



**Testimony of United Neighborhood Houses
Before the New York City Council Committee on Youth
and Subcommittee on Public Housing
Regarding the DYCD Cornerstone Initiative Concept Paper**

**Lew Fidler, Chair Committee on Youth
Rosie Mendes, Chair, Subcommittee on Public Housing**

June 3, 2009

Thank you Chair Fidler and Chair Mendez for the opportunity to testify. My name is Nancy Wackstein and I am the executive director of United Neighborhood Houses (UNH). UNH is the membership organization of New York City's 36 settlement houses and community centers. The history of the settlement house movement in New York City is closely linked to public housing with many settlement houses having been founded to meet the needs of the same low-income and moderate income communities that public housing serves. Over half of UNH members operate in NYCHA developments providing services such as community centers, early childhood education, youth activities, senior centers and other services for older adults, health and mental health clinics, hobby programs and summer camps.

We are deeply concerned about the impact that NYCHA's fiscal crisis is having on the services available to public housing residents. Last year, NYCHA discontinued grants to community based organizations which serve NYCHA tenants and closed several community centers. We are grateful for the Council's work to provide \$18 million annually to preserve human services for NYCHA residents.

The Cornerstone Initiative concept paper proposes to use \$12.2 million of the \$18 million which the City Council allocated in order to preserve human services for NYCHA residents. It is our understanding that the remainder of these funds will be used by HRA and ACS to provide job training and child welfare services respectively for public housing residents.

DYCD is uniquely positioned to fund programs with the flexibility to meet the specific needs of different communities. As the Agency's mission includes both services for youth and for all segments of the community, DYCD has the flexibility to fund programs that can serve youth as well as creating programs to serve their whole family.

We are concerned that the Cornerstone Initiative concept paper does not adequately fund programs to meet the needs of all age ranges of the communities.

The closing of NYCHA community centers has led to the loss of a resource that was available to all residents of NYCHA developments and the communities in which they live. In order to provide quality services to the youth in public housing communities, providers should be able and adequately funded to meet the needs of their families and therefore include services for all age ranges in the community.

We believe that the settlement house model- where multiple services that serve all age groups come together under one roof with an open door- is the most effective way to provide human services to NYCHA residents. A community center that is open to all age groups is able to refer a resident in need to the appropriate service and integrate funding streams to build a stronger social service network.

With a settlement house model, a parent whose child is in child care or an after school program knows where to go to find other services such as ESOL or job training if needed. Many grandparents who have responsibility for children can access supportive services for older adults in the same setting that their children participate in after school activities or early education.

The Cornerstone Initiative is focused on “strategically investing public funds in programs that promote healthy development of NYCHA youth”. The Cornerstone Initiative encourages but does not fund intergenerational activities and the provision of services for adults over 21 years of age. Similarly, providers are expected to “facilitate access by participants and their families to other support services (for example, counseling, healthcare, mental healthcare, work readiness and job placement services) through an effective system of referrals and follow-up.” This work, which will likely require staff is expected but not funded through the Cornerstone Initiative.

We are very concerned that the lack of funding for programs which serve segments of the population other than youth will prevent Cornerstone Initiative programs from meeting the needs of whole families in NYCHA developments.

Community Needs Assessment

Respondents should have the opportunity to assess community needs and design programs which meet the specific needs of the communities that they serve.

It is not clear how the expected number of participants (service levels) in each age group was determined. Providers have no guarantee that these numbers reflect the actual needs of the community and do not know how they were determined.

Community Outreach

We appreciate that DYCD engaged in a planning process by holding 22 focus groups as well as meetings with providers, NYCHA tenant association leaders and other community stakeholders. In particular, we are grateful that DYCD convened a provider’s forum which many UNH

members attended. At that forum, we specifically heard about the importance of serving youth by serving the entire family.

Recommendation

UNH recommends that DYCD makes available the information that DYCD gained in these focus groups about the needs for each development. This will help applicants to the RFP design the strongest programs to meet the needs of community members.

In particular, we would like to know:

- What residents and resident leadership reported to DYCD that community needs were.
- What human service community needs are currently met by other providers in or near the development.
- What services were lost through recent closures of either NYCHA operated or city contracted services in or near each development.
- How the needs assessment was performed to determine service levels at each site.

This information will be essential in determining whether the number of participants required at each development is achievable and whether those targets meet the needs of the communities to be served.

NYCHA Tenant Program Participation Rates

NYCHA has traditionally required human service providers operating in NYCHA facilities to have 51% or more of those served be NYCHA residents. We would like to know if this or any other tenant participation rate requirements will apply to programs funded through the Cornerstone Initiative.

Reccomendation

UNH recommends DYCD and NYCHA not impose tenant participation rate requirements on Cornerstone Initiative providers. The requirement that those in need of services prove NYCHA residency creates an unnecessary obstacle for clients in need. Furthermore, as these programs are funded using City Tax Levy, it is not appropriate to turn away New Yorkers who reside in non-public housing in the same community as a NYCHA development.

Facilities and maintenance

The Concept Paper should provide more clarity about how the expenses for the maintenance and upkeep of NYCHA facilities will be paid. In particular, it is important to know:

- How will upgrades required in order to make facilities SACC compliant be paid for?
Will funding for SACC required upgrades come out of the provider's budget?

- Will providers be expected to pay for security personnel, repairs and maintenance or any other facility expense?

These issues are of particular concern, since costs associated with facility maintenance and upkeep can eat into funding that should be dedicated to providing programs. In addition, through DYCD's OST program, school based programs are not required to pay for school security personnel or maintenance, so a similar arrangement should be made in the Cornerstone Initiative as NYCHA facilities are City owned properties just as school buildings are.

Recommendation

UNH recommends that funding to address the physical weakness of NYCHA facilities be covered by the City ahead of time and not through the Cornerstone Initiative funding.

Thank you again for the opportunity to testify. We look forward to continuing to work with you to foster quality human services that meet the needs of NYCHA residents.

United Neighborhood Houses (UNH), founded in 1919, is the membership organization of New York City settlement houses and community centers. Rooted in the history and values of the settlement house movement, UNH promotes and strengthens the neighborhood-based, multi-service approach to improving the lives of New Yorkers in need and the communities in which they live. UNH's membership comprises one of the largest human service systems in New York City, with 36 agencies working at more than 400 sites to provide high quality services and activities to a half million New Yorkers each year. UNH supports its members through policy development, advocacy and capacity-building activities.

UNH Members: CAMBA-Center for Family Life in Sunset Park - Chinese American Planning Council - Citizens Advice Bureau - Claremont Neighborhood Centers - Cypress Hills Local Development Corporation - East Side House Settlement - Educational Alliance - Goddard Riverside Community Center - Grand Street Settlement - Greenwich House - Hamilton-Madison House - Hartley House - Henry Street Settlement - Hudson Guild - Jacob A. Riis Neighborhood Settlement House - Kingsbridge Heights Community Center - Lenox Hill Neighborhood House - Lincoln Square Neighborhood Center - Mosholu Montefiore Community Center - Northern Manhattan Improvement Corporation - Project Hospitality - Queens Community House - Riverdale Neighborhood House - SCAN New York - School Settlement Association - Shorefront YM-WHA of Brighton-Manhattan Beach, Inc - Southeast Bronx Neighborhood Centers - St. Matthew's and St. Timothy's Neighborhood Center - St. Nicholas Neighborhood Preservation Corporation - Stanley M. Isaacs Neighborhood Center - Sunnyside Community Services - Third Street Music School Settlement - Union Settlement Association - United Community Centers - University Settlement Society