with public and private agencies, the person should have special preparation for this work, as they would be coordinator, inspirer and be in charge of training of volunteers.”

Some advocated for the new youth worker to be a citizen of West Haven. There was discussion whether the position would “be privately employed or a political employee” and what educational qualifications might be required. “Use of schools by all ages during out-of-school hours” was also deliberated.

The “legal form” the organization might take was discussed, including a possible affiliation with Farnum House. “Various possibilities were discussed, such as a private federation of a recreational group and
questions were raised regarding the need for possible legal action if there was to be a joint public and private sponsorship."

But the end of the meeting, the June meeting minutes noted, “It was felt such would be necessary.”

“The Rev. Settle concluded the meeting with the statement that we are in a particularly happy situation in the knowledge that the Park Board and this committee are working together for the welfare of the West Haven Community.”