



**UNITED  
NEIGHBORHOOD  
HOUSES**

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**Testimony of United Neighborhood Houses  
Before the New York City Council**

**FY 2027 Preliminary Budget Hearing:  
Committee on Children & Youth Services  
Council Member Althea Stevens, Chair**

**Submitted by Kate Connolly, Senior Policy Analyst  
March 16th, 2026**

Thank you, Chair Stevens and members of the New York City Council, for the opportunity to testify. My name is Kate Connolly, and I am a Senior Policy Analyst at United Neighborhood Houses (UNH).

UNH is a policy and social change organization representing neighborhood settlement houses that reach over 840,000 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 history of New York City by engaging young people in programming that can expand their minds and opportunities, connecting families to other essential supports beyond after school, and helping youth navigate challenging times. It is crucial that New York City maintain and invest in its youth and community development programs to provide all New Yorkers with opportunities to learn, grow, play, and access resources and opportunities to better their lives.

Settlement houses have been community hubs for youth programming and community development for over a century, and ensure that community members have what they need to thrive. Settlement houses operate DYCD-funded programs in most neighborhoods of New York City. Collectively, they operate over 170 DYCD-funded after-school programs (COMPASS Elementary, SONYC, and COMPASS High), serving over 25,000 youth or 23% of all COMPASS/SONYC participants citywide. Settlement houses also operate half of all Cornerstone contracts, a third of all Beacon contracts, and 32 adult literacy programs. Additionally, they serve over 27,000 participants annually through DYCD-funded youth workforce programs, a total of 7% of all SYEP participants. Settlement houses are also providers under DYCD's Office of Neighborhood Safety Programming, Immigrant Support programs, and Runaway and Homeless Youth services. Under the purview of ACS, settlement houses operate 7 Family Enrichment

Centers. While these programs play a crucial role in supporting children and families, they have often been underfunded and overlooked.

This testimony will focus on recommendations to support and stabilize citywide youth services in FY27 and strengthen the human services workforce including:

- Pilot an alternative summer program model for middle schoolers;
- Invest \$18 million in City Council funds for Adult Literacy services that sustains programs not eligible for funding under DYCD's Adult Literacy RFP;
- Restore and baseline the Promise NYC program with a \$50 million annual investment; and
- Protect Cornerstone Community Centers through infrastructure accountability.

### **Pilot an Alternative Summer Program Model for Middle School Youth**

Although the FY27 Preliminary Budget has restored funding for summer programming, there is still more work that must be done to prepare for Summer 2026. In addition to tackling the operational issues that have plagued Summer Rising year after year, the City must work with local stakeholders to pilot summer program models other than Summer Rising. The Summer Rising model made sense when it was first created in Summer 2021, when students had been learning remotely for long periods of time during the COVID-19 pandemic and there were real concerns about learning loss and student readiness to return to school buildings long-term. However, we are now in a different time, and summer 2026 presents us with an exciting opportunity to begin to rethink and reshape summer programming to meet students' current needs.

In response to questions from settlement houses and their communities about the efficacy of this model, UNH conducted a study of Summer Rising, composed of a digital survey of 700 parents and CBO providers, and 7 focus groups of middle school participants. In November 2024, we released [\*One Size Does Not Fit All: Assessing the Efficacy of the Summer Rising Program in Meeting the Needs of New York City Families\*](#). Some of our key findings were:

1. Many families are dependent on free summer programming provided by the city. 58% of surveyed parents said they did not have a back-up option if Summer Rising was not available, with the percentage rising to 64% for low-income families.
2. Middle schoolers expressed frustration with the DOE-led academics. 87% of focus group participants disagreed or felt neutral in regards to the statement "I feel engaged in the morning session" of Summer Rising."
3. Despite recognizing the value of summer academic enrichment, many parents participating in the survey expressed frustration over a lack of communication around the DOE-led academic program. Parents reported being unclear about what curriculum was being used, who their students' teachers were, and if their child's learning needs were being met. This was in contrast to reports of regular communication from the CBO staff.
4. There are widespread concerns whether students with IEPs and English Language Learners are receiving appropriate accommodations. Over half of CBO staff said that a shortage of paraprofessional support for students with IEPs was one of the most pressing challenges. Additionally, some focus group participants who identify as English

Language Learners shared that they were excluded from the DOE-led academic portion and given arts & crafts projects instead.

