



UNITED
NEIGHBORHOOD
HOUSES

A photograph of a woman in a blue vest pointing at a ballot paper on a table. An older man with glasses is sitting next to her, filling out the ballot. Other people are visible in the background, some sitting at tables. The scene appears to be a community meeting or a voting station.

FROM TRUST TO TURNOUT:

What Settlement Houses Teach Us About Engaging Voters

April, 2026

Introduction

United Neighborhood Houses (UNH) is a policy and social change organization representing neighborhood settlement houses that reach over 840,000 New Yorkers from all walks of life. Since 2017, UNH's nonpartisan Get Out the Vote (GOTV) initiative has mobilized settlement house partners across New York City and State to engage thousands of community members, building trust, civic knowledge, and participation. Over this period, UNH support and minigrant funding catalyzed 31 settlement houses to integrate or expand GOTV and year-round civic engagement opportunities. UNH provides peer learning, technical assistance, and data analysis to bolster settlement house capacity and identifies best practices for increasing voter turnout and civic participation. UNH also guides settlement houses as they navigate common challenges: voter disengagement, distrust of elected officials or the electoral process, linguistic, educational, or physical barriers to participation, and limited capacity.

As the GOTV initiative has progressed, UNH has integrated support for settlement houses to experiment with and expand their capacity to inspire voters, using relational organizing as a foundation for democratic participation. Amid increasing disenfranchisement, federal funding cuts, and policy threats facing settlement house communities, it is critical to continue building civic power. As trusted neighborhood institutions, settlement houses are uniquely positioned to engage groups typically underrepresented among voters and to educate and inspire new forms of community involvement.

In the 2024 general election, New York State ranked 41st nationally in voter turnout, with only 59.1% of eligible voters casting a ballot.¹ In New York City, voter turnout in mayoral elections fell each election cycle between 2001 and 2021 to a historic low of 23% in 2021.² The November 2025 mayoral election broke with this trend and recorded the highest turnout in decades, at over 40%.³ Even so, many eligible—and even registered—voters are not participating in elections. Voter turnout in New York remains low overall, with deep gaps by race, income, age, and neighborhood that leave many New Yorkers underrepresented in the

electorate.⁴ These disparities are reinforced by structural barriers, such as distance to poll sites and economic precarity, as well as relational barriers, including weaker ties to political networks.⁵ While campaigns often neglect first-time and low-propensity voters, research shows that nonprofits reach these communities effectively through nonpartisan activities. Voters contacted by nonprofits are significantly more likely to cast ballots, particularly young people, people of color, and low-income voters.⁶

Grounded in this research and UNH's experience with settlement houses, this report explores UNH's GOTV project, one component of its broader civic engagement campaign, Our Voices Count. It examines how UNH encourages settlement houses to lead nonpartisan voter engagement in their own communities by building shared capacity, learning, and infrastructure. It also shows how settlement houses have used UNH minigrants and support to embed that work into their operational and programmatic practices. The report concludes with recommendations for making GOTV feasible, meaningful, and effective for settlement houses and other community-based organizations.

How UNH Spurs Nonpartisan Voter Mobilization

For over a century, UNH and settlement house members have centered civic action—including voting—in our approach to social change. Seeing the need for deeper investment in settlement houses' civic capacity, UNH launched its nonpartisan GOTV initiative in 2017 with a cohort of seven of its members in the Bronx, Brooklyn, Manhattan, and Queens. The primary goal of the initiative was to encourage settlement houses to increase their capacity to reach voters and work toward more equity in voting, political representation, and policymaking.⁷ UNH also provided grants of \$1,000-\$2,000 to participating settlement houses to account for staff time. Many settlement houses already did some voter registration (70% in 2016), but these initiatives were limited.⁸ UNH grounded the project in the understanding that a long-term outlook on GOTV as part of a relational civic engagement strategy is key to developing organizational capacity and effectively making change, but requires sustained effort.

The GOTV initiative built upon the historical goals of the settlement house movement and fit into existing missions and priorities. As Sunnyside Community Services wrote on their application for UNH's first GOTV cohort, "Voter encouragement responds directly to [our] mission, as it engages and empowers people to be active in their civic life."⁹ Their mission is currently: "to enrich lives and strengthen communities through services

and engagement for individuals of all ages, beginning with those most in need." In 2016, Sunnyside reported engaging in some voter registration but not other advocacy work. By 2025, after participating in six rounds of the cohort, they broadened civic engagement efforts to include advocacy events, participatory budgeting, voter registration, voter education sessions, and community conversations.¹⁰

Between 2017 and 2025, 31 settlement houses—28 in New York City, two in Syracuse, and one in Albany—participated in the UNH GOTV initiative.¹¹ As settlement houses' appetite for civic engagement grew, UNH expanded its GOTV offerings, entering a new stage of work in 2021 with increased funding, enhanced data analysis, and deeper support for participating settlement houses. That year, UNH hired a consultant to analyze data from settlement house GOTV outreach and test the efficacy of current methods, which led to a report, *Settlement Houses Get Out the Vote! 2021*, on settlement house impacts on voter turnout in New York City.¹²

Between 2021 and 2024, UNH systematized its GOTV approach into a scaffolded process that prioritizes clear goal setting and deeper opportunities for peer learning, and by 2025 it had begun to offer settlement houses two tiers of GOTV participation, depending on their target metrics.

