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## NEWS

# Collaborative opens space for kids in Middletown homeless shelter (with video)

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MIDDLETOWN — Representatives from community organizations such as the Community Renewal Team, Head Start, the Middlesex Family Shelter, Bright Horizons and Columbus House were on hand Wednesday for the grand opening of the Middlesex Family Shelter on Daddario Road.

The two-family home at the end of a cul-de-sac can accommodate up to seven homeless families.



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The basement of new facility, formerly a Red Cross shelter, had been transformed to a children's playspace and library.


"Head Start started working with family shelters. Family shelters didn't have the resources for early childhood programs," said Grace Whitney, director of the Connecticut Head Start Collaboration Office.

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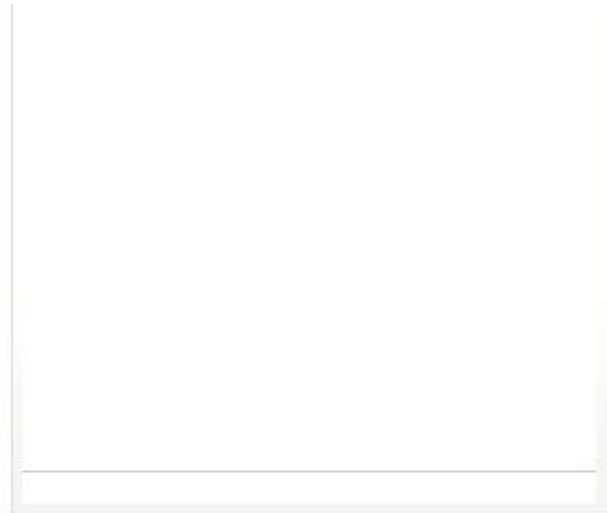
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"So we assessed shelters, child-proofed them and moved resources and staff for a shelter program to make them in line with the needs of infants and toddlers. The shelters are usually for adults and the children go along," Whitney said.

Whitney said the children did not have access to early learning services and that puts them at a disadvantage when they enter kindergarten.

The playspace and library, referred to as a "Bright Space" by organizers, was made possible by a grant from the state Department of Social Services Office of Head Start Collaboration and funding from Bright Horizons Foundation for Children. The DSS grant, awarded to the Community Renewal Team, required both assessment and improvement of the children's environments at three other family shelters in the area.



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Volunteers with the Community Renewal Team and Columbus House helped paint, hang pictures and mover furniture, among other efforts to make the playspace possible.

"This is an incredible collaboration," said Alison Cunningham, executive director of Columbus House. "This collaboration is important — we can't solve homelessness by ourselves, so we do this for the people devastated by homelessness."

Mayor Dan Drew came out for the grand opening. While the mayor routinely attends such events, the opening of the Middlesex Family Shelter held a special meaning for him, he said.

"I used to work for CRT for several years," Drew said. "To see this collaboration is amazing... Our children are our future — it's not a cliché. This children's area is a place where children can learn and grow, and that's important. It's important for the children and the community."