



**UNITED
NEIGHBORHOOD
HOUSES**

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**New York City Council Committee of the Whole Oversight Hearing re: Examining the
City's Response and Delivery of Services to Migrants
Speaker Adrienne Adams, Chairperson
Deputy Speaker Diana I. Ayala, Chairperson
Tuesday, December 20, 2022**

**Testimony of United Neighborhood Houses
Submitted by Lena Cohen, Senior Policy Analyst**

Thank you, Speaker Adams, Deputy Speaker Ayala, and members of the New York City Council for the opportunity to testify. My name is Lena Cohen, and I am a Senior Policy Analyst at United Neighborhood Houses (UNH). UNH is a policy and social change organization representing 46 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.

Settlement Houses Stepping Up

Since April 2022, New York City has seen an influx of [more than 31,000](#) refugees and asylum seekers – many from Venezuela fleeing the country's brutal dictatorship and economic collapse – who have been bussed up from southern border states. The majority of newcomers arrive in NYC with little to no English language capabilities or ability to navigate city or state systems. An estimated 14,000 are living in the city's shelters, accounting for [nearly one out of every four people](#) in the system. Mayor Eric Adams recently declared a state of emergency, predicting that it would [cost \\$1 billion](#) to

house and provide social services for these newcomers. Comptroller Brad Lander also estimated that the city's schools should receive, at minimum, an [additional \\$34 million](#) in funding to adequately serve an estimated 5,500 new students seeking asylum who have enrolled and will need intense academic and social supports. The sharp increase in border crossings over the past year has created a surge in demand for social services at settlement houses and other community based organizations; and with the potential end of Title 42 – a pandemic-era emergency order used to expel asylum-seeking migrants from the U.S. – it is likely that demand will continue to soar.

UNH's network of 40 New York City-based settlement houses anticipate serving an increased number of children and families who recently migrated to New York seeking asylum, as many of them have done before during past refugee crises including the recent influx of Ukrainian refugees. Already, settlement houses are providing asylees with support in navigating the many complex systems that these individuals will need to access, including education, adult literacy, childcare, afterschool programs, housing assistance, senior centers, and legal services.

To meet the urgent and shifting needs of these newcomers, settlement houses have pivoted their community outreach and support services. For example:

- At the Center for Family Life in Sunset Park (CFL), over 130 families of new arrivals have come through CFL's food pantry to receive emergency food assistance. As people wait in line for food, CFL staff speak with them in Spanish and help them enroll in a benefits access screening project. CFL staff have visited asylum seekers staying in local shelters, working with an estimated 400 people to date.
- In the South Bronx, BronxWorks opened a new migrant shelter. Funded by DHS, this shelter allows BronxWorks staff to provide temporary housing to individuals, one-on-one case management, and referrals to other program offerings. BronxWorks' team of immigration attorneys have worked with more than 300 asylum seekers to date, including 110 who are children.
- Shorefront Y of Brighton and Manhattan Beach runs a DYCD-funded adult literacy program with an 800 person waiting list. The program currently serves 360 adults in English Classes for Speakers of other Languages, with 158 of these students having recently arrived from Ukraine.
- As CAMBA's Refugee and Asylee program continues to serve granted asylees from over thirty countries of origin, there has been a recent influx in Haitian and Venezuelan Humanitarian Parolees seeking help. They currently house 70 asylum-seeking families and 31 migrant individuals in their homeless shelters. Additionally, over 500 newly arrived Ukrainian refugees have sought their services

since May 2022. CAMBA's most requested Refugee and Asylee services include job assistance, financial assistance, assistance with applying for employment authorization documents, health insurance and the supplemental Nutritional Assistance Program (SNAP/food stamps), Social Security cards, English as a second language instruction, child care, school enrollment, and housing assistance. CAMBA also provides emergency food support, a range of health and wellness programs, and legal services.

- Jacob A. Riis Neighborhood Settlement has begun offering ESOL classes for parents of Venezuelan asylee children enrolled in three local schools, most of whom are being housed in local shelters. These classes focus on beginner-level English, particularly navigating services, benefits, transportation, education and healthcare and are accompanied by basic case assistance.

The Need for Additional Support

Despite these innovative efforts, settlement houses and other nonprofit community-based organizations (CBOs) that have stepped up to welcome and serve newly arrived asylum seekers are doing so out of necessity and must receive additional funding or support from the City. The City's network of CBOs will overextend itself without sustainable and equitable funding to support the critical work they are doing in their communities to serve asylum seekers.

