



**UNITED  
NEIGHBORHOOD  
HOUSES**

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**Testimony of United Neighborhood Houses  
Before the New York City Council Committees on Youth Services  
Council Member Althea Stevens, Chair**

**Panel for the Committee of Youth Services  
Submitted by Dante Bravo, Youth Policy Analyst  
March 22nd, 2023**

Thank you, Chair Stevens and members of the New York City Council, for the opportunity to testify. My name is Dante Bravo, and I am the Youth Policy Analyst at United Neighborhood Houses (UNH). UNH is a policy and social change organization representing 45 neighborhood settlement houses, 40 in New York City, that reach 765,000 New Yorkers from all walks of life.

A progressive leader for more than 100 years, UNH is stewarding a new era for New York's settlement house movement. We mobilize our members and their communities to advocate for good public policies and promote strong organizations and practices that keep neighborhoods resilient and thriving for all New Yorkers. UNH leads advocacy and partners with our members on a broad range of issues including civic and community engagement, neighborhood affordability, healthy aging, early childhood education, adult literacy, and youth development. We also provide customized professional development and peer learning to build the skills and leadership capabilities of settlement house staff at all levels.

Youth programming has played a significant role throughout the COVID-19 pandemic by maintaining connections to youth and their families when schools closed, connecting families to other essential supports beyond after school, and helping youth navigate a challenging time. Summer programming, including summer camps and the Summer Youth Employment Program, has long been the cornerstone of the positive youth development movement, offering exciting and supportive programs outside of the September-June school structure. It is crucial that New York City maintain and invest in its summer programs not only to offer youth and their caregivers safe spaces to be in the summer, but also to maintain the positive development, enrichment, and most importantly fun that comes with summer programs.

The Mayor's FY24 Preliminary Budget proposes **a \$29.3 million program to eliminate the gap (PEG)** for the Department of Youth and Community Development (DYCD). Leading up to the FY24 Preliminary Budget Proposal, the Adams Administration cited economic uncertainty to justify a round of PEGs to City agencies. Over the last several months, analyses from New York

State Comptroller DiNapoli and the Independent Budget Office (IBO) have called into question the need for budget cuts, given an anticipated surplus of more than \$2 billion.<sup>1 2</sup>

DYCD's PEG will directly and indirectly impact the broad array of community-based programs supported by the agency, including: after-school programming, Beacon and Cornerstone community centers, the number of available beds for homeless and runaway youth, and adult literacy services. This PEG comes at a time when communities need these services the most as our city continues to rebuild after the fallout of the COVID-19 pandemic. The Mayor's Management Report issued in January 2023 notes increased program utilization across many of these programs in FY23,<sup>3</sup> calling any proposed cuts—however they are framed—into question. **This PEG must be restored in the FY24 Executive Budget.** At the very least, DYCD must provide clarity on which programs are included in the PEG and why.

### **COMPASS/SONYC programming**

COMPASS/SONYC programs provide afterschool and summer programming to school-aged youth across the city. UNH members collectively hold 214 youth service contracts, including 140 school-based after-school programs which were key parts of the city's efforts to keep youth engaged over the last two and a half years. COMPASS/SONYC programs have struggled in recent years with low staff wages leading to recruitment and retention challenges, vacancies due to delays in the DOHMH Comprehensive Background Check process, and fluctuating enrollment due to COVID-19. Now that schools are consistently open and youth are engaging with in-person activities again, it's important to invest in these programs to ensure they have the staff and resources they need to support young New Yorkers.

In the FY24 budget, the City must:

- Fund the current capacity of the COMPASS/SONYC system, if they are included in DYCD's PEG;
- Increase the cost-per-participant rate to set a wage floor of \$21 per hour for workers, so that providers can offer a more competitive wage to combat recruitment challenges. This rate is in line with wages for similar positions at the Department of Education; and
- Clear the backlog and expedite the DOHMH Comprehensive Background Check process so that providers can fill vacant positions in programs quickly.