TABLE 1

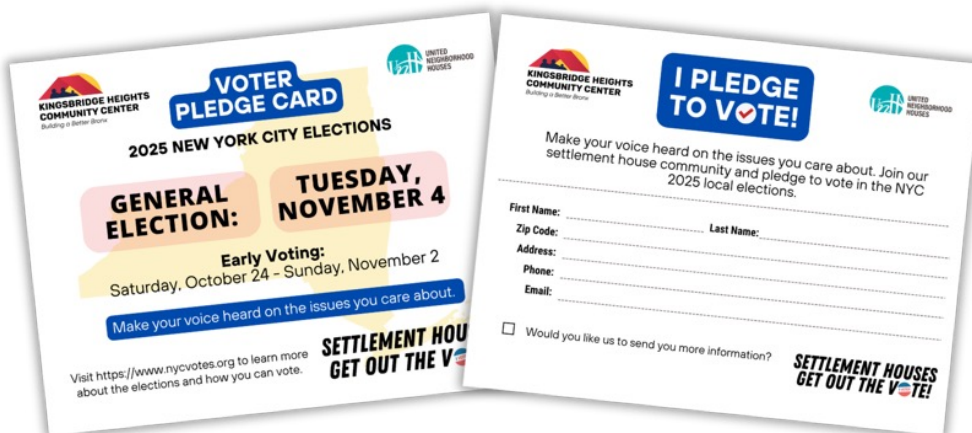
MINIMUM REQUIRED ACTIVITIES	TIER 1: \$5,000	TIER 2: \$3,000
Voter Engagement	600 Pledge cards completed	300 Pledge cards completed
	30 Voter registrations completed	15 Voter registrations completed
	At least 6 dedicated emails to staff and Board with reminders to vote	At least 3 dedicated emails to staff and Board with reminders to vote
	1,000 GOTV texts and/or phone calls to the settlement house community	
Community Engagement	6 Voter education events	3 Voter education events
Advocacy Engagement	Participation in UNH's GOTV Peer Group	Participation in UNH's GOTV Peer Group

Overview of UNH's GOTV Cohort Process

The UNH GOTV project runs from February through December (prior to 2019, when state primaries moved from September to June, the project began in May). A team of UNH staff led by the Senior Manager of Civic Engagement considers applications from settlement houses based on their capacity, commitment, and plans to conduct nonpartisan voter engagement that is responsive to community needs. In their applications, settlement houses must identify the staff members who will lead their GOTV efforts and discuss their organizational mission, planned GOTV activities, target populations, and intended impact.

Once the cohort is selected, UNH opens the GOTV cycle with a two-hour workshop on nonpartisan voter mobilization strategies. This session is designed both as an introduction for settlement house staff and as a train-the-trainer program, allowing participants to replicate the training for their settlement house colleagues. Following the training, UNH speaks with each settlement house one-on-one as they design a unique plan for integrating GOTV into their programs. Central to these efforts are Pledge to Vote Cards ("pledge cards"), which UNH designs for each settlement house (both paper and online versions), customizes with their logo, and makes available in multiple languages. As settlement houses conduct outreach in their communities, the pledge cards start conversations about an upcoming election,

provide voters with logistics, and help settlement houses to collect contact information for interested voters so that they can follow up with reminders to vote.

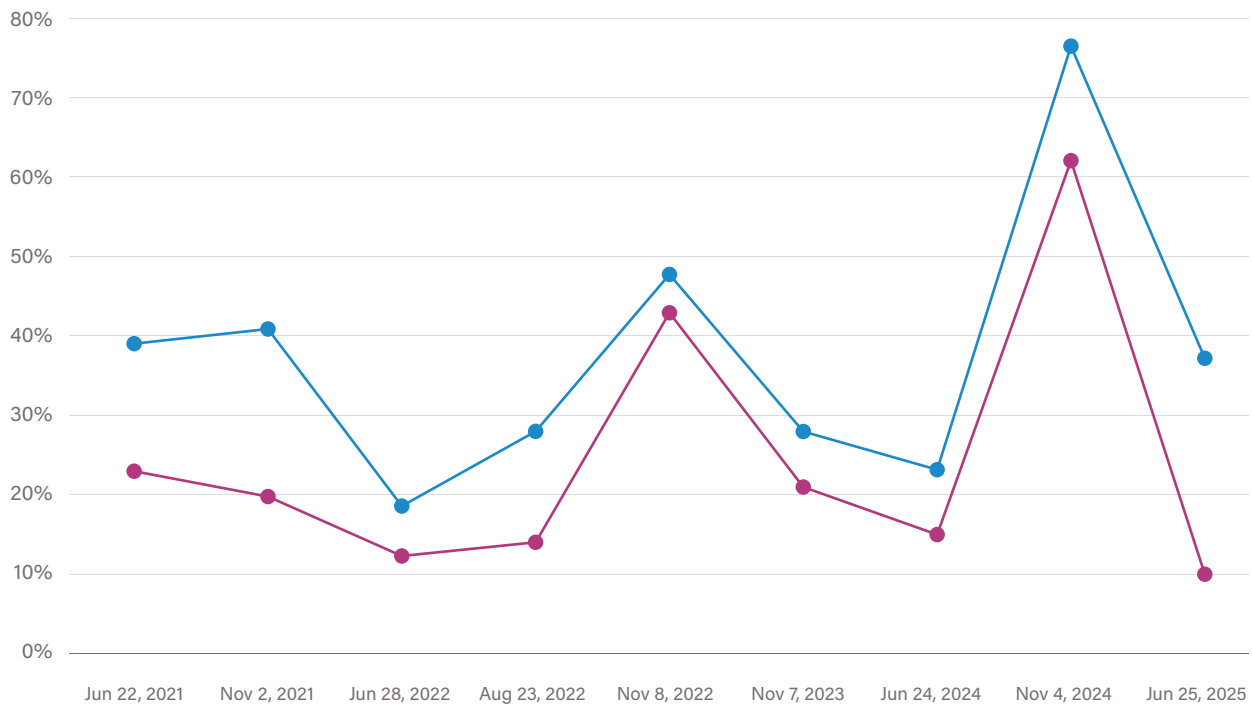


At regular cohort meetings, settlement houses establish connections and share information. UNH leads workshops for the settlement houses on tools, such as the Voter Activation Network (VAN), and on nonpartisan topics related to elections, including ranked choice voting or ballot questions. UNH also provides coaching for staff on issues that come up over the year and helps settlement houses understand their responsibility to remain nonpartisan as 501(c)(3) organizations. When the Board of Elections releases the data, UNH uses VAN to assess how many of the voters who were contacted by a settlement house turned out to vote and compares that turnout rate to the general population.¹³ The cohort concludes in November after the general election, giving UNH staff time to debrief and prepare for the next cohort the following February.

