



**ROOTED IN RESILIENCE**

# A Community Conversation for Newtown's Future

*engaging voices,  
shaping vision together*



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Abstract: The Newtown Community Conversation is a space for residents, leaders and stakeholders to share experiences and shape a collective vision for a future family center to transform quality of life.



# NEWTOWN FAMILY CENTER COMMUNITY CONVERSATION REPORT

## NEWTOWN COMMUNITY | SARASOTA, FLORIDA

Facilitator: Talethia O. Edwards

Date of Visioning Session: May 16, 2025

### INTRODUCTION

On May 16, 2025, a pivotal Community Conversation was held at Dreamers Academy, a bilingual dual-language charter school located adjacent to a 12-acre parcel of land in the heart of Sarasota’s historic Newtown neighborhood. The purpose of this event was to engage directly with residents to gather their ideas in the visioning process for a proposed Newtown Family Center. The conversation began by centering children and families with the guiding question: “What are your hopes and dreams for your child(ren)?” This opening set the tone for a thoughtful and inclusive dialogue. The event marked a key step in a broader community-driven planning effort to ensure that future development reflects the neighborhood’s needs, values, and aspirations.

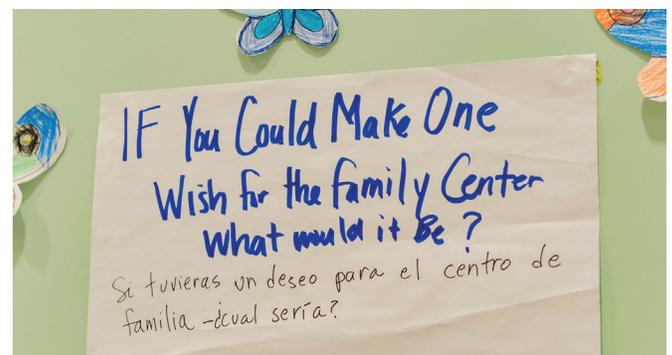
#### Newtown: A Historic Community

Founded in 1914, Newtown is one of Sarasota’s oldest African American neighborhoods. It was recently designated Florida’s largest Black Historic District, a testament to the community’s resilience and legacy of civic engagement. The Newtown Alive initiative has been instrumental in documenting and celebrating the area’s rich heritage, including its civil rights leaders, educators, business owners, and cultural champions who have shaped the fabric of the city.

#### Community Demographics and Diversity

While Newtown remains deeply rooted in African American culture and history, the neighborhood has grown increasingly diverse. Bilingual and bicultural families are an essential part of the community’s present and future. This is exemplified by Dreamers Academy, which hosted the Community Conversation and serves as a bridge between cultures. The Academy offers a dual-language immersion curriculum in English and Spanish to serve Sarasota’s most vulnerable student population with the goal of closing academic achievement gaps. Opened in 2023, the tuition-free public charter school’s Newtown campus enrolls 540 students in this school choice program.

This demographic richness underscores the importance of designing a Family Center that reflects the full cultural spectrum of Newtown’s families. The participation of a wide array of residents—including Black, White, Hispanic/Latino, multigenerational, and newcomer families—ensured a broad, inclusive vision emerged during the event.



## PURPOSE AND OBJECTIVE OF THE COMMUNITY CONVERSATION

The Community Conversation was designed to achieve the following, in alignment with the project's scope of work:

- Create a space for authentic, grassroots dialogue among residents.
- Identify priorities, programs, and services desired in the Newtown Family Center.
- Capture community-generated themes, quotes, and ideas to guide development and support future grant funding.
- Engage a cross-section of the community, with intentional outreach to bilingual and multicultural families.
- Identify individuals to develop into community leaders and Neighborhood Experts.
- Identify parents / guardians to join the Parent Advisory Committee, a key component of the Newtown Family Center.
- Identify barrier to participation and engagement.



