



# *PROFILES IN PRACTICE:* Older Adults Leading Change

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*A SELF-DIRECTED TEAM MODEL*

**BronxWorks  
Educational Alliance  
Lenox Hill Neighborhood House  
Sunnyside Community Services**



**UNITED  
NEIGHBORHOOD  
HOUSES**

# INTRODUCTION

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Older people across the United States are living longer and healthier lives than ever before. As they age out of the workforce, they often find themselves with the time, energy, and desire to have meaningful things to do, and have difficulty finding opportunities that truly use their skills and build on their interests. **Older people have decades of experience and wisdom and seek out opportunities to find purpose during this rich time of life.** They can be a force for good in their communities when they are given a chance to lead.

Over the past decade United Neighborhood Houses of New York (UNH) has worked with its settlement house members to develop new and innovative ways to mobilize teams of older people to work on issues that are important to them and their communities. Recently, through its Institute for Empowered Aging, UNH has established and trained **self-directed volunteer teams**.

UNH, in partnership with settlement houses, has facilitated the creation of **24 teams of older people** working out of a variety of senior centers, NORCs, and community centers across New York City. Each team works with their sponsoring settlement house to choose an issue specific to their community and interests.

From this, UNH creates learning cohorts of staff and older people. These cohorts work together with UNH over a two-year period to identify and implement effective and impactful ways to best address the issue. UNH provides cross-site trainings, individualized coaching, and a small annual grant to help with expenses related to the projects the teams develop. A City University of New York (2016) evaluation found that participating older people reported improved health outcomes, a greater sense of purpose and meaning, and a new and deeper connection to and engagement with their community. During the current Covid-19 pandemic, UNH is helping teams adjust and shift their work to remote on-line platforms

This Profiles in Practice brings to light the positive impact self-directed teams have at three levels: the individual, the organization, and the community. We believe this is a model that is applicable to a number of different social service and community settings.

Our hope in sharing these stories is that others will be inspired to change how they promote healthy aging and community engagement, while also bringing meaning and value to later life.

# OUR SELF-DIRECTED VOLUNTEER TEAMS

## **A Self-Directed Team Defined**

A self-directed volunteer team is a multi-skilled group of volunteers who share responsibilities for addressing a community issue or need. In partnership with a community organization, each team is empowered to take full responsibility for designing solutions and executing actions resulting in tangible results and outcomes.

## **Team Structure**

Teams vary in size, but the core team can range from between 4 or 5 individuals to 9 or 10 members. Each team has a team facilitator and a key staff person. The key staff person links the team to its sponsoring community organization, helps the team get started, and ensures the team has the training and resources it needs to be successful. The team facilitator is a team member responsible for facilitating (but not leading) the team process and coordinating with the key staff person. Core team members make a commitment to fully participate on the team, achieve its goals and to support one another on the team.

## **Training Topics**

The team is trained in team processes, decision making, goal setting and team building practices. These include the creation of a team charter that outlines agreed upon ground rules and processes for decision making, communication, and accountability. The team also creates an issue brief to help them identify, explore and then define the community issue they want to address. Teams receive training in project planning and goal setting, conflict management styles, and approaches and how to define and measure success.

## **Training Approach**

UNH works over a two year period with staff from up to ten settlement houses, creating a learning cohort to introduce this practice and this new way of working with older people. Throughout this process, UNH provides an iterative peer learning experience.

In the first year, a series of 4 to 5 learning gatherings are held, beginning with introducing and discussing the ideas and concepts behind self-directed teamwork and tasking teams to begin to work with these ideas and to build their team. Subsequent learning gatherings over the first year focus on how to identify an issue to address, how to create a team charter, address team challenges and conflicts, and measure and celebrate their success.

Within six months of the first training, most teams have successfully formed, identified the issue they want to work on and begun to address this issue. In the second year, topics for learning gatherings are generated by the teams with the goal of building the skill and confidence level of the teams and the staff who support them so that they become fully self-directed. The stories that follow provide a snapshot of how this process unfolded in four different communities, and the impact that this approach to working with older people has had.