Voters Engaged by Settlement Houses are More Likely to Vote Than Their Peers

UNH's analysis of voter turnout in New York City finds that the voters engaged by settlement houses have consistently been more likely to vote than the average city voter.¹⁴ In the 2024 presidential election, 77% of voters who pledged to vote with a settlement house cast a ballot in the general election, compared to 62% in New York State and 60% in New York City.¹⁵ This is especially significant given that many settlement house voters are part of underrepresented groups that historically have lower turnout, including people of color, low-income voters, and voters ages 18-24.

CHART 1 : UNH vs STATEWIDE TURNOUT 2021-2025



UNH's experience with GOTV is bolstered by existing research on the role that nonprofits play as civic intermediaries, reaching voters through trusted relationships. Nonprofit Vote found that voters who were engaged by nonprofits were 10% more likely to vote than comparable voters.¹⁶ Researchers highlight nonprofits' ability to relate to voters' cultures, speak their languages, and to consider local needs.¹⁷ Successful nonprofit voter mobilization efforts center community strengths and recognize that potential voters may already be involved in their communities or have other paths to civic engagement beyond or in addition to voting. They combine education and skill development with relational tactics such as canvassing regular program participants or having neighbors encourage one another to vote, and are active throughout the year, not only before

an election.¹⁸ These findings underscore the effectiveness of settlement houses' community-based voter outreach.

Between 2017 and 2025, settlement houses participating in the UNH GOTV initiative encouraged more than 10,000 people to pledge to vote, led more than 300 community events with a civic engagement component, and reached participants at dozens of program sites. At the center of all these activities are relationships and interactions between and among UNH and settlement house staff, neighbors and community members, and local leaders. Just as settlement house programs are designed to stem from community needs and to facilitate both individual and collective action, so too do settlement house GOTV efforts.



Building Trust is Foundational to Settlement House Civic Engagement

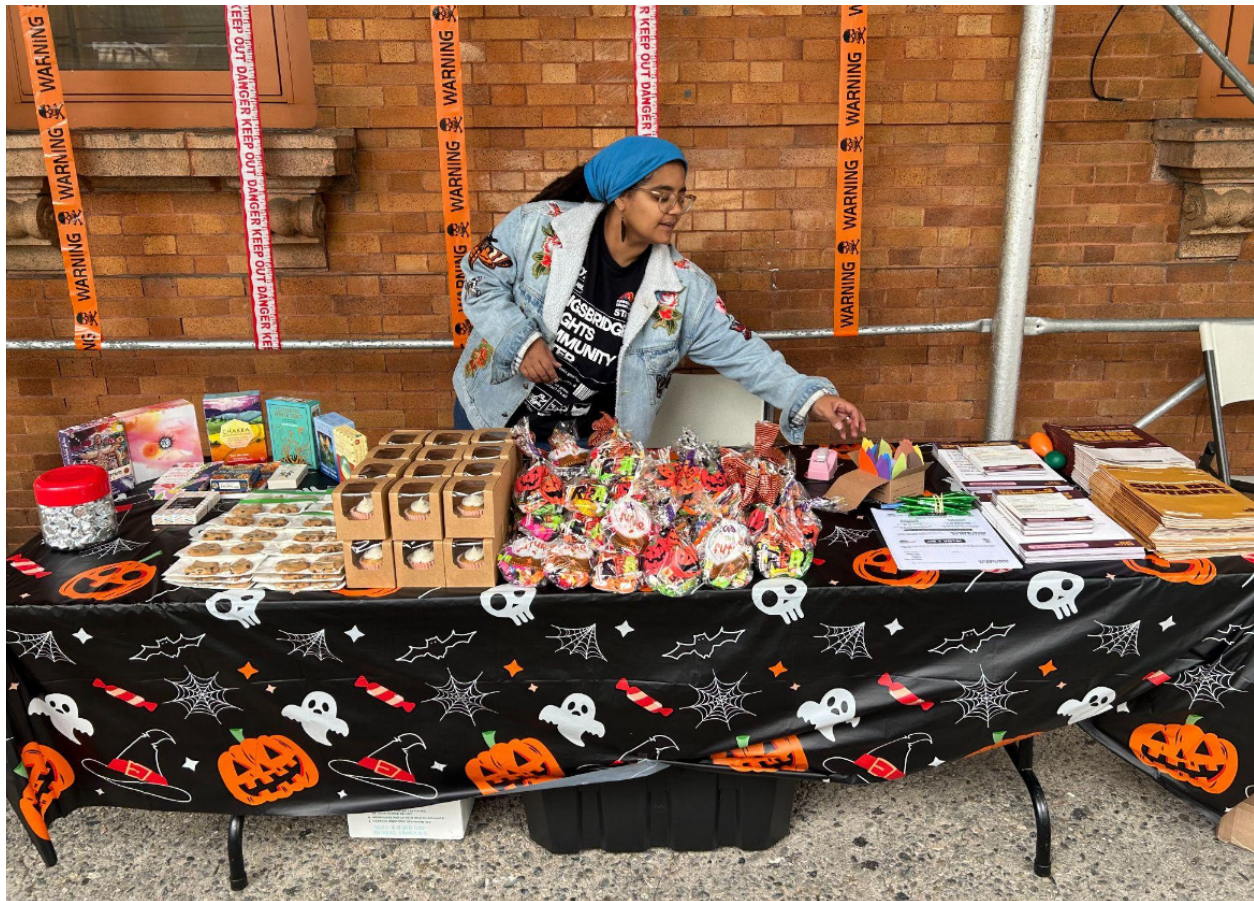
Engaging New Yorkers in the political process requires an understanding of the barriers potential voters face. Structural and informational barriers, including problems with voting infrastructure, economic precarity or poor health, and limited access to civic education, disproportionately disadvantage low-income communities and communities of color.¹⁹ In addition to the individual and structural barriers that impact voter participation, there are relational factors that shape inequities in voting. Someone is more likely to vote when they feel that politics is “for people like them” and see elected officials making choices that improve their lives and communities; however, systemic inequalities often leave those in low-income communities less connected to political networks and less likely to believe that voting will lead to material change.²⁰ Building relationships among potential voters and fostering year-round civic engagement brings new opportunities for people to establish their identities as voters and build trust.