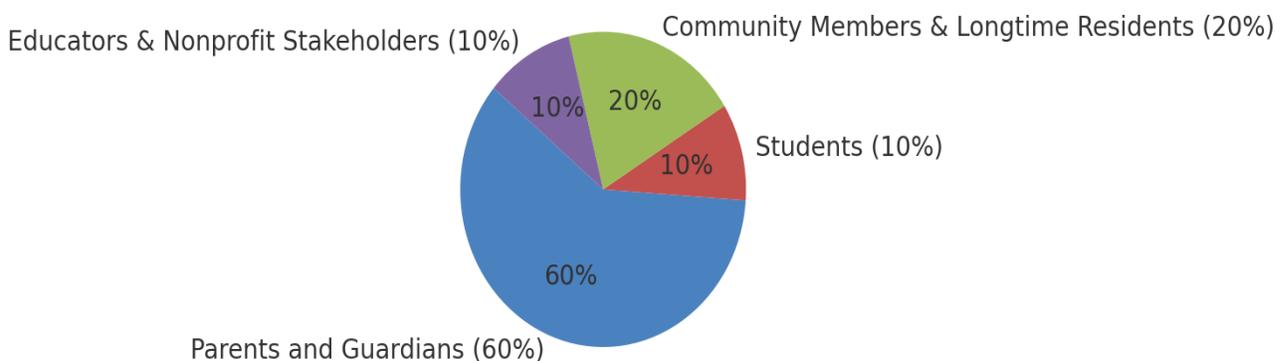
The insights shared during this session are documented in this report, which highlights emerging themes, resident quotes, and community priorities. These findings will serve as both a blueprint for future planning and a compelling narrative for stakeholders and funders committed to place-based transformation and the improved academic and social development of our children.

## PARTICIPANT SNAPSHOT

The Community Conversation reflected a diverse cross-section of the Newtown community and broader Sarasota partners. The event successfully brought together individuals with deep roots in the neighborhood as well as those invested in the future of the proposed Newtown Family Center.

### Demographic Breakdown:

#### Participant Demographics - Community Conversation



### **Languages Spoken:**

The Community Conversation was designed to be fully inclusive and accessible to all participants, regardless of their primary language. Recognizing the cultural and linguistic diversity of the Newtown neighborhood—particularly its growing Spanish-speaking population—live, professional translation services were provided throughout the entire event.

This intentional approach ensured that participants could fully engage in every aspect of the conversation, from small group discussions to large group feedback, without language serving as a barrier. Spanish-speaking residents were able to express themselves freely and contribute meaningfully to the co-creation of ideas for the future Newtown Family Center. All materials and facilitation were designed to reflect this commitment to linguistic access.

This level of participation helped foster a space of mutual respect and shared ownership, where every voice was valued and heard, regardless of language. The result was a richer, more representative dialogue that honored the full makeup of the community and strengthened trust in the planning process.

