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

**Panel for the Committee of Youth Services  
Submitted by Dante Bravo, Youth Policy Analyst  
November 18th, 2021**

Thank you, Chair Rose and members of the New York City Council, for the opportunity to testify. My name is Dante Bravo, and I am the Youth Policy Analyst at United Neighborhood Houses (UNH). UNH is a policy and social change organization representing 45 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.

Throughout the COVID-19 pandemic, young people have been uniquely impacted. Sudden school closures and reopenings, massive changes—and budget 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.

This testimony highlights the past work settlement houses have done in relation to the state of youth services programming in NYC as well as several key contract recommendations.

In order to provide young people with high quality services and to ensure the stability of the youth services field in a post-pandemic recovery, UNH recommends that the City do the following:

- Pay overdue contracts immediately as well as commit to a faster contract payment process;
- Clear the backlog of comprehensive background checks as well as create a faster process for background clearances in general;
- Increase rates across COMPASS, SONYC, and Beacon contracts in the new Request for Proposals process (RFP) as well as move towards a 12 month contract model that includes summer programming, with planning for Summer 2022 beginning no later than January 2022;.
- Ensure that non-profit sector employees under contract with New York City are paid fair wages for their labor; and
- Commit to consulting with CBOs and their coalitions to better inform the contract conditions that allow CBOs to do the work that they do.

### **Current State of Youth Services Programming in NYC**

In the pre-pandemic times, community-based organizations (CBOs) were an indispensable part of the City's child care and education system. For parents who need full daycare for infants, toddlers or preschool 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 youth services programs dramatically changed and increased their services to meet the new child care needs of families including New York City's essential workers. CBOs acted swiftly and innovatively, often without receiving complete guidance from government, to launch services including:

- Remote Programming: In March 2020, 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. This continued in various forms from March 2020 through June 2021.
- Regional Enrichment Centers (RECs): CBO staff played key roles in operating the school-age RECs that were located in public school buildings to provide in-person child care and education to children of essential workers. CBO staff brought their

expertise in Youth Development to design socially distant activities that were engaging and supportive for participants.

- Learning Bridges/Labs: CBOs provided Learning Bridges programs for children enrolled in hybrid learning at 3-K, Pre-K and elementary and middle schools from September 2020-June 2021 so that these students would have five days per week of care.
- Summer Rising sites: CBOs collaborated with the Department of Education (DOE) in Summer 2021 to serve more than 200,000 youth at Summer Rising sites as well as youth in other summer camp programming, allowing students a chance to re-engage with the DOE before the 2021-2022 school year began in September.

Despite having served communities all throughout the extraordinary circumstances of the pandemic, CBOs still deal with a litany of contracting challenges that ultimately limit their capacity to serve communities. In order to ensure a thriving youth services field and to support its workforce, UNH recommends that the City do the following:

### **Register and Pay Pending Contracts**

Once a CBO is offered a contract, they often begin their work right away to ensure community members have access to quality services. The City however is not as expedient in subsequent registration and payment for these contracts. A survey of United Neighborhood Houses' 40 New York City members shows that the City of New York owes settlement houses more than \$100 million for providing essential services. This is on top of roughly \$20 million in indirect-cost funding owed to settlement houses that has not been paid. This problem is particularly acute for providers who ran Summer Rising programs this summer. To date, *none of the settlement houses who ran Summer Rising programs have been paid.* This is nearly three months after programs have ended.

These late payments end up costing CBOs much higher than the initial \$100 million estimate, as delays often force organizations to take out interest-bearing loans to cover payroll costs. It also leads to a great deal of organizational anxiety because of cash flow challenges, staff turnover from job insecurity, and burnout after a year of fighting a pandemic. Not only does the city need to pay pending contracts immediately, but must also invest in a new infrastructure to ensure that contract payment delays are a thing of the past.

Late payments to these organizations are also an issue of racial, gender, and class justice: a majority of the human services workforce are women of color who come from the communities most impacted by the economic consequences of the COVID-19 pandemic. Economic recovery from the COVID-19 crisis will only be possible if settlement houses and other human services organizations can continue serving their neighborhoods. DYCD and the Mayor's Office of Contracting Services must expedite the contract registration and payment process for all contracts, but especially for Summer Rising programming. It is crucial that this process be made as simple as possible, given the amount of time that has passed since the program ended.