Voter turnout gaps by race, income, and age mean that many New Yorkers are underrepresented among the electorate. Nationally, the racial turnout gap has increased since 2012, and in 2022 New York had the fourth highest weighted racial turnout

gap among all states.²¹ Researchers have also found that people in higher-income precincts vote at higher rates than those in lower-income areas, and the disparity between the two was greater in 2020 than in 2016.²² Generally, older adults in their 60s and 70s are more likely to vote than younger adults (although this pattern was disrupted in the 2025 New York City mayoral primary, when 25- to 34-year-olds were the age group to cast the most ballots, making up 21% of all voters).²³

Traditional GOTV efforts are often implemented in ways that perpetuate existing gaps. Election campaigns usually target more likely voters to efficiently increase the number of people who will vote for their candidate. They calculate voter propensity based on past behavior, further entrenching existing voter gaps, and excluding first-time, young, low-income, and immigrant voters.²⁴ To resist this cycle of exclusion, inclusive voter mobilization must come from a place of understanding and connection.

UNH's GOTV initiative focuses on relational organizing, which uses settlement houses' existing connections to mobilize community members and is the most effective way to reach people.²⁵ As longstanding anchors in their neighborhoods, settlement houses



are uniquely positioned to serve as trusted messengers to potential voters. When UNH speaks with settlement houses implementing their GOTV plans, the theme of trust emerges as a key facet of both challenges and opportunities.

Navigating Potential Voters' Distrust

Settlement house staff encounter many potential voters who lack trust in elected officials or the democratic process, especially those from communities facing systemic neglect. At one settlement house, community members were resistant to voting because "they felt no change would ever take place."²⁶ Similarly, a staff member from WHEDco shared that in 2025, it is hard to "get people

to worry about a systemic problem when they're drowning in their own."²⁷

With settlement houses' connection to and understanding of the communities in which they work, staff can acknowledge and affirm their neighbors' concerns while inspiring new ways of thinking. At Syracuse Northeast Community Center, staff responded to feelings of distrust and disconnection by sharing how voting can directly influence local funding and community programs.²⁸ Similarly, Henry Street Settlement wrote in 2024 that it was effective to frame voting as "making your voice heard about the issues you care about."²⁹ Staff pivoted their conversations with participants to center on upcoming ballot initiatives, which they had been trained on by UNH and Henry

Street.³⁰ When voters in New York have an opportunity to support or reject changes to New York laws, policies, and practices that will impact their lives, it is critical that they understand the proposals before them.

Whether interacting in person, by phone, or by text, settlement house staff strive to do voter outreach that creates new connections and builds on existing community relationships. The UNH GOTV project has created a supportive space where they can experiment with different communication methods rooted in trust:

- **At intake:** Kingsbridge Heights Community Center added a new question to their universal intake form about voter registration. Now, staff can identify who is eligible to vote to better target GOTV-specific activities, and they can also begin conversations with potential voters early on in their relationship with the settlement house.³¹
- **On WhatsApp:** Queens Community House used neighborhood WhatsApp groups for advocacy projects and for groups in adult education classes. They found this to be the most effective way to share information and reminders about voting, because people could see that texts were coming from someone they know, not a random phone number.³²
- **During phone calls:** When Korean Community Services first participated in the 2021 GOTV project, staff expressed concerns with using phone calls or texts to remind voters about elections, fearing that people would get frustrated because of how many spam calls they get. After talking with other cohort members about best practices for outreach, they focused phone calls on their Korean-speaking participants,

who found it valuable and affirming to speak about voting in their own language.³³

- **At pickup:** At East Side House Settlement, the GOTV team is a regular presence at the community centers in the South Bronx where their afterschool programs take place. When parents and caregivers arrive at pick-up, staff greet them with voter education materials and pledge cards. Because afterschool is a daily program, parents can bring pledge cards home to family members and return them the following day.³⁴

Navigating Data Concerns

Even when GOTV activities draw on a foundation of trust, there are issues inherent to voting eligibility and the collection of voter data that elicit concern. Many potential voters are concerned about providing their name and contact information, especially amid increasing threats from the federal



government to immigrant communities and other marginalized groups. Most settlement houses encountered people who did not want to fill out the pledge cards, even if they intended to vote. While settlement house staff assure these potential voters that they do not need to share personal information, this does make it harder for staff to meet pledge targets and to do follow-up.

Data privacy related to voting status is of particular concern to immigrant New Yorkers, especially those who have undocumented family members. UNH and settlement houses observed this fear growing around the 2020 Census, when the first Trump administration proposed a citizenship question, leading to an undercount in immigrant communities even though the Supreme Court prevented the



question from appearing on the final forms.³⁵ Again, in 2025, voter engagement for the primary election coincided with the second Trump administration's surge in immigrant detentions and deportations. With participant safety as their top priority, settlement house staff empower people to choose the contexts in which they are comfortable sharing their data on pledge cards.