### **Community Affiliation:**

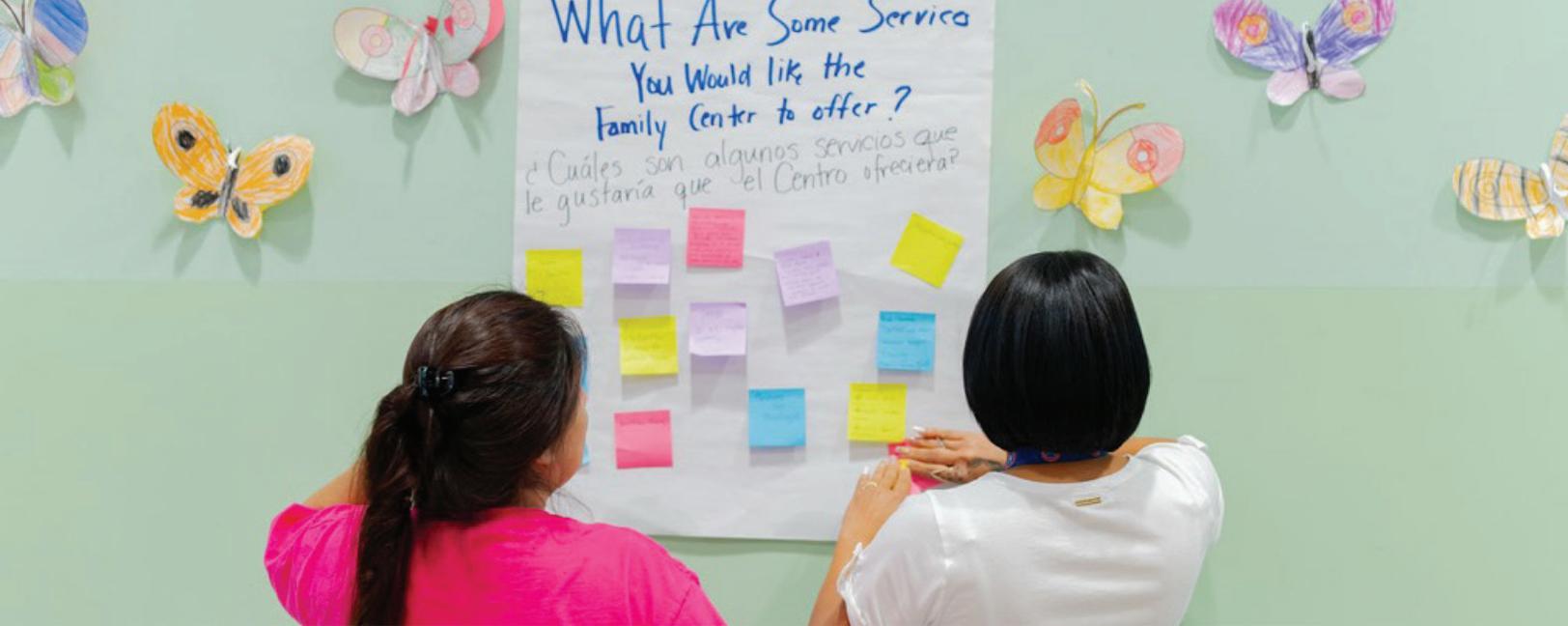
The majority of participants had direct ties to Newtown, either as residents or as parents of students enrolled in the four Title I neighborhood schools or bussed to other schools in the county. Unique to Sarasota County, the two-square mile Newtown neighborhood has ten attendance zones, and many children are bussed to far away schools, a legacy of desegregation which negatively impacts the level of engagement that Newtown families can have with their children's education. Additionally, the event drew participation from a range of community partners and stakeholders across the greater Sarasota area, reflecting broad interest and investment in the residents of Newtown as well as a vision for a future Newtown Family Center.



## **SESSION STRUCTURE**

The Community Conversation was designed with an intentional structure to ensure natural and robust engagement. A well-organized agenda guided the session, allowing for meaningful interaction through a variety of facilitation methods. The event was structured to maximize participation and elevate community voice through a purposeful format that included small group discussions, visual tools, and open sharing—ensuring every guest had an opportunity to contribute meaningfully. The following agenda guided the flow of the Community Conversation:

- Welcome & Purpose - Overview of the project, introductions
- Icebreaker - Vision collage & dream wall
- Community Mapping - Asset identification by participants
- Themed Breakouts - Conversations around key focus areas
- Group Report-Outs - Collective sharing and insights
- Closing Circle - Final reflections and commitments



## KEY THEMES IDENTIFIED

The Community Conversation surfaced a range of insights, ideas, and shared priorities from participants. Through facilitated dialogue, small group discussions, and open sharing, several core themes emerged that reflect the community's collective vision for the Newtown Family Center. These themes represent the voices of parents, residents, students, and partners, and provide clear direction for how the center can serve as a responsive, adaptive, and transformative asset for the Newtown community.

### **Access to Resources**

- Strong demand for medical services, mental health support, parenting classes, and behavioral health services for youth.
- Requests for job readiness, GED classes, and adult literacy programming.
- Interest in legal support services.

### **Family Support Services**

- Parents expressed a need for a 'one-stop shop' for navigating school systems, healthcare, and social services.
- A family navigator or bilingual case manager was suggested as a critical resource.
- Emphasis on programming for families.

### **Youth & Student Development**

- After-school programs were identified as a high priority.
- Teen mentorship and leadership opportunities were suggested as essential components.
- Community voiced a need for safe, youth-centered spaces.

### **Community Connectedness**

- Residents discussed a need for more intergenerational events and gatherings.
- Ideas included cultural celebrations, neighborhood cleanups, and community dinners.
- Desire for community advisory boards that include parent and youth voices.

### **Health & Nutrition**

- Interest in nutrition education, cooking classes, and access to affordable, healthy food.
- Healthcare services for those uninsured, with an emphasis on accessible, quality services.

