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

**Oversight – The Preliminary Budget for Fiscal Year 2022, The Preliminary Capital Commitment Plan
for Fiscal Years 2021-2025 and The Fiscal 2021 Preliminary Mayor’s Management Report**

**Submitted by Nora Moran, Director of Policy & Advocacy
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Thank you Chair Rose and members of the New York City Council for the opportunity to testify. My name is Nora Moran, and I am the Director of Policy and Advocacy at United Neighborhood Houses (UNH). UNH is a policy and social change organization representing 44 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.

The COVID-19 pandemic has ravaged New York City’s economy and safety net and has underscored the significant racial and economic disparities that have impacted New York City’s neighborhoods for decades. Just as they did through other crises our City has faced, settlement houses have been on the frontlines of the COVID-19 emergency response by continuing to deliver essential services to New Yorkers, providing emergency food, counseling, shelter, youth and family supports, and more. Though the City is facing financial challenges, this is not the time to divest from the safety net programs that support neighborhoods, nor is it time to cut funds that will lead to layoffs in the human services sector.

Throughout the COVID-19 pandemic, young people have been uniquely impacted. Sudden school closures and reopenings, massive changes—and cuts—to the community based programs on which they rely, and the loss of parents, guardians, and community members have all weighed on them during key periods of development. The mental health toll of this pandemic will be with this generation for years to come, and the disparate impacts on young people of color and low-income young people threaten to widen already existing racial and economic gaps.

Mayor de Blasio's FY22 Preliminary Budget does not repeat the disastrous budget cuts from Summer 2020, with one glaring exception. The Preliminary Budget once again fully eliminates funding for Summer SONYC programming for middle school students, leaving 43,500 middle school students with no options for summer activities.

In order to provide young people with safe and supportive activities this summer and to ensure the stability of the youth services field, UNH recommends that the City do the following:

- Restore \$25.7 million in the FY22 Executive Budget to support Summer SONYC programming for 43,500 middle school students;
- Work to clear the backlog of comprehensive background checks;
- Ensure that SYEP is a safe and robust program for summer 2021;
- Restore and baseline \$12 million for adult literacy services; and
- Restore funding for the Indirect Cost Rate Initiative in FY21 and beyond.

This testimony highlights the current state of youth services programming in NYC, as well as several key budget recommendations.

Current State of Youth Services Programming in NYC

Community-based organizations (CBOs) are an indispensable part of the City's child care and education system. For parents who need full day care for infants, toddlers or Pre-School Aged children or who need after-school services for school-age children, community-based organizations have traditionally been the only affordable option.

With COVID-19, community-based early childhood education and youth services programs dramatically increased their services to meet the new child care needs of families including New York City's essential workers. Community based organizations acted swiftly and innovatively, often without receiving complete guidance from government, to launch services including:

- Remote Programming: In March, early childhood education, youth employment and after-school programs rapidly transitioned to virtual programming which kept children connected to their peers and to adults focused on their support and educational enrichment.
- Regional Enrichment Centers (RECs): CBOs operated early childhood Regional Enrichment Centers, providing in-person child care and education to young children of essential workers. CBO staff also played key roles in operating the school-age RECs that were located in public school buildings. CBO staff brought their expertise in Youth Development to design socially distant activities that were engaging and supportive for participants.
- Learning Bridges/Labs: CBOs started to provide Learning Bridges programs for children enrolled in hybrid learning at 3-K, Pre-K and elementary and middle schools in September so that these students would have five days per week of care.

CBO staff have gone to significant lengths to provide essential services during this time of significant stress and upheaval for the City's children and youth. However, the City has not adequately supported CBOs, making it difficult for them to carry out programming and focus on working with children and youth. CBO programs depend on successful high-level collaboration

between City agencies. Unfortunately, this has often been lacking throughout the COVID-19 pandemic and CBOs have been left to make sense of missing or conflicting guidance from Department of Education (DOE), Department of Health and Mental Hygiene (DOHMH), and Department of Youth and Community Development (DYCD).

This led to issues such as:

- After-school programs not having clarity as to what space they are able to use in school buildings, or receiving exorbitant permit fees;
- Lack of communication to CBOs operating in schools about school health issues and decisions from the situation room;
- Reduced capacity for summer programs which the City Council fought to restore due to late notice insufficient guidance; and
- Learning Bridges/Labs programs facing the expectation of ramping up in a matter of weeks with many unanswered questions.

Overall, youth services providers have remained focused on providing children, youth, and their families with the highest quality support they can in uncertain times. In the following sections, we make recommendations that will help to bolster those efforts in service of New York City's young people. With the recent passage of the federal American Rescue Plan Act of 2021, we have an opportunity to address the primary challenges weighing on the youth services field for summer 2021. Funding from the ARP, such as the Elementary and Secondary School Emergency Relief Fund (ESSER), can and should be leveraged to restore Summer SONYC programming and generally support summer and after-school programming run by human service organizations.