Over years of participation, settlement houses have adopted different strategies that work for them. For example, Hamilton-Madison House preferred using the physical pledge cards so that they could help seniors fill them out while personally addressing any privacy concerns. Another settlement house found it more successful to share a QR code linking to the virtual form so people could fill out the pledge online in a private space.³⁶ As settlement houses collect pledge forms, they must enter information from paper pledges into a spreadsheet, which can be labor-intensive. However, UNH's coordinated analysis of all settlement house pledges and statewide voting data creates tangible results from these efforts.

UNH compiles the list of settlement house participants who have pledged to vote and uses it throughout the election season to help settlement houses track their progress and to create lists for targeted voter outreach. When election results are released, UNH uses that individual data to analyze how many of the people who pledged to vote did so. UNH's data consultant uses anonymized data to show each settlement house a personalized visual of their impact on voter turnout and the demographics they engaged. Over time, settlement houses saw how data would strengthen their GOTV work, and grew more interested in data collection, making efforts to navigate these data concerns and build trust.

Inspiring Potential Voters and Reducing Turnout Gaps

Against the backdrop of persistent turnout gaps, settlement houses apply relational, community-rooted strategies to build trust among voters who are often excluded from traditional GOTV efforts. **Settlement houses in New York City are already positioned in communities with lower voter turnout—there are over 200 settlement house program sites in the 12 community districts that were in the lowest one-fifth for voter turnout in 2022.**³⁷

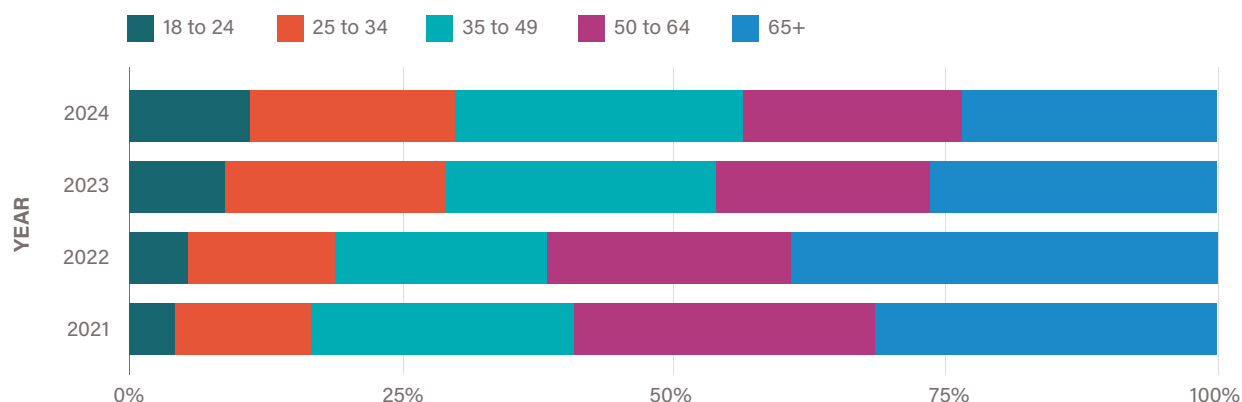
Of the 840,000 New Yorkers engaged by UNH member settlement houses, 90% are people of color, 70% are living below the federal poverty level, and 28% are not proficient in English.³⁸ Over 27,000 young people participated in settlement house youth workforce programs in 2025, with newly-voting-age participants joining other types of programs as well. The UNH GOTV project was designed to support each settlement house in engaging members of their own community, and to make decisions about who to target. After the first few years of the program, UNH began to ask about the groups of people settlement houses were planning to engage during the application phase, which encouraged settlement houses to be more deliberate in how they use their relationships and community knowledge to reach voters.

Creatively Engaging Young Voters

With programs including afterschool, summer camps, youth workforce, and more, settlement house staff often have strong relationships with young people as they age into voting. However, young people are typically less likely to vote than older voters, reflecting both significant distrust in elected officials and a lack of civic education.³⁹

In 2021, UNH began encouraging settlement houses to dedicate more GOTV resources to youth. The UNH GOTV project's peer group meetings have become fruitful spaces for considering how to engage and inspire young voters. In 2023, UNH's data consultant led a workshop about engaging youth, which identified the importance of relational organizing, using tools such as the peer-to-peer texting app Hustle, and strategies for partnering with schools. Each year between 2021 and 2024, the portion of youth among the potential voters who pledged to vote at a settlement house rose, from 4% of engaged voters in 2021 to 11% in 2024.

CHART 2: PERCENT OF ALL MATCHED PTVs BY AGE GROUP



With young people, a key area of civic engagement is voter registration. In New York, youth ages 16-17 are eligible to pre-register so that their voter registration status activates once they reach 18. UNH led a conversation during a settlement house GOTV peer group meeting about promoting this option. Settlement houses responded with new ideas to help young people build excitement around elections and identify as future voters. At East Side House Settlement, youth workers present to students in their local high school classes and keep track of those who have pre-registered so that they can engage them more in the future.⁴⁰ They have found that the settlement house's presence in the community is a jumping-off point to talk with youth about elections and their impact on neighborhood resources.

Settlement houses have embedded civic engagement into their youth development work through creative activities and youth-led initiatives. During NMIC's first year in the GOTV cohort in 2024, staff brought up voting in their youth career programs for 17- to 24-year-olds, and participants responded with their distrust of elected officials. NMIC's youth workers understood that this group of youth, who had chosen to leave school and seek

alternative career pathways, was coming into the conversation already disconnected from government systems and with a history of not being heard. They held a focus group, where youth told them "no lecturing, no PowerPoints, no sending people to a website to research or register on their own."⁴¹ Instead, the group suggested emphasizing personal agency and increasing the focus on local elections, where the impact of voting is clearer. Participants are now learning about their local representatives and have become advocates, testifying at City Council hearings and lobbying in Albany. In the process of sharing their opinions about elections and government, they developed new skills in navigating conflict and built stronger bonds as a group.