# BRONXWORKS

## Los Amigos de Moore Team

*Changing How Older People See Themselves*

### **The E. Roberts Moore Senior Center, Mott Haven, South Bronx**

**Projects:** Built a community food garden; trained to be healthy food educators; led healthy food education workshops in the local community; created a healthy food cookbook focused on traditional Puerto Rican cuisine; successfully advocated for a local bodega to carry fresh produce and other healthy food options.

## **THE ISSUE: Healthy Eating and Healthy Food**

UNH worked with BronxWorks' E. Roberts Moore Senior Center to form a team of six in 2014. The team named themselves Los Amigos de Moore. They were asked by UNH to consider addressing the lack of access to, knowledge about, and use of healthy food in their South Bronx neighborhood. The first project the team designed and implemented was a community food garden in a New York City Housing Authority (NYCHA) development.

The garden grew beyond what the team anticipated. As the garden garnered more attention from the community, the team expanded their work. They began cooking demonstrations in other housing developments, at farmers markets, and in local bodegas. The team also began to work intergenerationally, and published a healthy eating cookbook focused on Puerto Rican cuisine. The team continues their work today.

## **Impact on Older People**

**Antidote to Social Isolation.** Los Amigos de Moore members bonded with others through the work they did together and developed friendships that have grown over the years and extend beyond the project work.

**Moving from Service Recipients to Leaders.** This initiative helped older people see themselves as leaders in their community as opposed to merely service recipients. Team members had the opportunity to share skills cultivated over a lifetime of experience, and were encouraged to learn new skills such as conducting cooking demonstrations.

**Improved Health.** The Los Amigos de Moore team unanimously agreed that working together led to a greater focus on their own health and eating. They learned about healthy food as they engaged in the project and it had a lasting impact on their own eating habits.

"I eat differently. I try to eat fresh green vegetables more than before, instead of the canned stuff."

FRANCIS, TEAM MEMBER



**Recognized for their Skills Across the City.** As the garden was recognized by community members, the team started to look outward. They worked with NYCHA residents and a local school; they were trained as healthy food community educators; and they were asked to participate in a Borough-wide forum on health and hunger.

## Community and Issue Impact

"We had this gentleman who came out of nowhere, he came from Hawaii or something like that. He saw that we were planting and all of a sudden he became our cleaner.

He used to get up at seven o'clock in the morning and clean up our space there [...] That's the whole idea of a project [like this]: to get people to recognize 'oh wow, I can help out and make it a better project!"

WANDA ABEYLLEZ, PROGRAM DIRECTOR  
ROBERTS E. MOORE SENIOR CENTER

**Fostering Neighborhood Connections.** Los Amigos de Moore were skeptical at first of their ability to have an impact. They believed that if they started a garden, their neighbors would likely throw trash in it and steal any of the food that was grown. To the team's surprise, as they worked to clear trash away, build garden boxes, and plant food and some flowers, area residents began to notice and appreciate what they saw. The frequency with which garbage appeared in the garden decreased. Others started volunteering and the garden became a community effort.

**Community Legacy.** Los Amigos de Moore team members were recognized by their New York City Councilmember, other local organizations and throughout their neighborhood for their knowledge about gardening and healthy eating. The depth of this recognition became apparent when the team received a NYCHA-wide community garden contest!

"[The Center] is where they come every day and where they congregate, and they love seeing something out there [...] that they're upkeeping, that they formulated."

WANDA ABEYLLEZ, PROGRAM DIRECTOR  
ROBERTS E. MOORE SENIOR CENTER

## Organizational and Staff Impact

**Committing to Older People as Change Agents.** This project has inspired the organization to start more older adult-led projects throughout their senior centers and beyond. BronxWorks has committed staff time to continue this model because it sees it as important and vital to the wellness of older people and positive for the community.

**Seeing Older Age as a Time of Opportunity.** Working with the team changed people's understanding of what older people can do and the possibilities that are available as we age. Marina, an intern at BronxWorks who is decades away from retirement, said that the work gives her hope for a "greater amount of involvement in the larger community" when she is older.

## Story of Change: Older People Discovering their Value

For BronxWorks, this UNH initiative transformed how older people saw themselves within the local community. At the beginning the team believed that the local community was not interested in older people or what older people were doing. The garden group persisted with encouragement from UNH and BronxWorks and the team's involvement compounded.