Restore \$25.7 million for Summer SONYC Programming for 43,500 Middle School Students

It is essential that New York City have program options in place this summer for youth to ensure that they have constructive activities that support their well-being and recovery after a difficult year. Similarly, their parents, including many parents who are essential workers, need the security of knowing that there are safe and available child care arrangements. Summer camp programming is more important than ever given the extreme challenges youth and their families faced this past year due to COVID-19.

Unfortunately, the FY22 Preliminary Budget includes no funding for Summer SONYC programming for middle school students. New this year, Mayor de Blasio cut \$5.7 million in baselined funding for Summer SONYC programs, which typically supported approximately 9,500 students. Additionally, the Preliminary Budget does not include expansion funding for Summer SONYC slots, which have included in the Adopted Budget as one time funds from FY16-20. At its peak, this one-time funding was allocated at \$20 million for 34,000 Summer SONYC slots.

This cut comes after middle schools have been closed for months and parents have few options for affordable child care this summer. It is essential that New York City have program options in place this summer for youth to ensure that they have constructive activities that support their well-being and recovery after a difficult year. Similarly, their parents, including many parents who are essential workers, need the security of knowing that there are safe and available child care arrangements. Summer camp programming is more important than ever given the extreme challenges youth and their families faced this past year due to COVID-19.

Given the immense need for social and emotional supports in 2021, we are urging the City to invest \$25.7 million to support 43,500 middle school students with Summer SONYC programming this summer.

With stimulus funding on the way from the federal government, we have an opportunity to quickly address this challenge and restore these funds to the budget. Critically, this restoration must happen soon. The Mayor and City Council must work together to restore Summer SONYC funding immediately, as providers need time to plan and prepare for programs, especially due to the increased health and safety restrictions. Families also need to know that summer programs will be available to them. This funding must be restored by the Executive Budget, otherwise we run the risk of providers not being able to use these funds because they arrive too late.

DYCD must also immediately release summer programming guidance. As we saw last summer and in the fall, delayed roll out of funding and inconsistent guidance frustrated the hiring process, preparation of health safety protocols, and preparation of curriculum. Clear, consistent, and early communication can help prevent some of these challenges.

Clear the Comprehensive Background Checks Backlog

Since September 25th, 2019, New York State Office of Children and Family Services (OCFS) has required NYC DOHMH to perform new extensive background checks for staff and volunteers in after-school and early childhood education that are listed below:

- A NYS criminal history record check with the Division of Criminal Justice Services; (new)
- A national criminal record check with the Federal Bureau of Investigation; (new)
- A search of the NYS sex offender registry; (new)
- A database check of the NYS Statewide Central Register of Child Abuse and Maltreatment (SCR) in accordance with 424-1 of the Social Services Law;
- A search of the national sex offender registry using the National Crime and Information Center ***Required at a later time (new)

If the individual being cleared has lived outside of New York State in the last five years, they will also have to undergo background checks in every other State where they have lived. This includes:

- Each state(s) criminal history repository; (new)
- Each state's sex offender registry or repository; (new)
- Each state's child abuse or neglect registry. (new)

Providers and advocates strongly support rigorous background checks for all staff and volunteers, and we rely on our partners in government to process background checks quickly and efficiently so that programs can operate.

DOHMH has not been able to complete the background checks in a timely manner and many prospective staff members in after-school and early childhood education programs are unable to work due to pending clearances. In February, the backlog led New York State Office of Children and Family Services to provide some relief through a temporary rule change that allows staff members to work provisionally if they have been cleared through the State Central Register of

Child Abuse and Maltreatment (SCR) and if they are supervised for 100% of the time that they are in contact with children by a staff member who has been cleared.

While this measure has helped tremendously it is not adequate to address the new needs that have resulted from the COVID-19 crisis. The Learning Bridges Programs must have pre-cleared staff who can provide the supervision and have struggled to clear staff quickly. The City must clear the backlog of staff awaiting clearances and develop processes to quickly clear prospective staff members.

Summer Youth Employment Program

In summer of 2019, 75,000 young people ages 14-24 participated in SYEP. Participants in SYEP are primarily low-income students from communities of color that have faced economic disparities. Despite this, in Spring 2020, as the COVID-19 pandemic wrought devastation across the City—with particular damage to low-income communities of color—Mayor de Blasio announced plans to suspend SYEP for Summer 2020, pointing to health and safety concerns regarding in-person programming.