Like NMIC, other settlement houses have experience holding youth focus groups and encouraging youth leadership, which is a strong approach to awakening civic engagement. When Henry Street Settlement first joined the UNH GOTV project in 2022, they incorporated voter engagement into an existing youth employment initiative, the Community Response Team (CRT), made up of community youth ages 17-24 from the Lower East Side. Henry Street developed CRT

at the height of the COVID-19 pandemic, “To provide critical support for our community while also providing job opportunities for local youth, at a time when city-funded programs faced severe cutbacks.” With CRT members leading peer-to-peer outreach, Henry Street reached its highest pledge card numbers in 2024. Henry Street’s experience highlights the role that young people can play as leaders.

Youth workers at settlement houses have also brought youth leadership into GOTV work by asking teens and young voters to do hands-on, creative tasks that encourage voting. This can be an effective way to include teens who are not yet voting age, building knowledge and investment in elections. At Hudson Guild, staff invited teenage participants to submit an entry into a poster design contest that promoted voter participation. The best poster designer won a

prize, and Hudson Guild then used that poster around the community.⁴² At many settlement houses, staff have experienced significant shifts in engagement when youth leadership, hands-on learning, and non-judgemental inquiry into personal opinions are all prioritized.

Making Voting Accessible for Older Adults

Typically, older adults in New York have some of the highest voting rates. Still, there are inequities in who is able to—or chooses—to vote, with significant access issues around language, voter education, physical ability, or technology. Settlement houses are poised to meet these access needs with robust programs and services for older adults, such as older adult centers, home-delivered meals, medical care, and more. Staff for these programs already do



many of the things that GOTV activities require. They provide support with computer and other technology questions, discuss participants' interests in current events, give out food and other materials, and create communal spaces for interaction. Overall, settlement houses have found that engaging seniors in voter education and collecting pledge cards has a high success rate.⁴³ Conducting GOTV work with older adults is an effective form of voter outreach, but to achieve these goals, settlement house staff must plan GOTV activities with the specific needs of older adults in mind.

The following examples illustrate how settlement house staff built on the enthusiasm for voting that many older adults share and led community activities to make civic opportunities more visible and accessible.

- In 2023, St. Nick's Alliance set up a voting information table at the annual summer BBQ at four older adult centers. While participants responded well to their outreach, they noted in a call to UNH that they now wanted to expand the languages of materials from just English and Spanish to include Mandarin, Polish, and Italian.⁴⁴
- In 2024, at Hudson Guild, older adults expressed a need for transportation to the polls. In response, the settlement house used their van to transport voters to their poll sites. They also helped older adults understand the requirements and due dates for obtaining a mail-in ballot.⁴⁵
- Goddard Riverside posted information about voting at their affordable housing complex for older adults and people with disabilities. Because all residents have the same voting address, staff could easily share the exact polling location together with a sample ballot. They also brought a group to the polls to vote together.

Building GOTV into Civic Engagement with NYCHA Residents

Settlement houses in New York City regularly engage the 1-in-16 New Yorkers who live in public housing and operate many programs inside of New York City Housing Authority (NYCHA) buildings.⁴⁶ In 2025, UNH member settlement houses, including 18 of the 31 past participants in the GOTV project, operated 123 program sites in NYCHA buildings.⁴⁷

NYCHA residents are predominantly low-income people of color, and they are often part of strong neighborhood communities buoyed by tenant organizing in their buildings and long-term connections (the average tenure of a public housing resident in 2024 was 26.3 years).⁴⁸ Experiencing significant barriers to voting, NYCHA residents typically have low voter turnout and are less likely than other New Yorkers to engage in elections.⁴⁹ They are often dismissed as "unlikely voters" by campaigns doing voter outreach. While there is limited research on voters within NYCHA, one study of public housing residents in Boston found that personalized outreach from tenant organizers significantly increased voter turnout.⁵⁰ UNH has supported settlement houses to engage NYCHA residents as potential voters, with dedicated programming that builds on community assets.

Settlement houses that have successfully engaged large numbers of NYCHA residents are often able to do so through their existing connections to Tenant or Resident Associations. They work to make election resources accessible and visible on site, close to residents' homes.

- In 2021, Ocean Bay Community Development Corporation (OBCDC) held a workshop on Ranked Choice Voting. Despite the challenges of running programming during COVID-19, OBCDC was able to hold a hybrid event in the NYCHA community center with Zoom access for those who preferred to join from home.⁵¹
- Grand Street Settlement ran three activities that incorporated GOTV at NYCHA's Bushwick-Hylan Community Center, where staff aligned civic engagement with intergenerational activities: a conference on domestic violence, a teen roundtable discussion, and a Halloween family fun night.⁵²
- Goddard Riverside attended tenant meetings in Amsterdam Houses in Manhattan where they distributed pledge cards and led a discussion about the importance of voting. They also collected pledge cards at community events for NYCHA residents, such as a school supplies giveaway.⁵³

Mobilizing Immigrant New Yorkers

Settlement houses work with immigrant New Yorkers, both new arrivals and longtime residents, across their full range of programs. Many immigrants are U.S. citizens and are eligible to vote, despite often being labeled as “unlikely voters” in traditional GOTV campaigns. This cycle of exclusion, along with language barriers, restricts immigrant New Yorkers’ access to voter education. For example, the 2020 Asian American Voter Survey found that 58% of Asian Americans received no contact from any political party during the 2020 presidential election cycle.⁵⁴

In KCS’s 2024 application for the cohort, they wrote that immigrants “find meaning and agency through voting.”⁵⁵ Through their experiences teaching English for Speakers of Other Languages (ESOL) classes and supporting Korean New Yorkers, KCS found that participants often came to their English classes in order to understand government policies and the benefits for which they are eligible. They were able to easily transition these discussions into conversations about voting. Other settlement houses noted being particularly excited to engage newly-eligible voters who recently became citizens. A staff member from WHEDco shared that while she provides voter education materials, she also asks the person to tell the story of what they went through to become a citizen. These interactions have been meaningful for staff, immigrant participants, and their families, and help motivate new connections to voting as a way of claiming civic responsibility.