## DIRECT COMMENTS & QUOTES FROM PARTICIPANTS

*“Looking forward to be a part of the Newtown Family Center.”* - Parent

*“I have worked in Newtown for 23 years; I have 70% of my investments here.”* - Stakeholder

*“Necesitamos que mas líderes de la comunidad sean mentores para los niños.”* - Participant

*“Let the children share their ideas about what they would like to see in the Family Center.”* - Student

*“Sin duda alguna me encanta la idea. Brindará apoyo tanto a los padres como a los niños.”* - Community Elder

## RECOMMENDATIONS

### **Establish a Trust-Building Engagement Strategy**

- Recognize that while community interest is strong, historic disinvestment and broken promises have eroded trust. The organization must invest in building relationships with transparency, humility, and consistency.
- Practice transparency with regular updates and feedback loops.
- Work to overcome skepticism due to past disappointments, and invite community dialogue and invite community dialogue on how to move forward differently, together.
- Show continuity between community input and actual decisions being made.

### **Create On-Ramps for Leadership and Ownership**

- Move beyond traditional outreach to build true community ownership by offering leadership development, paid opportunities, and roles in design and implementation.
- Ensure community members hold real decision-making power on steering committees or advisory groups.
- Prioritize hiring and training residents for center staffing and project roles.

### **Co-Design the Vision with a Long-Term Opportunity Lens**

- Use this first conversation as the beginning of an iterative co-design process that centers the voices of families, youth, and elders to include those in the community that may feel disconnected or disenfranchised but remain as residents.
- Frame the Newtown Family Center as not just a place for services, but a hub for engagement, growth, and opportunity with the children as the primary focus.
- Ensure programming reflects the linguistic, cultural, and generational diversity of Newtown. Build in evaluation methods that incorporate community definitions of success and wellness.

## NEXT STEPS

While this section highlights the major themes that arose during the community conversation, it is important to mention that the participants were candid about acknowledging the challenges that Newtown residents are navigating on a daily basis. These challenges should be taken into consideration as the committee plans and prepares for next steps.

- Share this report with the full steering committee.
- Incorporate themes and community voices into grant narratives and funding proposals.
- Host follow-up meetings with participants to validate findings and maintain momentum, do this through on-going visioning sessions (quarterly or monthly).
- Build partnerships with potential service providers based on identified needs.
- Explore short-term pilot programs that test components of the envisioned center.
- Launch a Newtown Community Fellowship to build leadership capacity. Already planned are stipends and training in areas like public speaking, facilitation, and civic leadership.
- Secure early investment/funding specifically for community-driven employment, such as resident-led outreach teams or center construction apprenticeships.