Team members began to see the value in their contributions to their community and took advantage of every opportunity UNH offered to expand their skills, knowledge, and passions. UNH connected them with the opportunity to become "community healthy food educators". They took advantage of it, steadily becoming known throughout the community as experts.



LOS AMIGOS DE MOORE

# EDUCATIONAL ALLIANCE

## SALT - Senior Advocacy Leadership Team

*A Story of Perseverance and Flexibility*

### **The Manny Cantor Center, Lower East Side, Manhattan**

**Projects:** Conducted a community walkabout survey; produced a report about unsafe/non-age-friendly conditions in the neighborhood; created an affordable housing guide for the community; participated in the Age-Friendly District initiative; organized a petition drive and collected 5,000 signatures to save the M14 local bus stops; held a press conference with support from City Council members about the need to maintain local bus service.

### **THE ISSUE: Advocating for Age-Friendly Neighborhoods**

The Senior Advocacy Leadership Team, or SALT, formed through Educational Alliance's Manny Cantor Center in 2017. SALT took on the issue of affordable housing on the Lower East Side. They saw a distinct need for housing assistance, particularly for older people who were being priced out of the neighborhood.

The team developed an affordable housing guide to help their peers navigate New York City's oftentimes confusing affordable housing systems. After that, there were a number of issues they wanted to work on and the group could not come to a consensus. UNH stepped in to coach the team, introducing them to the Age-Friendly NYC initiative through the New York Academy of Medicine (NYAM) and the Mayor's office.

Age-Friendly Districts are an international concept developed by the World Health Organization with the aim to make cities places where everyone can age well. It consists of eight domains, such as Housing and Social Participation, providing a framework for SALT. The Age-Friendly Initiative provides tools and resources for those interested in making their communities age-friendly, and NYAM gladly partnered with SALT and UNH to help organize the work.

The SALT team continued to take steps to improve their neighborhood. They conducted a community walk-about suggested by UNH which identified safety hazards throughout the Lower East Side. They formed political alliances with their local City Council members and sent letters to their State Assembly Members and Senators. They circulated a petition and organized a rally to maintain local bus service along the M14 bus line. Before COVID-19 they were advocating to make streets safer for pedestrians and bike riders in light of a recent spike in cycling related deaths and hosted a cycling forum in the summer of 2019 that was attended by representatives for several elected officials, community members, activists, and other organizations.

## Impact on Older People

**Combating Social Isolation.** SALT's strong relationships are born out of a collective mission. A desire to make their community a better place brought them together, but the friendships forged keep them going. One example of this comes from a team member, Joann, who joined SALT as a way to stay active and involved in the community after the death of her husband.

**Fostering Meaning and Purpose in Later Life.** Many members of the SALT team have a history of activism. The ability to carry on that passion has instilled their lives with more meaning and purpose in older age than they initially anticipated. It has also changed their perspective on getting older.

**Older People as Civic Champions.** Through the initiative, with UNH's coaching and support from staff at the Manny Cantor Center, SALT members learned how to engage elected officials and city agencies around issues that are important to them. They continually engage in letter writing campaigns at the city and state levels. They have successfully organized rallies, petitions, and most recently a roundtable to address pedestrian safety.

"I certainly changed. I completely thought differently [before]. You think of older people as recipients and sort of sitting around in the rocking chair waiting for a meal to be delivered. But activists, I think everyone here was involved in community activity, and I think psychologically I changed my attitude about [aging] and [see it] much more positively."

JOANN, TEAM MEMBER

## Community and Issue Impact

**Keeping The Community Connected.** From the beginning SALT made sure their peers, community members, and staff at the Manny Cantor Center were informed about what was happening in the community by providing regular updates and reports at the community center.

"I go into several offices and they don't know who I am, but I say I'm with SALT and they say 'Oh, SALT?' They've heard of us, and that makes us feel good."

JOSE, TEAM MEMBER

**Building New Community Partnerships.** SALT excelled at making themselves known throughout the community, partnering with the local police department, NYAM, and the local Community Board, among others. These relationships created new avenues for the SALT team—creating new pathways to engagement that were otherwise absent. This was made evident in the team's recent push for pedestrian and bike safety, as they reached out to other invested organizations and coalitions to build a successful platform together.