To support voting among immigrant communities, settlement houses prioritize language accessibility. UNH provides pledge cards and handouts in multiple languages and works with settlement houses to share materials that they have translated into additional languages. Organizations with large immigrant populations can best inspire voters when staff members with linguistic and cultural knowledge lead voter outreach. During Educational Alliance’s first two years in the GOTV cohort, they experienced a language barrier with Chinese immigrants, so they began to involve different staff members for translation help and engaged volunteers and partners who could speak Chinese dialects with participants.⁵⁶

As part of UNH’s approach to nonpartisan GOTV, civic engagement is understood as broader than voting alone. The Center for



Family Life (CFL) in Sunset Park, Brooklyn wrote in its most recent application, “Our GOTV initiative is committed to empowering immigrant voices, reinforcing the premise that civic engagement does not only come through the ballot box.”⁵⁷ CFL works with a population that is 25% Asian and 36% Latinx, and where, in 2022, 54% of residents identified as foreign-born.⁵⁸ Since joining the UNH GOTV cohort, CFL has chosen to foreground work with immigrants in its civic engagement plan.⁵⁹ Through ESOL and civics classes embedded in their adult employment

program, CFL educators connect the history of the U.S. political system and voting rights with practical information about registering and voting in New York City. CFL also creates space for participants who are not eligible to vote to engage in civic learning and dialogue. This model reflects themes that regularly surface in GOTV cohort peer learning sessions, where settlement house staff discuss how to use voter engagement conversations as inclusive entry points to civic participation and affirm that democracy belongs to all community members, regardless of voting eligibility.

Building Capacity for GOTV and Civic Engagement Work at Settlement Houses

UNH supports settlement houses not only in designing effective voter mobilization with participants but also in building the internal systems needed to sustain that work. Through the GOTV initiative, UNH builds settlement house capacity, providing technical support, coaching, and peer learning opportunities on tools or practices that are new to many settlement house staff members. In 2024 UNH led seven peer group conversations and educational workshops for settlement house staff and visited four settlement houses to present to staff or participants. At the end of the cycle, UNH provides each settlement house with a customized report analyzing their voter engagement, which inspires further experimentation by helping settlement house staff see the impact of their efforts.

UNH's minigrants, which have ranged from \$1,000 to \$5,000, give settlement houses dedicated funding for GOTV activities. This modest amount makes a significant difference to organizations whose limited funding is largely restricted, and incentivizes staff to initiate new activities. Most often, that money goes toward decorations, food, and informational materials to make events or outreach tables appealing and fun for participants. These resources strengthen voter outreach by creating welcoming and educational spaces that foster relationships, and

those relationships are what make deeper civic engagement possible.⁶⁰ UNH's support has spurred settlement houses to develop their own capacity for civic engagement.

Settlement Houses Integrate GOTV into Existing Programs and Activities

Often, the strongest way for settlement houses to mobilize voters is by integrating GOTV into their regular programs and events. Although settlement house staff are eager to contribute to voter mobilization, they are challenged by limited time and resources. Their efforts to integrate GOTV into existing activities enable settlement houses to staff and fund the work, while ensuring that voter education is accessible to community members in a trusted context. Settlement houses build on the relationships created at program sites, spreading out GOTV across their many activities, services, and modes of outreach, as explored throughout this report:

- **Community events:** Settlement houses table and talk about voting at existing large events such as holiday celebrations, neighborhood parties, health/wellness programs, food pantry pickup days, and more.

- Expanded programming opportunities:** Some settlement houses train program participants to do voter outreach themselves as leadership development opportunities. For example, BronxWorks recruited seniors and youth from their intergenerational program to volunteer to collect pledge cards at a seasonal farmstand in front of their community center.⁶¹
- Embedded in training:** Settlement houses can add voting information into existing training, such as workforce development programs. For example, at WHEDco, the Home-Based Childcare team is equipped with voter education materials to share as the team travels throughout New York City monitoring and training childcare providers.⁶²
- Displays at settlement houses:** When settlement houses create custom educational materials on voting, they are visible to anyone who enters the settlement house. For example, in 2024, NMIC printed large posters for their Bronx office with information about the six ballot proposals, with which many New Yorkers were not familiar.
- Civic education events:** Many participants in the GOTV cohorts have held candidate forums or voter education events at their settlement houses. These take place outside the scope of existing programs, but they recruit participants from other settlement house programs and take place in a familiar space, building on existing communities.

By meeting people where they already are, settlement houses make voter engagement doable with limited staff time and embed it as a sustainable practice that can endure beyond a single election cycle.

Staff Training is Critical to Expanding Civic Engagement

As settlement houses in the UNH GOTV project built out GOTV practices, they all faced questions of which staff would be responsible and where the work would fit in their varying organizational structures. Settlement house GOTV programming is sustained by either program staff working with a target population or in a target community (around 2/3 of settlement houses in the cohort) or staff who are focused on advocacy, community, or organizing functions (around 1/3 of settlement houses in the cohort). Staffing decisions typically depend on which program areas or sites the GOTV work will be targeting, which staff members have capacity or interest, and which teams are best situated to reach the community.

One of the key ways that settlement houses' GOTV plans have evolved over their years of experience is in prioritizing and standardizing staff training. Settlement houses engage their entire staff not only as trusted messengers to the community, but also as a constituency of potential voters themselves. Many settlement houses have hundreds or thousands of employees who live in New York City or State, who can be empowered both as advocates and voters.



