

HRA facility adds classroom for infants, toddlers

By CATHERINE SHEN
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NEW BRITAIN — A brand new licensed classroom for eight infants and toddlers in New Britain was unveiled to the public Wednesday morning before a crowd of excited children, parents and educators.

During the ribbon-cutting ceremony, the Human Resources Agency of New Britain and other local organizations celebrated the new classroom, on Oak Street. It complements two Head Start classrooms for 3- and 4-year-olds at the same location. The new classroom filled quickly and already has a waiting list, although not everyone on the list will be eligible. The classroom was opened in early September to start providing child care services and quality education.

According to HRA, licensed child care slots for low-income infants and toddlers in the city fall woefully short of the growing demand for them, especially in the poorest neighborhoods. The most recent U.S. Census data ranks New Britain with the fifth-highest poverty rate in the state. Poverty among children under 5 is an alarming 35.1%.



Catherine Shen | Staff

Celebrating the dedication of a new HRA classroom for children under 3 Wednesday were, from left, Elena Trueworthy from the Connecticut Office of Early Childhood; Betty Sugarman Weintraub from the Connecticut Health and Educational Facilities Authority; Rocco Tricarico, director of HRA; Liz Buczynski, director of community investment for the United Way, and Amy Griswold, director of early Childhood Education for HRA.

Before HRA's classroom opened in 1965, there were only 387 licensed slots for center-based or home-based infant and toddler care in the city. None of them was in the Oak Street neighborhood.

The agency has 165 of the 387 slots at its main facility at 180 Clinton St.

The Connecticut Health and

Educational Facilities Authority helped provided funds to support classroom renovations to meet state licensing regulations, while funding from the

United Way of Central and Northeastern Connecticut supported children and teacher operations for the classroom, according to Rocco Tricarico, executive director of HRA.

"The Oak Street neighborhood has been historically underserved so this is a great way to help the community," Tricarico said. "We've been trying to reclaim the neighborhood block by block over the years and, hopefully, this will help keep the momentum going."

Betty Sugarman Weintraub, CHEFA's grant program manager, said her organization was really excited to be involved with this project because child care tends to be a neglected area.

"It's so important for parents who work to know that they have a safe place for their children," she said. "There's always a need and not enough service. We really need to focus on increasing the number of child care providers so not only can they get quality education,

but the parents can continue to work."

Jennifer Perez, 32, a longtime Oak Street resident, said that to know that her son, Isaiah Yanes, 2, is in the HRA classroom while she is at work really helps with their daily lives.

"We're happy to be here and he's very happy to be here," said Perez. "He has learned so much since the classroom opened. It really allows me to work in peace when I know that he is safe and learning from teachers who we love so much."

For more information, visit www.hranbct.org.

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