**Neighborhood Safety.** The team conducted a neighborhood walkabout, produced a detailed report, and presented it to their City Council Member and Community Board to advocate for fixes and changes. Results are ongoing and the team continues to keep the city accountable.

**Inspiring Others to Action.** SALT has reached out to other groups of non-mobilized older people to share their work and explain how they, too, can advocate and fight for change in their communities.

## **Organizational and Staff Impact**

**Engaging the Center's Diverse Cultures.** The Manny Cantor Center has a large Chinese-speaking population. SALT made a concentrated effort to recruit Chinese-speaking members because they wanted the team to represent the whole community.

"I [have been] in the United States 47 years. After 40-something years I said "oh, I've become a senior" and I found out that when you become a senior, people don't really care, even your family members. I was told I should join this group, learn to raise my voice, when you see something wrong you gotta say something. You have to say something because otherwise nobody will care."

GINA, TEAM MEMBER

**Staff Perceptions.** The work of SALT provided staff with a new way to look at issues throughout the organization, along with a refreshed view of the power of older people to champion change. The self-directed team model that SALT took and ran with, with support from UNH, provided a method for staff throughout the organization to use when considering how to approach change. Instead of staff trying to lead initiatives, they could reach out to older people in programs to tap them to be change-makers and to do community building work.

"It is not just me, everyone here speaks of [SALT] and has such pride in what they do. It is something we often think about. How do we replicate this or build other things that are similar but not exactly the same. It is so on target with what we want the programming here to be. It is community-driven and they feel ownership of it and they're deciding what's important to them."

DEB SHER, DIRECTOR,  
STRATEGIC SERVICE & CIVIC ENGAGEMENT

## Story of Change: Perseverance and Flexibility

SALT is a study of a team that very nearly failed. They originally joined UNH's Older Adults Strengthening Communities initiative in 2016 but struggled to coalesce given the diverse interests of the team members.

UNH stepped in to offer a framing that would allow the team to see their diverse interests as connected to a broader issue: making their community age friendly. With the Age-Friendly NYC framing, the team realized they had more in common across their interests than they initially thought. This intervention helped the team come back together into what became SALT.



SENIOR ADVOCACY LEADERSHIP TEAM (SALT)

# LENOX HILL NEIGHBORHOOD HOUSE

## The Ambassadors Team

*Moving to a Strengths-Based Approach with Older People*

### **The Center @ Lenox Hill Neighborhood House, Upper East Side, Manhattan**

**Projects:** Formed a welcome committee for new senior center members and changed the process to empower them to get involved; met with staff to shift assessment forms from needs-based to strengths-based outlook; developed a workshop series to connect with new and current members and provided workshops on topics like bullying, mental health, and other psychoeducational topics; switched the Center calendar to a booklet based on interests to make it easier for members to connect.

### **The Issue: Diversity and Inclusivity in their Senior Center**

The Ambassadors' primary goal was to make the Center a place where members could connect, and be involved in shaping the Center in a way that empowered them. They wanted older people to be the driving force behind what was happening at the Center.

The team worked with staff to create an initial assessment for new members that viewed individuals from a strengths-based perspective instead of a needs-based one. The team took on the responsibility of connecting with new Center members and introducing them to people with similar interests.

Advisory Committee and General Membership meetings of senior center participants shifted from report-outs from staff, to discussions led by members of the Center about how to improve services and programming. Over time, the team felt the energy in the Center change. Members were viewed in terms of their interests and strengths and plugged into places where they felt seen, heard, and appreciated.

### **Impact on Older People**

**Validation, Meaning, and Purpose.** Members of the Ambassadors team described impact in three words: validation, meaning, and purpose.

"Everybody in life needs to be validated, everyone needs to see themselves as worthwhile. People have certain skills, a certain energy, a need to be involved. The key to this program is that it validates them socially, professionally, personally, emotionally, that they realize there is a reason to get up in the morning."

ALICE, TEAM MEMBER

## Community and Issue Impact

**Small Groups Build Big Community.** The team worked to build small groups around key interests and those small groups were connected with other interest groups through a series of bigger workshops the Ambassadors led. This created a space in The Center where everyone felt welcomed, connected, and involved to whatever degree they desired.