Furthermore, COMPASS/SONYC programs have not been re-procured in many years, leaving providers with outdated reimbursement rates that do not reflect inflation or changes in the labor market. DYCD must reissue an RFP that reflects the true cost of providing high quality afterschool programming. This includes:

- Establishing year-round, 12 month youth service contracts moving forward and streamlining the procurement process;
- Paying approved provider indirect rates in full, in accordance with the City's Indirect Cost Rate Initiative;
  - Providers must be able to claim those rates at the outset and include them in budgets, not have a placeholder rate that later gets amended;

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<sup>1</sup>

<https://www.ibo.nyc.ny.us/iboreports/current-year-surplus-projected-despite-slowng-economy-future-year-challenges-remain-fiscal-outlook-december-2022.pdf>

<sup>2</sup> <https://www.osc.state.ny.us/files/reports/osdc/pdf/report-16-2023.pdf>

<sup>3</sup> <https://www.nyc.gov/assets/operations/downloads/pdf/pmmr2023/dycd.pdf>

- Including year-over-year funding cost escalators in the contracts, in accordance with inflation;
- Supporting staffing ratios appropriate for School Age Child Care (SACC) licensing for all 12 months of the year; and
- Prioritizing positive youth development principles.

Finally, we urge DYCD to work with providers to develop a plan for serving youth with disabilities in COMPASS/SONYC programs. Recommendations include:

- Providing funding for paraprofessional support and allow that paraprofessional staff to report directly to CBO staff;
- Enable CBOs to hire experts and trainers in multiple modalities of learning to support Education Specialists and other existing staff;
- Give program staff access to assistive technologies (and training on how to use them) like communicators (including speech-to-text devices), computer access tools, hearing and visual aids, and more present in their community centers; and
- Issue clear protocols for CBOs to seek out support when integrating a youth with a disability and have programs available to refer these youth to if the current arrangement is not fulfilling that young person's needs.

### **Community Programming: Beacons**

Beacon programs are school-based community centers that serve community members as young as six years old, and include specific provisions for adult education and family support services. Beginning in 1991, Beacons have 91 locations throughout the five boroughs of New York City operating in the afternoons and evenings, on weekends, and during school holidays and vacation periods, including the summer. Of the 91 Beacon contracts, UNH settlement house members hold 25 of those contracts. Beacons provide services from afterschool programming, arts and enrichment opportunities, ESL classes, GED preparation classes, organized sports, and even more opportunities for community connection and recreation.

Community-focused programs like Beacons allow community based organizations (CBOs) to create programming that centers the needs of the local community by serving both youth and adults. Whereas school-based youth programming may have an emphasis on academic remediation, community-focused programming allows young people an intentional space to develop holistically within a supportive community in an assets-based program framework rather than within a deficit model that does not recognize the skills, knowledge, and multiple intelligences our young people already possess. In contrast to other school-based programs, Beacons also serve adult community members and create programming specific to their needs, which allows for a more holistic community culture to be built during programming.

Community center programming is a critical resource that can empower and nurture the inherent talents of New York City's young people, all within the safety of their local communities, and settlement houses have been doing this work for over a century. In short, community center programming is one of the few places where CBOs have full autonomy to do what they do best: positive youth and community development.

It is crucial that Beacons have the same supports as other school-focused DYCD programs. In the FY24 budget, the City must:

- Fund the current capacity of the Beacon system, if Beacons are included in DYCD's PEG;

- Increase the cost-per-participant rate to set a wage floor of \$21 per hour for workers, so that providers can offer a more competitive wage to combat recruitment challenges. This rate is also in line with wages for similar positions at the Department of Education;
- Clear the backlog and expedite the DOHMH Comprehensive Background Check process so that providers can fill vacant positions in programs quickly; and
- Support providers with school administrators that restrict the ability of community members to enter DOE buildings, especially during Beacons' evening and weekend hours.

### **Community Programming: Cornerstones**

The Cornerstone model was developed with input from United Neighborhood Houses and our settlement house members and is aligned with the settlement house model. Cornerstones are based in NYCHA community centers and—like settlement houses—offer integrated, holistic social services to community members of all ages. For school-aged youth, during the academic year, Cornerstones provide after school programming and tutoring/academic services, and over the summer, they act as safe sites within NYCHA communities where young people can go to engage in youth development-driven activities. Cornerstones were first launched in 2010, and over the last decade have expanded to 99 total contracts across all five boroughs, with 49 of those contracts being held by UNH's settlement house members.

