

Boys & Girls Club Launches \$20 Million Fundraising Drive For New South End Center

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The [Hartford](#) Boys & Girls Clubs hope to raise \$20 million in the next four years to open a new center in the South End, a corner of the city with a wealth of children and a dearth of after-school facilities.

The clubs' board already has secured nearly \$12 million, Sam Gray, head of the Boys & Girls Clubs of Hartford, said Thursday. Gov. [Dannel P. Malloy](#) approved \$7 million in state bonds for the project in May; a group of board members contributed more than \$3 million; and The Hartford pledged another \$1 million Thursday.

Christopher Swift, the insurance giant's chairman and CEO, will chair the fundraising campaign.

"I didn't grow up in Hartford, but I've come to love the town," Swift said Thursday. "The caring is palpable."

The clubs' board had first proposed renovating some of their eight existing locations in Hartford, but settled on building a new facility, said Alan Kreczko, the board's chair and a former executive at The Hartford.

"We ultimately decided the campaign shouldn't be about buildings — it should be about reaching more kids," Kreczko said. Gray had run an analysis of where the clubs were reaching Hartford children: 40 to 50 percent of all kids in the city's western half interact with Boys & Girls Clubs, Gray said, compared with just 10 percent of kids in the eastern half.

And as much as a third of all Hartford's schoolchildren now live in the city's southeastern corner, Gray said, with families drifting down from the North End and the graying of the Blue Hills neighborhood, one of the most homeowner-dense pockets of the city. But the area has few after-school options for parents, he said. The closest Boys & Girls Club to the South End is at Trinity College.

"Seven thousand school age kids don't have an after-school facility," Kreczko said. He estimated that 400 children would pass through a South End club each day.

Gray said the clubs have not yet settled on a site.

The \$20 million targeted sum would fund the new construction and the first few years of its operating costs, which Gray estimated would amount to at least \$500,000 a year. The Hartford clubs now have a \$6 million endowment.

Growing up in public housing, the local Boys & Girls club provided Greg Davis all he knew to want. His mother raised him and his brothers alone, but at the club Davis had books and someone to read them aloud; sports, and coaches to teach them; and a second home since he was 5 years old.

“We didn’t have much money, but with the club there, we felt we had everything any kid had,” he said.

Davis, now an attorney at Travelers, all but grew up at the Joseph D. Lapenta Northwest Boys & Girls Club and was mentored by the namesake. Lapenta, a six-decade employee of the Hartford clubs and eventually their executive director, died in 2016. Davis read his eulogy.

“For these kids,” Davis said, “the club staff is your second family.”