**New Faces, New Involvement.** One of the unintended results of the work of the team was greater visibility in the community. The Center is becoming a place where older people from all walks of life feel that they have a place to contribute in meaningful ways to their community.

## Organizational and Staff Impact

**Organizational Culture Change.** According to the team, an important part of their success was the ability to train and work with staff around the changes they wanted to implement. They knew, through training and through their own experiences, that older people getting to lead senior center activities often increased community engagement, reduced social isolation, and gave older people new ways to find meaning and purpose connected to their communities.

**Changes in Programming.** Whenever new members join they are now assessed based on their strengths, not on their needs. Instead of coming into a senior center where their days are prescribed, they are given a chance to have a hand in making it what they would like to see. As a result of the work of the Ambassadors and of all the new member-led activities, not only is the Lenox Hill Neighborhood House Center a vibrant and friendly place, it also enables the Center to far exceed the units of service requirements under its New York City Department for the Aging contract!

"Maybe five or six years ago it would have been staff saying 'no we're going to tell YOU something' at the [Advisory Council Meeting]. Now it is very collaborative. I think it energizes the rest of [Lenox Hill Neighborhood House], because [they] can see what these seniors are doing as leaders and the rest of the [organization] can feel a really good energy. I think it does carry over."

CAROLYN SILVER, CHIEF PROGRAM OFFICER



THE AMBASSADORS, hosting a dumpling making event



# SUNNYSIDE COMMUNITY SERVICES

## The Joining of Youth and Seniors at Sunnyside (JOYS) Team

### *Building Intergenerational Connections*

#### **Sunnyside Community Services' Senior Center, Sunnyside, Queens**

**Project:** Created and implemented programming for an after school SONYC (Schools Out New York City) program that shares space with the senior center.

### **The Issue: Intergenerational Work with After School Programs**

The JOYS team at Sunnyside Community Services formed in 2017 and eight team members chose to work intergenerationally with young people, as a new after-school program had recently been established in the same building as the senior center.

The JOYS' desire for intergenerational work led them to develop after-school programming under the direction of Sunnyside staff. The programming was built around specific topic areas (healthy eating, exercise, art projects, aviation, etc.) which the JOYS team delivers to the after-school participants on a regular basis. The young people involved were so thrilled by the interactions that they decided they wanted to teach the older people in return. The result was a meaningful, bi-directional relationship between middle schoolers and older people who were previously only sharing space, and now are sharing pieces of their lives.

### **Impact on Older People**

**New Skills.** While the older adults on the team were interested in working with youth, many of them had no relevant past experience. With support from the youth development staff, the team created formal lesson plans and conducted lessons based on the interests of the youth. One example was a set of lessons based on aircrafts and understanding how planes work as well as an exploration of the history of flight. Donald Lubin, Deputy Director of Youth and Family Services at Sunnyside, remarked that he was impressed at how quickly the team members rose to the standards the program set out for the lessons plans.

"I think that both groups are acting as ambassadors and realizing that both seniors and youth can misjudge the other through the lens of ageism - but they can also stop and say "wait, wait a minute we are both making assumptions about the other," stereotypes that aren't true."

JONAH GENSLER, ASSOCIATE EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR OF COMMUNITY SERVICES

**Learning Different Perspectives.** The JOYS quickly realized they had to adjust their perspectives in order to build a relationship with the youth. For example, Ted, one of the team members, shared that he learned to adjust from focusing solely on teaching, to engaging in conversations about the material with the youth. He observed that a willingness to listen and to learn from the perspectives of young people led to deeper, more meaningful relationships, and this in turn taught him how to consider other perspectives.

The perspectives of youth towards older people also changed the more the two groups interacted. The JOYS were viewed as capable, interesting, engaging, and important people whereas before the two groups began interacting, the youth had expressed concerns about being bored, wondering what older people could have to offer them.

**Health Outcomes.** Participants reported having something to look forward to that was worth scheduling around, when before they felt that their lives were only dictated by doctors appointments and other errands - resulting in a feeling that their lives were healthier and more balanced. In addition, the director of the senior center shared that team members felt their minds were much sharper as a result of working with younger people. Presenting programs to the youth required thoughts to be well organized and expressed clearly - something they often were not called upon to do at this point in their life!