While providers do important work in their Cornerstone sites, the model itself is under-funded, causing considerable stress and creating unnecessary challenges for the nonprofit staff who are tasked with their operation. Like COMPASS/SONYC programs, Cornerstone contracts have been renewed with level funding for many years, leading to stagnant staff salaries and resulting challenges with recruitment and retention. A healthy youth services ecosystem that meets the needs of all youth requires both school-based and community-based programming. Recent emphasis on academic programming - like Summer Rising - has left community based programming out of the conversation, despite this programming being directly connected to local communities across New York City.

In addition, Cornerstone programs face additional challenges stemming from failing NYCHA infrastructure and a lack of support from NYCHA to quickly resolve building issues as they arise. NYCHA developments have faced severe under-funding for the last half-century, leading to modern conditions of dilapidation and disrepair. Community centers are not exempt from these challenges, and providers struggle to get NYCHA to respond quickly to repair needs within their centers, from leaks that could cause mold; peeling paint that could lead to lead exposure; and HVAC issues that result in high temperatures when the AC shuts off in the summer months.

In the FY24 budget, the City should:

- Increase Cornerstones' budgets to cover the costs associated with operating programs in NYCHA-owned spaces and ensure equal pay for Cornerstone staff doing similar work to Beacon and SONYC/COMPASS staff.
  - Reexamine the current funding formula for Cornerstone, which is insufficient to cover staffing and program costs, forcing many providers to offer programming through "in kind" contributions from other programs.

- Provide greater transparency on how these rates are calculated and the average cost-per-participant rate so the CBO community can work together with DYCD to improve the formula to ensure it covers the costs of running these programs.

### **Summer Rising**

DYCD has confirmed that Summer Rising, the partnership between DYCD and the DOE to provide integrated summer school and summer camp to elementary- and middle-school aged youth, will continue in Summer 2023. Despite holding a series of provider feedback sessions wherein CBOs raised challenges with this model—including issues with centralized DOE enrollment that made it challenging for providers to match youth with the type of programming they wanted which left many summer camp slots unused despite the demand within the community for these slots; a lack of choice for parents and families who wanted a more traditional summer camp experience; and inconsistent support for students with disabilities—there have been no clear changes or improvements made.

In order for Summer Rising 2023 to be successful for all parties, but especially for children and families who deserve summer opportunities that fulfill their needs, the City must consider the following:

- CBOs must have control over participant registration, which will especially help families who need additional digital and language support to apply for programming,
  - CBOs should be able to maintain their own rosters so that if there are young people who cannot attend the CBO portion of the day, CBOs have the power to unenroll that youth and give that slot to a young person who can attend so the slot does not go to waste.
- The City should allow youth and families to choose whether to attend summer school, camp, or both, and allow CBOs the chance to record how many young people choose which service.
- In addition, Summer Rising 2023 can only be set up for success if there is increased and coordinated support for students with disabilities to make sure CBOs have resources they need to properly serve these young people.

### **Adult Literacy Education**

UNH advocates for an adult literacy system that provides quality, comprehensive, and accessible educational services for New Yorkers to improve their literacy skills, learn English, obtain a High School Equivalency diploma, and enter training and post-secondary education.

Today in New York City, there are currently about 906,000 adults living in New York City with limited to no proficiency in English (i.e. those who reported that they did not speak English or did not speak English well)<sup>4</sup>. Moreover, over the past year, more than 44,000 asylum seekers and refugees have arrived in New York after fleeing life-threatening social, political, and economic conditions in their home countries. For many of these adults, limited skills impact almost every aspect of their lives, making it difficult to support their children in school, access health care, secure and maintain living-wage jobs, advocate for their rights, and fully participate in their new communities.

### *FY2024 Budget Recommendations*

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<sup>4</sup> UNH tabulations of 2021 American Community Survey data from the US Census Bureau.