Last year, the Department of Education released the Summer Rising 2024 Impact Analysis, which used spring 2024 and fall 2024 standardized academic data to compare the academic performance of young people who participated in Summer Rising to those who did not participate in the program. From this data, we can see that middle school participants who attended Summer Rising programming for 20+ days saw no statistically significant impact on their Math scores. Furthermore, when compared to other students in the City, middle school Summer Rising participants who attended Summer Rising programming for 20+ days actually fared worse in reading scores than the comparison group. DOE's own impact analysis supports our findings that Summer Rising is not the appropriate model for all middle school youth.

The summer months offer young people a break from the traditional school schedule, and allow more time for outside play, postsecondary exploration, field trips, positive peer socialization, and hands-on learning activities. Higher-income families often have the option to pick from different summer options depending on their child's preference, but most low-income families are reliant on city-funded programs to ensure a safe summer placement.

There exist a number of respected summer programming models that be used as a basis for alternative models, including:

- COMPASS Summer: DYCD funds community-based and Cornerstone programs to operate non-Summer Rising programming during summer months. This model reflects school-year programming and includes field trips, physical activity, leadership development, and integrated academics.
- Freedom Schools: This research-based and culturally sensitive program focuses on academics, civic engagement, family engagement, and social emotional learning. The training and model have been developed by the Children's Defense Fund.
- In addition, settlement houses operate a number of alternative summer models, including:
  - Life Lines Arts Camp: This program run by the Center for Family Life in Sunset Park engages youth in consistent group and community-building activities that promote social, physical, and artistic development. Campers attend a 5-day/week, full-day program and participate in enriching activities, including dance, theater, music, visual arts, and sports. Two full days per week are spent off-site on day trips.
  - Learning Campus Model: Henry Street Settlement operates this program as an extension of their school-year afterschool program, bringing together young people from two local community centers to participate in a club model. All students participate in academic sessions, but are given voice and choice to select enrichment activities, resulting in higher retention rates.

Youth and families should have a voice in deciding what kind of programming is right for them. **The City must commit to funding alternative summer programming models to meet the diverse needs of NYC's youth and families.**

## **Invest \$18 million in City Council funds for Adult Literacy services that sustains programs not eligible for funding under DYCD's Adult Literacy RFP.**

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.

In New York City, an estimated 2 million adults have limited English-language proficiency or lack a high school diploma. No-cost community-based adult literacy programs such as English for Speakers of Other Languages (ESOL), adult basic education (ABE), and high school equivalency (HSE) preparation programs enable New Yorkers to gain the knowledge and skills necessary to secure higher-paying jobs that can sustain their families, support their children's education, and advocate for themselves and their families. Adult literacy programs run by settlement houses and other community-based organizations reach over 9,000 people each year and often serve as entry points for adult learners who are subsequently connected to workforce training support and other wraparound services that strengthen their families' economic and social well-being.

In FY25, the Department of Youth and Community Development's Adult Literacy RFP introduced new requirements tying program eligibility to specific Neighborhood Tabulation Areas (NTAs), which significantly limited which organizations could apply for funding. As a result, many long-standing providers were excluded from securing multi-year contracts and lost the funding needed to sustain their adult literacy programs.

To address the gaps created by the 2024 DYCD RFP, the City Council made a historic investment of \$16.5 million in adult literacy funding in FY25 and FY26. This discretionary funding is sustaining more than 60 programs. For four UNH settlement house adult literacy program providers (CAMBA, Center for Family Life, Queens Community House and Sunnyside Community Services), City Council discretionary funding is the sole funding source sustaining these programs, and they have served or expect to serve more than 3,100 students collectively. Without renewed funding, organizations excluded from the current DYCD literacy portfolio will not be able to offer adult literacy classes after June 30th of this year.

It is necessary for adult learners to have stable programs and support, as continued City Council funding supports staffing and essential program infrastructure and thousands of adult learners depend on these programs for essential skills. Ideally, these programs would be supported by a robust, baselined program managed by DYCD that offered students and providers stability with year-over-year funding. However, until DYCD revisits its unnecessarily restrictive stance on geographic priority for programming, **it is crucial that the City Council increases its investment to \$18 million to make sure that more adult learners can have access to quality classes.**

### **Restore and Baseline Promise NYC with a \$50 million Annual Investment**

Under Promise NYC, four providers, including three settlement houses, have contracted with the Administration for Children's Services (ACS) to implement a child care voucher program in each of their respective boroughs (NMIC in the Bronx and Manhattan, Center for Family Life in Brooklyn, Chinese-American Planning Council in Queens, and La Colmena in Staten Island). Since the program launched in FY23, providers have been reporting full enrollment and long waitlists, which demonstrates the need and desire from families to have this support.

