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**Testimony presented by Anthony Ng  
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**Before the New York City Council  
Select Committee on Community Development**

**Al Vann, Chair**

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Good afternoon. My name is Anthony Ng, and I am the Legislative Advocate for United Neighborhood Houses of New York, Inc. (UNH). UNH, founded in 1919, is the nonprofit umbrella organization for 35 settlement houses in New York City. Our member agencies comprise one of the largest human service systems in New York City and the largest group of settlements in the nation. 8,000 employees operate programs and activities in over 300 locations, reaching 500,000 New Yorkers each year. Services provided by the settlement houses include: early childhood education, after-school programs, teen centers, English for Speakers of Other Languages classes, GED classes, job training, tutoring, recreation, meals and supportive services for the elderly, mental health counseling, drug prevention, and art, music and drama programs. Our agencies offer multiple human services to an intergenerational mix of residents.

I am pleased to appear before you today, to highlight the work of settlement houses, and offer our insights into community development. UNH and its member agencies have a strong history and continued role in creating strong and healthy neighborhoods in NYC. The work of many of our agencies dates back to the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Some of the first settlement houses in the Lower East Side such as University Settlement, Henry Street Settlement, Grand Street, and Educational Alliance, were integral to improving the lives of its residents and the conditions of the neighborhood. These agencies still exist today, and are integral institutions that anchor the Lower East Side. UNH's member agencies also include groups that formed in and after the period of the War on Poverty programs of the 1960s. During the 1960s, the federal government's broad commitment to racial and economic justice, and greater community organizing and increased community-based planning converged to help these groups form. Groups that come out of this tradition include the Chinese-American Planning Council, CAMBA, and Cypress Hills LDC. Whatever their origins, our agencies work tirelessly to improve the lives of their community members, and in being their primary advocates.

As one with a community planning background, I understand that the term community development may still generally refer to:

- The revitalization of housing, community facilities, parks and open space
- Revitalization of commercial shopping strips in a neighborhood

Many community development organizations in NYC that gained their start through redeveloping housing, and commercial thoroughfares, have been successful at it. Once the physical revitalization of their communities were achieved, they realized that there additional human needs that had to be met. Several of these community development groups have made a conscious shift towards providing more human services, which helps to evolve the term and practice of community development.

We know that a vibrant community is comprised of the proper functioning of various components – good housing, good schools, well-maintained open space and parks, a strong local economy, and neighborhood institutions that offer human services that uplift people. Our member agencies specialize in the provision of human services, and how they contribute to making a vibrant neighborhood. However, we also understand that we must work with the City and other community institutions to ensure that the other components of a vibrant neighborhood are achieved. From our viewpoint, community development must strive to achieve all these components.

Through our experience and the work of our member agencies, we offer the following recommendations and insights regarding anti-poverty and community development programs in NYC:

- a) **Establishing a Community Advocates Initiative.** Since they are situated within communities, community based organizations (CBOs) are knowledgeable about neighborhood conditions, and programs that are effective at improving one's socioeconomic status. This initiative would support their ability to engage in decisionmaking structures (e.g. working with a community board; advising City Council and City agencies) and bring their voice to the formulation of public policy. CBOs that provide direct services often struggle to find the resources to bring their recommendations to policymakers. This Initiative would bolster their ability to do so.
- b) **Ensure that anti-poverty programs are people-based and place-based.** While concentrations of poverty may shift over time, we need to ensure that CBOs with a positive track record of serving low-income residents, continue to have opportunities to do so. A few of our member agencies have faced situations where they may have been prevented from accessing public funding to support such programs, because newly redrawn high-need districts did not include the location of their organization (they were now located only a few blocks outside the redrawn district). Additionally one of our member agencies in Manhattan serves the workers of a hospital in an upper income neighborhood. CBOs should have some flexibility in serving residents from low-income neighborhoods which may not reflect the current socioeconomic conditions where the CBO is located.
- c) **Re-examine the role of community boards.** Community boards produce community district needs statements, have land use review powers, and other committees that examine components of their district (e.g. housing, youth, parks, etc.). The membership of community boards aims to include neighborhood residents, yet they lack the resources to sustain their participation, and in some instances, be effective. We recommend a review of the role of community boards in analyzing neighborhood needs, and fostering the participation of neighborhood residents in solving the issues that face their community.
- d) **Anti-poverty and community development programs must effectively serve immigrant New Yorkers.** As immigrants and their children account for nearly 55 percent of the City's population, and 43 percent of the City's labor force, with a high concentration in the construction, manufacturing, and service industries, anti-poverty and

community development programs must serve the various immigrant communities in the City, in ways that are culturally sensitive, and with interpretation and translation assistance if needed. Specifically, we would like to see increased funding for ESOL, and legal services programs that protect immigrant workers from exploitation. Another barrier that immigrants face when attempting to fully integrate and succeed in NYC is their immigration status. This can range from them being undocumented, to their struggle to achieve citizenship amidst all the backlogs that USCIS has. Attention must be paid to these challenges when serving immigrants.

We look forward to working with this Committee and the entire City Council to determine programs and public policy aimed at alleviating poverty and improving the socioeconomic opportunities of low-income New Yorkers.