Rather than committing to bolster the resources and critical services that New Yorkers deserve, the Mayor has proposed significant budget cuts to crucial programs, including adult literacy education. To address the gap in funding for community-based adult literacy services, UNH calls on the Mayor and the City Council to:

- Restore the full amount of baselined and one-year funding that DYCD-funded adult literacy programs were allotted in the FY23 Adopted Budget;
- Renew the \$2.5M City Council Discretionary Adult Literacy Pilot Project and expand it to \$5M under the new title “Adult Literacy Program Enhancement,” now that the pilot has proven to be a resounding success;
- Renew the \$4M City Council Discretionary Adult Literacy Initiative, with added flexibility so that programs that receive this funding are not bound by the problematically low \$950 per student DYCD funding rate.

The Mayor’s FY24 Preliminary Budget proposal includes about \$8.26M in City Tax Levy for DYCD-funded adult literacy programs. This is based on our understanding of the budget but given that DYCD’s PEG is listed as simply “less than anticipating spending across agency contracted programs” and not itemized, we need greater clarity on the city’s total spending on adult literacy. In contrast, the FY23 adopted budget allocated approximately \$20.4M in city funds for adult literacy. The breakdown of last year’s funding included \$5.7M in established baseline funding, \$8M in expansion funding that was baselined in FY22, and \$6.7M that was added for additional expansion in FY23.

#### *Program Overview*

As a whole, the city’s adult literacy system provides over two hundred classes that reach New Yorkers in need of English literacy, health literacy, digital literacy, and the ability for parents to independently support their children’s education. The success of adult learners is often predicated on how well programs can accommodate their other social service needs. A working parent without reliable access to childcare, an adult learner with mental health challenges, or a skilled professional from abroad in need of immediate employment, can more easily commit and benefit from classes if those needs are met. While the level of support services offered vary by provider, resources in community-based organizations like settlement houses include case management, workforce development programming, child care assistance, college planning guidance, legal assistance, behavioral health services, and housing assistance.

#### *Increased Rates*

One of the significant challenges of the adult literacy system is that it is seriously underfunded, and where funding does exist, it is at reimbursement rates that do not fully cover the cost of delivering high-quality adult literacy classes. A 2017 DYCD-commissioned report conducted by the Literacy Assistance Center -- titled Investing in Quality -- analyzed the true costs of providing quality adult literacy programming and found that on average, adult literacy programs cost about \$3,600 to provide instruction and support to each student they serve<sup>5</sup>. Instead, the city’s current reimbursement rate is about \$950 per student. This rate has not been raised in years, despite significant increases in the costs of running programs and maintaining living wages for staff. This means that many adult literacy providers are actually experiencing a loss on contracts when they provide literacy services to their community and must raise private dollars to support this program.

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<sup>5</sup> Literacy Assistance Center, 2017. Investing in Quality, A Blueprint for Adult Literacy Programs and Funders: <http://www.lacnyc.org/investing-in-quality.html>.

While we have not yet reached that goal, the \$2.5 million Adult Literacy Pilot program passed by the City Council two years ago and that was renewed in the FY23 budget provides a template for what a fully funded adult literacy program looks like. The adult literacy pilot increases the amount of funding for students in those programs without requiring additional students served. This has enabled programs to make significant improvements to the quality of services they provide, including updating and expanding curriculum, adding and improving remote services, increasing focus on digital literacy, increased student outreach and support, and more. It has also allowed for programs to address the needs of particular populations like parents, or respond to immediate needs in their communities.

### **Create a \$3 Million Youth Mental Health Council Initiative**

During the first few months of the COVID-19 pandemic, 1 in 600 Black children and 1 in 700 Latinx children lost their parent or caregiver to the pandemic in New York State, more than double the rate of white children. More than half of those parent deaths were in the Bronx, Brooklyn, and Queens. Losing a caregiver is associated with a range of negative health effects, including lower self-esteem, a higher risk of suicide, and symptoms of mental illness. According to pediatricians, addressing the impact of family death on young people will “require intentional investment to address individual, community, and structural inequalities.” Beyond grief, the learning loss and isolation has had an extreme impact on our young people. In late 2021, the American Academy of Pediatrics (AAP), the American Academy of Child and Adolescent Psychiatry (AACAP) and the Children’s Hospital Association (CHA) declared a National State of Emergency in Children’s Mental Health; and the Surgeon General followed suit by declaring a Youth Mental Health Crisis.