Promise NYC was funded at \$25 million in the City's FY 2025 budget, and this investment helped clear waitlists across the program and expand access to child care for undocumented and mixed-status families who are otherwise excluded from most public child care programs. However, this funding was not baselined, and programs are now anticipating that child care services will end on June 30th, leaving families abruptly without care arrangements.

This year, we urge the City to both **baseline and increase funding for Promise NYC to \$50 million in the FY 2027 budget**. The success of the program has driven significant demand, and waitlists are growing as providers struggle to keep up with the number of eligible families seeking care. Additional investment would allow the program to serve more families and bring more providers into a model that has proven effective at connecting immigrant families to stable, affordable child care.

We celebrate that child care is receiving the attention and investment it deserves, and we strongly support efforts to expand access so that every child in New York City can benefit from early care and education, regardless of immigration status. However, experience shows that immigrant families are often the first to fall through the cracks when new systems are implemented or existing programs are expanded. Promise NYC has been successful precisely because it was designed to reach families who are otherwise excluded and to work closely with trusted community-based providers.

As the City works toward building a more inclusive and equitable child care system, it is critical to sustain and strengthen Promise NYC so immigrant families do not lose access to essential services during this transition. Maintaining and expanding this program ensures that families can continue accessing the child care they rely on today, while the City builds long-term systems that guarantee equitable access for all families.

### **Protect Cornerstone Community Centers Through Infrastructure Accountability**

Cornerstone Community Centers are based in NYCHA housing developments throughout the city and play a unique and important role in communities by acting as essential community centers that provide engaging and high-quality programming for people of all ages. The work is rooted in community engagement and staff are experts in facilitating youth-lead and community-engaged events and activities. Cornerstones serve as community hubs, remaining open during evening and weekend hours to provide activities and resources to the community. This program was informed by the settlement house model and settlement houses operate approximately half of all Cornerstone sites.

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.

In addition, Cornerstone programs face additional challenges stemming from failing NYCHA infrastructure. NYCHA developments have faced historical neglect and 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 or DYCD 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.

The issues created by failing infrastructure are exacerbated by band-aid solutions for serious structural problems, which lead to the need for larger repairs and long-term program relocations. Even providers operating in developments that have gone through RAD/PACT conversions find themselves without clear answers as to who is responsible for various repairs, licenses, or permits. Ultimately, delayed repairs can cause program disruptions, forcing families to scramble for alternative care when centers are closed for reasons outside of their control, and preventing communities from accessing important resources.

Beyond the physical impact on programming and space, delayed repairs also impact program budgets. Cornerstone providers shared that they have received violations and been fined by New York State Department of Health (DOH) and FDNY for issues they have already reported to DYCD and/or NYCHA. These violations are based on health and safety regulations to keep participants and staff safe. However, inspections by DOH and FDNY do not include communication with DYCD or NYCHA, including a review of open tickets from providers requesting facility repairs. This results in Cornerstone providers assuming responsibility for all violations and associated fines, even if they have been actively trying to solve the issue with city agencies.

Providers are not reimbursed or compensated by DYCD or NYCHA for paying these fines, so the costs come out of the Cornerstone program budgets. These community-based organizations want to support their communities, and yet years of Cornerstone contract extensions with no cost escalators have brought them to a point where budgets cannot absorb the added costs of violations due to crumbling NYCHA infrastructure. Requiring Cornerstone providers to cover the cost of violations issued by other city agencies for facility issues they are unable to resolve penalizes participants by co-opting funds that should be used for community programming. **The City must commit to covering the costs of DOH and FDNY violation fines for Cornerstone Community Centers when providers have already communicated the issue to DYCD and/or NYCHA.**

Additionally, DYCD should work with providers who operate Cornerstones in developments that have gone through or are currently going through a RAD/PACT conversion to develop a clear division of responsibility for repairs. Many providers have stated that while developers completed initial repairs to improve the space, the developers often push back against performing repairs post-construction, despite language in community agreements. DYCD should take a more active role in both the negotiation phase, and in ensuring developers are compliant with finalized agreements. Making sure that developers follow agreements with providers and complete repairs in a timely manner could ultimately save the City time and money.

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