## APPENDICES

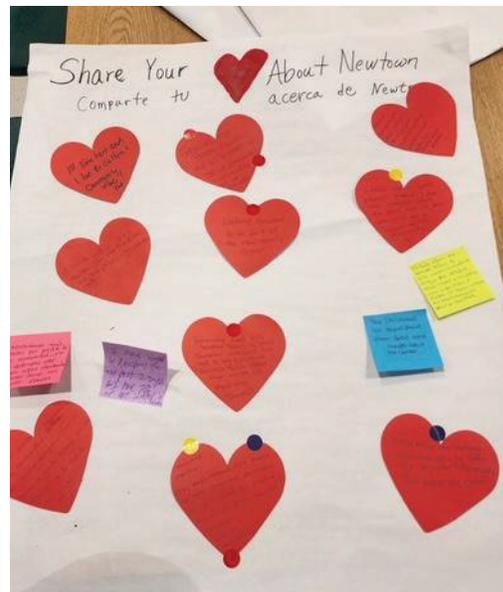
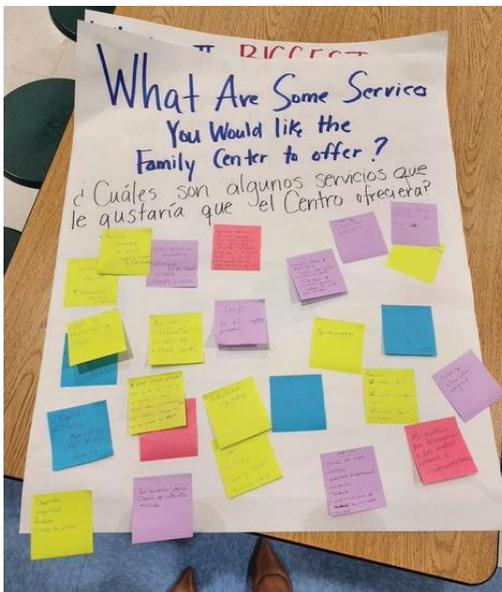
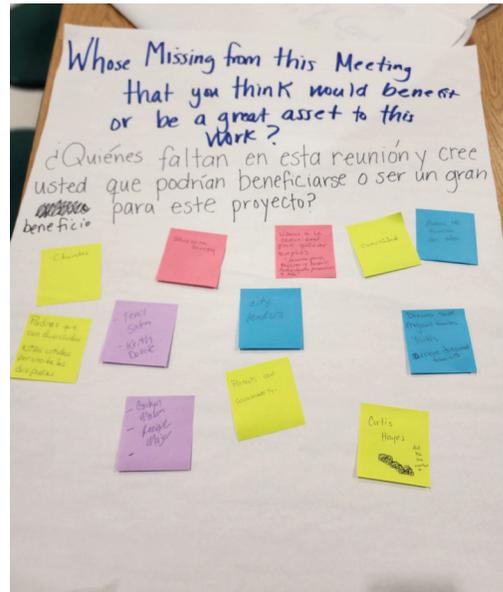
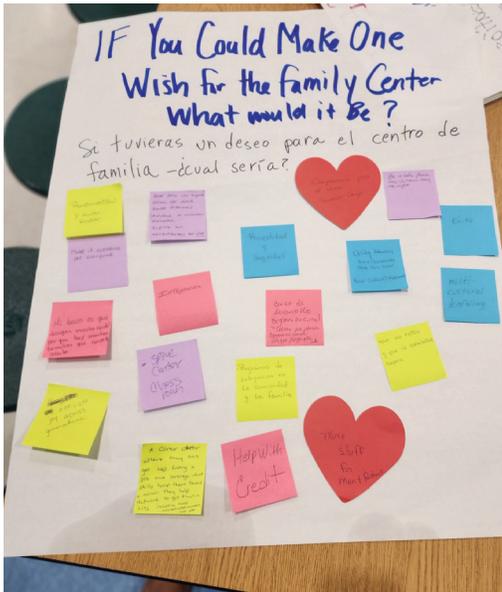
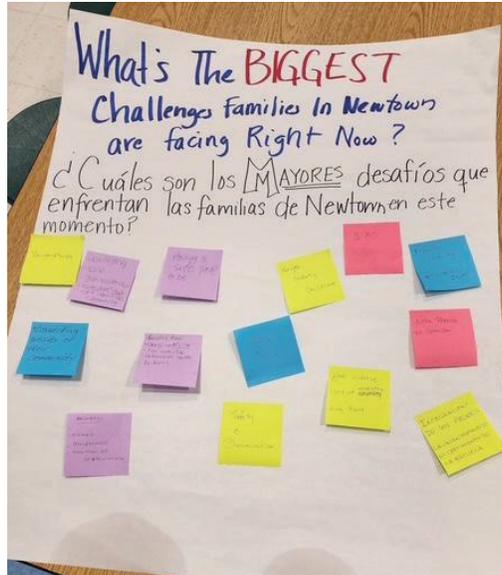
**Appendix A:** Raw Notes from Breakout Groups

**Appendix B:** Photos of Community Vision Boards & Dream Wall

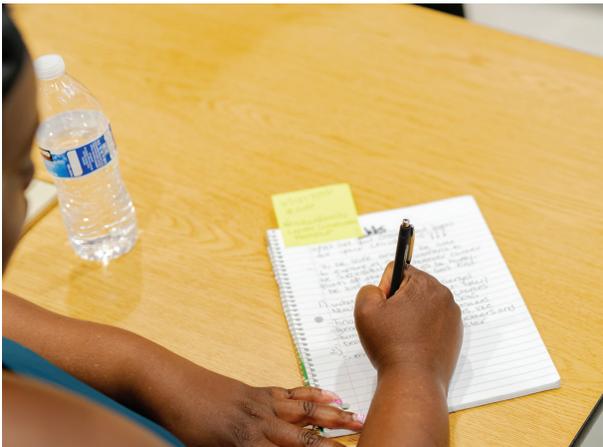
**Appendix C:** Menti Slides and Participation Results