Given these growing mental health needs among young people, we propose using approximately \$3 million in new Council Initiative funds to create a new Youth Mental Health initiative. This new initiative would provide flexible mental health services for youth programs run by CBOs – such as Beacons, Cornerstones, COMPASS/SONYC, and others—with a focus on out-of-school time. Programs would be able to hire mental health professionals, lead structured group activities, or test other innovative, hyper-local solutions to youth mental health needs – much in the same way the Geriatric Mental Health Initiative functions for older adults.

### **Invest in the Human Services Workforce**

While it is crucial to examine the needs of school-aged youth and provide supportive services, we must also ensure that the workers providing these services are supported. Low wages for youth services positions have contributed to a staffing crisis, and without increased budgets in government contracts to cover wage increases, nonprofits will be unable to recruit and train the next generation of early childhood educators and youth development workers, setting future New Yorkers up for significant barriers to accessing services. Our society has devalued care work for far too long, and it is time that we invest in this workforce to ensure that they earn wages that properly compensate them for the skilled and important work they do.

More broadly, human service workers as a sector are grossly underpaid. A recent analysis by UNH found that human service workers face similar economic insecurity as the participants in their programs; in our report, [\*The Need to Strengthen the Economic Security of the Settlement House Workforce\*](#), we note that government funding decisions and chronic underinvestment in



human services have led to poverty-level wages for essential frontline workers at settlement houses.

Low wages, exacerbated by burnout from the COVID-19 pandemic, have led to chronically low staffing levels at human services organizations. Our settlement house members report more, longer vacancies, higher turnover, and significant challenges recruiting in a competitive labor market. Insufficient staffing has made it increasingly difficult for nonprofits to serve New Yorkers, leading to under-enrollment and program closures – such as the recent announcement of the closure of Sheltering Arms – which then leads to budget reductions and a vicious cycle that harms New Yorkers seeking services.

For years, the human services sector has warned of a staffing crisis citing low wage levels. Over the last two years, the City ignored a COLA request and instead issued a one-time bonus for our workforce that was equivalent to less than 1%, and a “contract enhancement” that led to contract-by-contract increases of between 1.5 and 2.5%. This investment is wholly insufficient to have a meaningful impact on the nonprofit workforce. Even with an annual 5% COLA, for most frontline workers starting at or around minimum wage, five years of raises would still mean an hourly wage of under \$20. Coupled with inflation and the City’s tendency to extend contracts without any cost escalators or budget modifications, this salary problem will only be solved by a significant investment in the workforce.

*Create a Prevailing Wage Schedule for Human Services Workers:*

For these reasons, UNH supports Introduction 510 (Stevens), which would establish prevailing wage schedules for human service workers, require agencies to include sufficient funding to cover those wages in contracts, and track implementation of those wages by human service contractors; and we know that this legislation would need to pass through the budget process to be effective. While prevailing wage schedules are an imperfect tool to address the current conditions faced by human service workers, it is a significant improvement from the status quo. This process to design a true prevailing wage system is arduous and will require careful analysis, but we cannot afford to continue ignoring the need. For years, the government at every level has asked nonprofit partners to do “more with less.” This dynamic has pushed our sector to a real breaking point, and our workforce has suffered the consequences.

*Include a 6.5% COLA for Human Services Workers:*

Given the gravity of the human services staffing crisis, we are also supportive of a 6.5% Cost of Living Adjustment (COLA) for this workforce in FY 2024, in alignment with the JustPay campaign. We also ask the Council to ensure it is included in the budget as a “cost of living adjustment” and not some other named initiative so providers can rely on these funds being stable and recurring.

Thank you for your time. For any follow up questions, I can be contacted at [dbravo@unhny.org](mailto:dbravo@unhny.org).