To date, the City's response to the influx of asylum seekers has been fragmented, and has lacked consistent, proactive communication with settlement houses and other community-based organizations. To better support the rapidly growing population of asylum seekers in NYC, all levels of government will need to collaborate and commit to immediate investments that sustain aid work already happening on the ground and build upon it. Systems will need increased capacity to serve the new arrivals, but providers will also need the right tools to support the unique and complex needs that these children and families have. Specifically, UNH offers the following set of recommendations for New York City to support asylum seekers:

Guarantee legal services for asylum seekers. The City must fund emergency immigration legal services to support the growing population of asylum seekers that may be subject to legal proceedings. As states at the southern border continue to mishandle the lives of these individuals, NYC must respond by making sure these new arrivals can access the legal support they need to navigate the court system. In addition, the City must prioritize language access and expand the supply of trained, vetted immigration legal interpreters to be provided to community-based organizations.

Strengthen and expand Adult Literacy Programs. The City should expand and strengthen its network of DYCD-funded community-based adult literacy programs to increase investments in services, supports, and resources for current and new English language learners. This increase would not only allow programs to meet the new demand for services but would also bolster adult literacy programs' capacity to provide asylees with one-on-one support with systems navigation, digital access, and case management while accounting for the rise in costs for classroom space and staff salaries.

Create a Nutrition Assistance Program for Undocumented New Yorkers. The Council should pass Council Member Ayala's Resolution 305, which calls on New York State to provide food benefits for all New Yorkers, regardless of immigration status. Given that asylum seekers are not eligible for the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP), this new program would provide thousands of individuals and families now living in our city with access to food and nutritional assistance. New York State legislators and agencies are currently considering this program and we anticipate legislation being introduced in 2023. We urge the Council to lend their support to this effort to help meet the nutrition needs of asylum-seekers and to help take pressure off of the emergency food system.

Eliminate barriers to child care. Scaling up child care programs will be necessary to serve the influx of children coming to New York City. In addition to funding for appropriate expansions, the City should work toward eliminating citizenship requirements for certain extended day/year child care programs. Due to federal and state funding restrictions, the only public programs that children can currently attend are 3-K, Pre-K, and federal Head Start. This leaves a major gap in care for asylum seekers, and the City should invest its own funding to support child care for undocumented children and families. In the FY23 Budget, the City invested \$10 million (at ACS) to begin to address this need for undocumented families. The City recently announced that four providers, including three settlement houses, will be distributing these funds via vouchers under the new Promise NYC program. Notably, this funding was secured before the majority of new asylum seekers arrived in NYC, and it was not baselined, so the City should work to secure additional resources.

Expand the Children Under Five Initiative. The City's estimated [cuts of \\$469 million](#) to DOE's budget have put an additional burden on schools that are struggling to cope with the increase of new asylum seekers. DOE Chancellor David Banks has noted that the City has expanded its programming to support migrant children with high needs,

including more bilingual instruction, mental health treatment and access to social workers. But more can be done to reach newly arriving young children. The Children Under Five Initiative (CU5), provides early childhood mental health services to infants, toddlers and pre-school aged children and their families in community-based settings. A Council Initiative under the Department of Health and Mental Hygiene (DOHMH), the program funds organizations to work with children to develop psychosocial and educational skills. CU5 currently supports 13 organizations, (including two UNH members) and the City should ensure that these services are available to immediately support the increased number of children coming to New York City who have unique mental and emotional health needs.

Engage regularly with CBOs and create feedback mechanisms to track progress. The arrival of thousands of asylum seekers needs community coordination of services and care. In an effort to better support migrant students, the DOE recently [sent a memo](#) to citywide and community education councils, the Chancellor's Parent Advisory Council and an organization of PTA presidents. The memo called on parent volunteers to participate on borough response teams that would help organize food and clothing drives, resource fairs, and listening sessions. Yet, the City has not reached out to settlement houses in such a targeted way, despite their deep expertise in serving many of the neighborhoods where migrant families have been sent throughout the City. Settlement houses, along with other community-based organizations, can help inform the City on newly emerging needs and necessary interventions. The City should create a formal communication stream between CBOs and appropriate City agencies to share information in real time. Specifically, the City must ensure interagency coordination between MOIA, DYCD, DOE, DHS, ACS, and DFTA.

In closing, UNH appreciates the leadership the City Council has taken to hold the city accountable for meeting the needs of our newest New Yorkers. New York City has always and will continue to be a sanctuary city. We are proud knowing our city continues to welcome new individuals seeking asylum. However, this situation cannot be fully addressed without the addition of State and Federal funding to cover the significant costs of providing these services to support new migrants.

Looking ahead, UNH hopes to partner with the City alongside our member settlement houses and other community based stakeholders in a coordinated effort to sustain relief and secure State and Federal aid for asylum seekers. We look forward to continuing to be a part of this conversation in the coming months.

For additional information, please contact Lena Cohen at lcohen@unhny.org.