

POINT OF VIEW

Settlement Houses and Public Housing A Contemporary Solution

Despite significant challenges, New York City's public housing authority and its tenants have succeeded in fostering strong communities in their developments. Nationally, public housing authorities are privatizing and even demolishing needed units of low and moderate income housing. But here in New York City, the New York City Housing Authority (NYCHA) remains committed to preserving its precious stock of affordable housing. Unfortunately, the increased cost of maintaining aging buildings and infrastructure coupled with severe declines in three levels of government support recently has caused NYCHA to pare down some services and even lay off staff. Yet despite these challenges, we applaud NYCHA's commitment to provide low-income New Yorkers with both shelter and core human services.

Even in our current recession, it is incredibly difficult to find an affordable home in New York City. NYCHA housing makes this possible for hundreds of thousands of low and moderate income New Yorkers to stay in the City, thereby ensuring the diversity which is the enduring strength of our City.

NYCHA's success in fostering strong communities is achieved in large part through its partnerships with community based organizations that provide essential human services to public housing residents. These include many settlement houses and community centers – members of United Neighborhood Houses – that have provided comprehensive, neighborhood based services at NYCHA developments for decades.

Community based organizations operate 135 child care and Head Start programs on NYCHA properties, educating more than 7,500 young children during their crucial early years and giving their parents the opportunity to work and pursue education. These programs operate in spaces provided at low cost or no cost to nonprofit providers. Thirty-seven comprehensive Out of School Time programs at NYCHA sites provide more than 3,500 youth with after school activities. Senior centers and Naturally Occurring Retirement Communities (NORCS) run by nonprofits and by NYCHA itself have ensured that older New Yorkers have a place to socialize and participate in various activities.

Community centers and settlement houses that operate in NYCHA properties work to make the full range of services available to the mostly low-income residents of public housing. By bringing together services for children, youth and seniors, they make quality services readily accessible and available to public housing residents.

NYCHA's Funding Crisis

These services, as well as other basic needs of public housing residents, are under constant threat because of budget shortfalls arising from the persistent underfunding of NYCHA from all levels of gov-

ernment. As the tragic death of a child in a Williamsburg development demonstrated in 2008, NYCHA's physical infrastructure has been neglected. Its social service infrastructure needs upgrading as well. This year, NYCHA was forced by fiscal constraints to discontinue its grants to community based organizations which provide on-site services to public housing residents. In addition, 25 community centers operated by NYCHA as well as directly-operated programs for youth and job development are being either closed or transferred to city agencies.

Funding for public housing in New York City has been dangerously low for too long. The federal government, which originally funded the construction of most of NYCHA's developments, has decreased operating subsidies by \$611 million since 2001. These cutbacks have come despite increasing costs of maintaining properties, some of which were constructed in the 1930's. We are hopeful that with the inclusion of capital money for public housing in President Obama's economic stimulus package, by the time this article is published the Federal government finally will have taken dramatic steps towards more adequate funding for NYCHA.

New York State, which funded the construction of sixteen public housing developments, none of which are eligible for Federal operating support, discontinued its operating subsidies in 1996 and has not restored this essential funding. Regrettably, because of this shortfall of State funds, NYCHA has begun to use Federal Section 8 vouchers, which can support low-income tenants in both public and private homes, largely for the developments which New York State constructed. This move has decreased the number of New Yorkers who receive housing subsidies even though there are many eligible New Yorkers waiting for them.

After NYCHA's former Chair Tino Hernandez told the New York City Council last May that the consequences of the City's continued lack of support for NYCHA would mean the closing of basic services for public housing residents, affordable housing advocates and human service providers, together with NYCHA residents, advocated for city funding to support NYCHA and human services funding. The City responded by providing \$18 million to support human services for public housing residents. We have recently learned that these funds will be divided among three city agencies - Department of Youth and Community Development, Administration for Children's Services and Human Resources Administration - with the expectation that these agencies will let contracts over the next year to non-profits to provide services formerly provided by NYCHA staff.

We applaud the efforts of Deputy Mayors Linda Gibbs and Dennis Walcott and NYCHA General Manager Douglas Apple to address the important priority of maintaining social services for NYCHA residents despite the City's, and NYCHA's, severe fiscal situations.

The Opportunity

We are hopeful that with increased federal funding from the economic stimulus package and with the City's expenditure of \$18 million for human services, there can be renewed attention to the needs of public housing communities. We will have the opportunity not only to preserve services that are essential and which have been successful, but also to implement new services that respond to the real needs of public housing residents and their communities.

By bringing multiple services together into NYCHA community centers, we believe human service providers will best be able to respond to community needs. Therefore, although funds are now divided between three city agencies which often serve different populations, we propose that the City and NYCHA work together to identify and fund services based on the particular needs of each NYCHA development. It would be a mistake to simply replicate the existing service structures in NYCHA developments. Rather, a human services needs assessment for each development should be completed.

The City should build upon the successes of settlement houses which operate in public housing developments by incorporating the multi-generational model into NYCHA facilities. The settlement house model brings together services for the multiple age groups - children, teens, seniors- that are represented in every community. This makes it more likely that a resident in need will be able to find help at the community-based organization located nearby. City funding for CBO's working in NYCHA should be organized so that services for children, youth, seniors, immigrants and others at risk can be provided under one community center roof.



Nancy Wackstein



Gregory Brender

We believe New York City is strengthened by having public housing in nearly every part of the City. We must ensure that those communities have the supports they need in order to remain safe and strong. The settlement house model creates an open door where the voices of residents count when the services are developed and delivered. As community needs change, so too should the services in their development. The City's public housing residents, ignored for too long by all levels of government, need and deserve quality human services which meet the specific demands of each community and help all residents reach their full potential.

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Women's Prison Association

WomenCare is a mentoring program for women making the transition from incarceration to society. WomenCare recruits and trains volunteer mentors.

Our mentors are a broad range of women from the community. It's a 10-month commitment between mentor/mentee. Mentor workshops occur monthly.

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