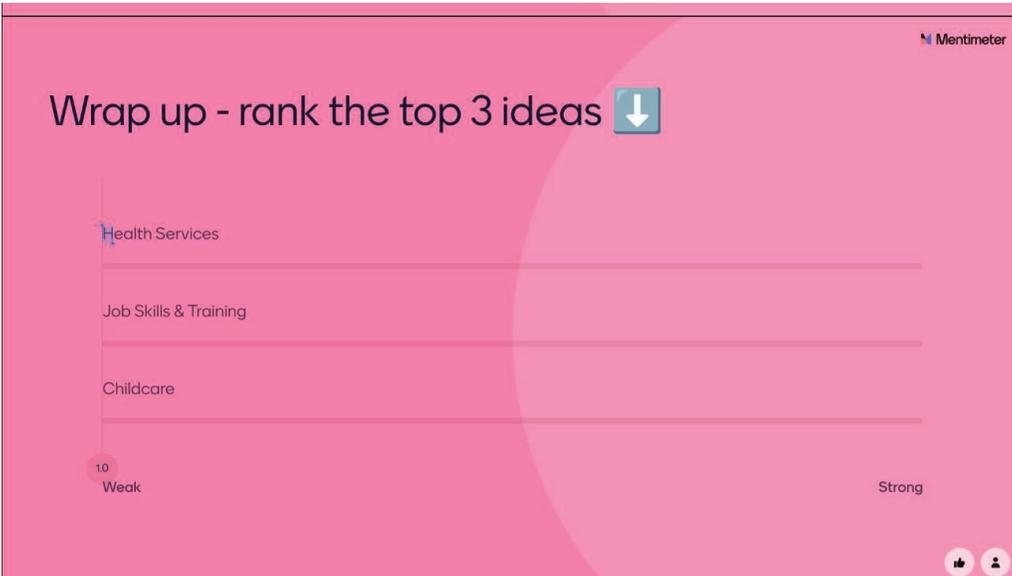
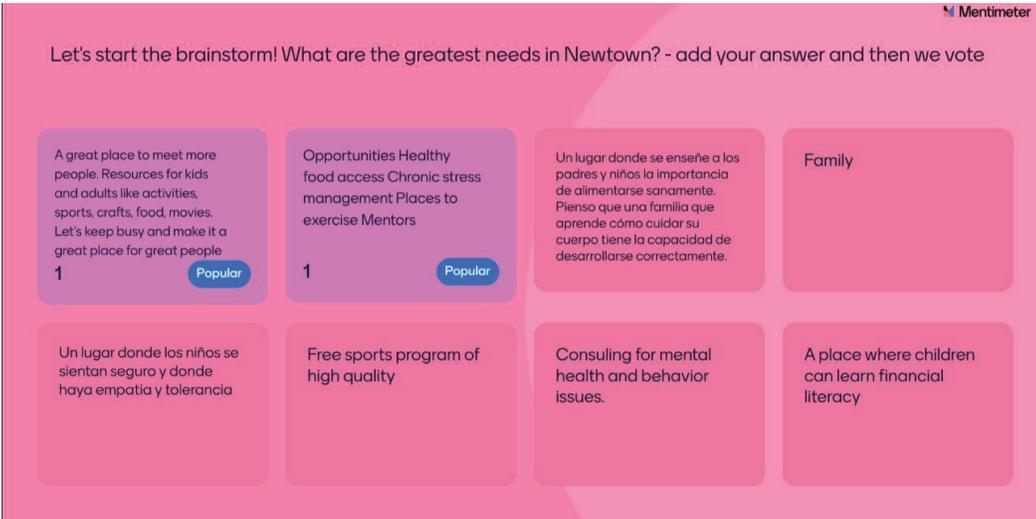
APPENDIX A Raw Notes from Breakout Groups



APPENDIX B Photos of Community Vision Boards & Dream Wall



# APPENDIX C Menti Slides and Participation Results





■ STEERING COMMITTEE

Alex Amaya, Mary Butler, Geri Chaffee, Jessica Cramer, Hilary Espinosa-Santucci, Curtis Hayes, Ronnique Major, Helen Neal-Ali, Gina Rosabal, Dr. Cathy Rodriguez, Terrill Salem, Nathan Scott, Yazmil Soriano, Michelle Stears, Javi Suarez, Ernestine Taylor, Carlos Yancy

*Thank you!*

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**NewtownFamilyCenter.org**