## Community and Issue **Impact**

**Youth Impact.** Staff and team members have both reported an observable change in attitudes and social interactions among participating youth. Shy children, nervous because of a perceived lack of English proficiency, or other barriers to interacting with peers, became more social after participating in the JOYS' programming. Some youth expressed they were nervous or skeptical about spending time with older people, only to turn around and say they ended up having fun and learning a lot from them. The youth were not required to participate in the programming. Even though it is voluntary, the youth continue to seek it out.

**Sharing Space.** One adjustment the senior center community had to make was figuring out how to share space. For a while, senior center space was adults-only, and not everyone approved of sharing it with youth. Some older people told staff they were resistant to having youth come into their space. But the team's work demonstrated for other participants the joy that can come from intergenerational relationships, and now the older people enjoy sharing space with the youth.

"I hear the [youth] comments, my son knows a lot of the students and they're comfortable coming up to me and saying they're having fun with [JOYS after-school programs]. The comments are positive. Just that age group and how they're reacting to it is really positive. They've enjoyed learning together."

KERLY SERRANO, SENIOR CENTER  
DIRECTOR

## Organizational and Staff Impact

“That program [The JOYS] literally forced me to engage my colleague [...] I now advocate for other colleagues to walk around and go to other departments and understand the importance of our colleagues, because you never know!”

DONALD LUBIN, DEPUTY DIRECTOR OF  
YOUTH AND FAMILY SERVICES

**Changing Views About Older People.** Youth program staff, who had not previously worked with programs for older people, learned that their assumptions and beliefs about older people were largely unfounded. They had thought that older people only needed to be served, and learned that they could also serve. One staff member pointed out that “we are talking about individuals with so much experience [...] [they] are able to keep up with the criteria I put on them about making action plans and lesson plans and how [...] to engage the youth, better than some of my staff...”

**Breaking Down Silos.** For the JOYS, choosing an intergenerational issue meant they had to navigate between senior services and youth services, involving staff from both programs every step of the way. Staff who had not spoken much outside of organization-wide meetings began to form relationships, and collaboration grew.

### Story of Change: From Multi - to **Inter-Generational**

The JOYS were so successful in their endeavor that their work influenced the organization’s way of tackling important community issues. This strengthened Sunnyside Community Services’ vision of older people as a valuable resource and constantly looking for ways to get involved that match their interests. With this experience under their belt, the staff at Sunnyside ended up forming a second intergenerational team that is currently being trained by UNH to work with youth around civic engagement and voter registration.



THE JOYS

# CONCLUSION

These stories are a sample of what is happening in settlement houses to recognize and elevate the leadership of older adults in their communities. The self-directed team practice that UNH trains settlement houses to use enables older people to demonstrate their capacity to address challenges and identify and implement effective solutions. These teams in turn take the pressure off of organizations to keep project momentum going as teams have been shown to sustain their projects over time—in some cases for years. The teams are empowered to effectively address real problems that positively impact team members, their settlement house, and the larger community.

Working in a **self-directed team** has been shown to:

- improve the health, well-being and quality of life for older people,
- create extended social networks that are an antidote to social isolation and loneliness, and
- change attitudes about older people and aging for both organizations and team members.

Imagine if every community-based organization looked at older people as potential self-directed team members as opposed to solely service recipients. The impact would fundamentally change aging and what it means to be an older person in our society. **Communities would be strengthened, important needs and challenges addressed, and later life would be a destination that everyone would want to reach and experience.**



A GATHERING OF THE INSTITUTE FOR EMPOWERED AGING TEAMS, 2019



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We want to thank **Katie Cardwell** of **United Neighborhood Houses** for researching, writing, and designing this Profiles in Practice.

Finally, thank you to the 190+ older people who have formed teams in communities across New York City, impacting 1500+ lives and that have made their communities better places to live and thrive. You inspire us.

## ABOUT UNH

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United Neighborhood Houses (UNH) is a policy and social change organization representing 44 neighborhood settlement houses 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.