Many settlement houses have replicated UNH's workshops for their own staff and community members. UNH's train-the-trainer curricula cover a variety of nonpartisan voter engagement topics such as ranked choice voting or ballot proposals. In 2023, Sunnyside Community Services (SCS) added a series of three staff events before the primary and general elections—a "Cup of Democracy" coffee hour, "Ballots and Bagels," and a training on voter registration led by UNH staff.⁶³ High attendance and positive feedback from attendees indicated to SCS's GOTV team that they should keep putting energy into staff training on civic engagement. With dedicated time for settlement house staff to learn about civic engagement, the hard work of consistent outreach to community members can be shared among staff and programs. Across the UNH GOTV cohort, settlement houses tend to begin by working these activities into scheduled all-staff meetings, then move to offer further opportunities for professional development and education.

GOTV is a Year-round Organizational Priority

The UNH GOTV cohort has established that civic engagement is both a reflection of settlement house values and a regular part of organizational activities. UNH has helped settlement house staff and leadership make the case that civic engagement is something in which settlement houses must invest. As Educational Alliance wrote in their final report from 2023, "We have also come to learn that civic engagement of this level only becomes truly sustainable in the longer term if it is embedded in the practice of an organization." Since 2021, several settlement houses have adopted goals related to civic engagement through their strategic planning

or other planning processes and are devoting more resources to it. This investment can take many forms, such as the creation of a new department, hiring a new staff member, or solidifying GOTV/civic engagement in job descriptions and celebrating successes organization-wide. Settlement house staff in the GOTV cohort have reiterated that clear support from the executive director is important to supporting managers, and thus the entire organization, to prioritize civic engagement.

One settlement house in the UNH GOTV cohort that recently expanded its infrastructure for year-round civic engagement is WHEDco. WHEDco first joined the project in 2024, during a moment when the settlement house was committing to bolster its civic engagement work. In 2025, a Civic Engagement Specialist joined their team, with the goal of empowering and creating opportunities for families, communities, and partner organizations to advocate for themselves in their neighborhoods. The Specialist has been able to harness excitement and interest among staff across the organization and support them in bringing intentional GOTV conversations with potential voters to their activities. Her outlook as a community organizer helps her to approach program staff with ideas for collaboration and to build trust with them, one department at a time. One of the benefits of adding a dedicated staff member is that after program staff collect pledge cards from interested voters, the Specialist has time to follow up by text and email and make sure those voters have the information they need to vote on Election Day. This progress illustrates the potential for a settlement house to build out a more comprehensive plan that unifies and institutionalizes GOTV activities across the organization.

Settlement Houses & Civic Engagement: Recommendations from the UNH GOTV Project

Between 2017 and 2025, UNH and New York settlement houses have experimented, adapted, and embedded meaningful activities to encourage voting and drive civic engagement among settlement house communities. Voters have participated in settlement house-led activities, had meaningful conversations with settlement house staff, chosen to sign the UNH pledge card, or received follow-up with reminders to vote. These layers of contact are key to the relational organizing at which settlement houses excel and which allows them to engage underrepresented voters. They also require continual work and resources.

UNH's experience with the GOTV project has affirmed our foundational belief that settlement houses and other community-based organizations (CBOs) can, and must, build nonpartisan political power in their communities. Below are key recommendations moving forward:

- 1. CBOs should invest in civics and voter education training for staff:** Settlement house staff are able to effectively mobilize voters when they have sustained investment, education, and support. Executive directors and senior leaders can prioritize civic engagement by making

space for conversations at all-staff and department meetings, and by making training accessible to staff. Because they have many employees who interact daily with community members, settlement houses should invest in staff as voters themselves, and as trusted messengers to neighbors. Organizations can also pursue partnerships for technical assistance and additional tools.

- 2. CBOs should integrate GOTV into existing programs:** Settlement houses operate programs that bring them into daily contact with hundreds of thousands of New Yorkers. These trusted spaces are not only where people turn for essential resources; they are also natural entry points for civic engagement. By weaving nonpartisan voter outreach and education into this existing infrastructure, settlement houses can reach wide and diverse communities while ensuring staff have the capacity to carry out GOTV. This approach is sustainable and effective, and at the same time, it strengthens programs by sparking new conversations and connections.

3. CBOs can build trust through relational organizing: Settlement houses are strong because of the relationships built between and among staff and participants. Building on the connections forged during programs, settlement house staff are equipped to authentically inspire New Yorkers to think about how they want to shape their neighborhood and government. Settlement houses are already connected to groups of underrepresented voters, including youth, low-income families, immigrants, and NYCHA residents, and settlement house staff are effective at providing consistent, accessible, and understanding communication.

4. Civic engagement must be a year-round activity: GOTV activities are most effective when people identify as civically involved and are connected to meaningful issues in their daily lives. Settlement houses that engage participants year-round in advocacy, community building, and nonpartisan voter education are better able to activate community members in elections, equipping them with the knowledge and resources they need to vote or encourage others to vote.

At settlement houses, voter outreach flows naturally from organizational missions and deep neighborhood roots. Staff and participants are mobilized by the belief that local elections shape both community life and settlement house programs. The UNH GOTV project has created space and provided guidance for settlement house staff to think systemically, share ideas across sites, and build a more intentional and empowering civic culture in New York. The impact is measurable: voters engaged by settlement houses consistently turn out at higher rates than the general electorate, while the GOTV work itself reaches tens of thousands of underrepresented New Yorkers through trusted, community-based institutions. UNH has catalyzed settlement houses to experiment with creative, strategic, community-based approaches to voter outreach, supporting staff in developing identities as nonpartisan advocates. With this foundation, settlement houses will continue to expand their work in coordinated and impactful ways, demonstrating how community-based organizations can build civic power.



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