The full elimination of SYEP in summer 2020 would have had disastrous consequences for the City's young people. Many families rely on SYEP income during strong economic times and eliminating SYEP in 2020 would have had a disproportionate economic impact on those communities already suffering the most profound consequences from the pandemic. SYEP providers often hear from participants that they use their wages to buy food while out of school for the summer, pay for school supplies for themselves and their siblings in the fall, and generally help out with household expenses. Eliminating this essential economic support in the face of a recession would have compounded the inequitable impact the pandemic had on low-income communities of color. Furthermore, the impact on the mental health of young people—who were already carrying so much—would have been incalculable. Many young people were struggling with mental health issues and providers feared that the loss of SYEP would contribute to the larger sense of loss and hopelessness young people were experiencing due to COVID-19.

Thanks to the work of advocates, providers, young people, and our allies on City Council, funds were ultimately restored in the adopted budget to cover 35,000 Summer Bridge slots. Still, the impact of the Mayor's initial decision to eliminate SYEP and the significant cut the program's funding took in 2020 will be felt this year as providers attempt to ramp services back up. Layoffs, furloughs, and staff fatigue have led to a loss of infrastructure through attrition. Furthermore, SYEP is a program that depends on deep, meaningful partnerships with local employers, so losing a year of contact with them will have significant ripple effects.

For 2021, the Mayor has included sufficient funds in his preliminary budget to cover 70,000 SYEP slots. Given the consequences of last years' tumultuous rollout, the provider community believes this is a realistic and achievable number of slots for summer 2021. However, out of a recognition of the importance of this program, we have also been meeting with advocates, providers, and youth leaders as well as DYCD to discuss changes that could be made to the program such that we could, in the next few years, reach universal access. While expansion beyond 70,000 slots would be challenging this year given the unique set of circumstances, we

believe that the City has a moral responsibility to provide access to this critical program to every young person who applies.

While the Mayor's preliminary budget includes sufficient funding to cover 70,000 slots with wages paid to older youth, there are some additional potential expenses that providers will incur while providing remote internships and/or credentialing for some older youth. Given all this, we recommend City Council work with DYCD to ensure that sufficient funding is in the budget to cover additional expenses for technology for young people and access to credentialing/courses as well as additional staffing to support credentialing/courses at community organizations.

Furthermore, Teens Take Charge has developed a proposal for *SYEP Unbound*, which would provide self-guided courses and learning opportunities to young people who are not accepted through the lottery process, and we urge the City Council to fund this initiative.

In addition, UNH recommends the following for SYEP in summer 2021:

- Set aside slots for youth in areas most impacted by COVID-19 as was done in the wake of Superstorm Sandy;
- A coordinated inter-agency effort, led by DYCD, to ensure that providers have the supports and partnerships they need to rebuild capacity after last year;
- Ultimate flexibility to providers to develop programming that is safe, high quality, and responsive to the unique needs of young people in their communities; and
- Continued partnership with advocates, providers, and youth to determine a safe, effective process for document collection and audits that meets legal requirements while accommodating the unique circumstances faced by young people and providers in 2021.

Once summer 2021 programming is complete, we will look to begin work in earnest in the fall to pass Council Member Kallos' Intro 1474, which would make access to SYEP universal for all eligible young people.

Adult Literacy

Immigrant & low-income New Yorkers are serving on the front lines of the city's response to COVID-19, and have experienced some of the harshest outcomes with higher rates of COVID-19 infections and higher rates of unemployment. Adult literacy programs are one of the few services available in New York City to support their educational and economic growth.

In the absence of economic relief from the federal administration, which has excluded immigrants from any COVID-19 federal stimulus package, the City must keep these programs whole by doing the following:

- Restore and baseline the \$12 million in annual funds that the Council secured in the budget every year from FY17 to FY20, and which were reduced to \$9.8 million in FY21;
- Ensure that every adult literacy student who needs it is provided with the necessary hardware and with free internet to be able to access and engage in online education platforms;
- Invest \$10.5 million in the adult literacy pilot project that NYCCAL had proposed prior to the pandemic; and

- Work to increase the cumulative funding for adult literacy education in New York City by sixfold over the next five years (from \$85M in city and state funding to \$500M).

Restore Funding for Indirect Rates

Indirect funding is the backbone of a nonprofit human services organization, covering critical overhead costs that help organizations serve their communities most effectively. Indirect helps to support functions that are crucial to running a program, like facilities cleaning, payroll, and technology. Indirect expenses are often the things that we do not see when we walk through the front door of an organization to go to a program or receive a service, but help to keep that front door open.

The City retroactively cut Indirect Rates for non-profit human services providers in the FY 20 budget. Indirect Rates are necessary for programs to have the flexibility to develop new programs such as Learning Bridges and to change programs to meet new health and safety requirements.

UNH urges the Mayor and City Council to honor their commitment to the human services sector and fully fund indirect rates for youth service contracts and all other human service contracts in FY21 and beyond.

Thank you for your time and the opportunity to testify today. For more information, or to answer any additional questions, you can reach me at nmoran@unhny.org.