## **Clear the Comprehensive Background Checks Backlog**

Since September 25th, 2019, New York State Office of Children and Family Services (OCFS) has required the New York City Department of Health and Mental Hygiene (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;
- A national criminal record check with the Federal Bureau of Investigation;
- A search of the NYS sex offender registry;
- 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

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
- Each state's sex offender registry or repository
- Each state's child abuse or neglect registry

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 2020, the backlog led OCFS 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. All youth services programming must have provisionally cleared staff who can provide the supervision and direction these programs need. It has become significantly harder to get staff cleared due to staff turnover, and it is sometimes a challenge for providers to have even enough provisionally cleared staff to operate programs safely in ratio. Furthermore, providers have reported losing prospective staff due to the turnaround time on the CBC process; if a prospective staffer has to wait weeks to start working, it is not surprising that they are finding other jobs where they can start working right away. The City must clear the backlog of staff

awaiting clearances and commit to a faster turnaround time to quickly clear prospective staff members.

### **Issue and Increase Rates in the next COMPASS/SONYC RFP**

When DYCD issued the last COMPASS and SONYC RFP in 2018, the proposed rate structure inadvertently did not maintain the commitments that the City had made to support the human services sector, specifically the Cost of Living adjustments and higher indirect rates. The RFP was then rescinded in fall 2018, but DYCD never reissued a new RFP, meaning that programs are still operating on outdated rates. UNH urges the incoming Adams Administration to issue a new RFP, and calls for an increase in rates across COMPASS, SONYC, and Beacon contracts. The next RFP also must issue 12 month contracts rather than the current model of 9 month school year contracts and 3 month summer programming contracts. This new contract model would lessen the bureaucratic burden on CBOs, given that they only would navigate with a single contract.

The increase in rates would help providers deliver quality services to communities across New York City and stabilize the system before any expansion of slots to make these services accessible for all families who need them. Likewise it would also reflect the financial realities of maintaining youth services programming in the current economy as current contracts operate on rates from the last RFP in 2015.

The baselining of a subsequent increase in both funding and slots would alleviate serious programmatic concerns and would help meet the growing demand for after-school programming across the city. It would also build an incredible foundation for a universal year-round youth-serving system. Therefore, UNH calls on the city and its new administration to immediately baseline funding for summer middle school programs and expand year-round programs for elementary school students.

### **Raise Wages for Youth Services Staff**

Current New York City and State contracts have resulted in the essential human services workforce being some of the lowest paid workers in New York's economy. Youth services are not immune to this trend, with many staff making minimum wage despite the fact that they are performing skilled work taking care of our city's youth. Therefore, UNH joins our partners on the #JustPay campaign in calling for an end to poverty-level wages driven by low contract reimbursement rates. Specifically, the City must:

- Establish, fund, and enforce an automatic annual cost-of-living adjustment (COLA) on all human services contracts.
- Set a living wage floor of no less than \$21 an hour for all City and State funded human services workers.
- Create, fund, and incorporate a comprehensive wage and benefit schedule for government contracted human services workers comparable to the salaries made by City and State employees in the same field.

It is especially important to ensure pay parity between human service workers and their City counterparts, as CBOs cannot provide wages to compete with agencies like the DOE, which incentivizes frontline staff to leave for these jobs after CBOs have already trained, cleared, and developed these workers. Settlement house staff have described feeling as though they are merely a pipeline for city agencies like the DOE to hire competent staff on short notice. Recently, settlement houses have reported that their staff have directly received recruiting emails from the DOE encouraging them to apply for substitute teacher positions. This indicates that on some level, the City recognizes the need for these workers as well as the quality of their work. If the City can recognize that, then it is unconscionable for the City to continue the practice of low contract reimbursement rates. CBOs cannot compete with the DOE for staff when the City also sets reimbursement levels for afterschool and other youth services programs. Without higher wages, CBO programs can't be competitive.

## **Conclusion**

Without these actions, CBOs across the city will face delayed roll out of funding which make it nearly impossible to run quality programming. CBOs will not be able to run existing sites or expand to new sites because of the workforce shortage the sector is currently experiencing, which means that our city's young people will pay the highest price despite having survived a pandemic for the past year and a half.

If there is a commitment to a full recovery for New York City post-pandemic, then there must be a substantial increase to the city's financial commitment to the human services workforce - especially our youth-facing professionals. Without these actions, the City risks unnecessary harm to youth and their communities in a time when their priority should be recovery from the harrowing consequences of the COVID-19 pandemic.

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 [dbravo@unhny.org](mailto:dbravo@unhny.org).