



*Photo courtesy of Martina Maine*



# Settlement Houses Supporting the Newest New Yorkers: Voices from the Field

**Published By:**

*United Neighborhood Houses*

*December 2023*

**Written By:**

*Irene Lew, UNH Senior Research Analyst*



# Letter from UNH Leadership

New York has always been a city of immigrants. As we welcome yet another swell of newcomers, it is important to remind ourselves why so many people around the globe come to New York to make a better life for themselves and their families. New York is a beacon of hope and freedom, and it is the people who live here and move here who make our City thrive for generation after generation. For well over a century, the settlement house movement has worked to lift up new New Yorkers, providing critical services to improve quality of life in immigrant communities and advocating together for progressive policies that make our City the cultural epicenter it is. In turn, New York is in a constant state of evolution, growing and changing with the people and institutions that settle here, strengthening our neighborhoods and our broader economy.

Settlement houses understand the opportunities that come with surges in immigration, and have moved quickly to address the needs of this most recent round of newcomers in their neighborhoods. Our members have stepped up, meeting basic needs such as food, clothing, and shelter while expanding adult education and English classes and providing workforce support. The need for these services is great, and a continuation and expansion of this work will require true partnership with New York City and State.

Moreover, what comes next is critically important and will define our City for generations to come. Once our new neighbors' basic needs are met, how should our City grow and evolve once again to truly become their home and a place where they can thrive and contribute? As we turn towards this question, it is critical that we rely on the experience of those who have answered it countless times throughout our history and can help identify the policies that meet our collective needs: the settlement houses that are working on the ground to feed, clothe, shelter, educate and empower our newest arrivals and other New Yorkers.

Settlement houses and other community-based organizations are trusted messengers with deep connections in their neighborhoods and communities. A path forward that continues New York's legacy and preserves our reputation as a beacon of hope and freedom will require their experience and expertise. We look forward to working together to welcome our newest neighbors and continue the City's legacy of inclusive growth.

Sincerely,



Susan Stamler  
UNH Executive Director



M. Bryna Sanger, Ph. D  
UNH Board President

## Executive Summary

For more than a century, settlement houses have welcomed people from all walks of life. Settlement houses across the State continue to welcome the newest New Yorkers, including thousands of asylum seekers who have fled economic and political hardships in their country of origin. Settlement houses are stepping up to support the most recent wave of newcomers, through meeting basic needs such as food, clothing and shelter, expanding adult education and English-language classes, and providing child care and other workforce supports.

In September 2023, United Neighborhood Houses (UNH) surveyed its settlement house members to better understand the most pressing challenges facing the asylum-seeking families they are serving, the impact of the increase in asylum seekers on their programs and operations, and the support they need from government to serve these populations more effectively. This brief summarizes the key findings from this survey, along with information collected from peer groups of settlement house staff convened by UNH. Furthermore, the brief provides recommendations for how all levels of government can work with settlement houses on both immediate and long-term solutions to address the needs of asylum seekers in New York who are seeking a better future for themselves and their families.

### Key findings:

- Majority of surveyed settlement houses (91 percent) reported that unemployment is the most pressing challenge facing the asylum seekers they are serving, followed by food insecurity (83 percent) and lack of permanent housing (78 percent)
- 56 percent of surveyed UNH members are providing new services to asylum seekers
- 76 percent of surveyed members reported increases in the number of asylum seekers seeking food assistance and 72 percent reported an increased presence of asylum seekers in their youth programs
- 74 percent of surveyed settlement house members are providing services to school-aged youth and families with children
- 75 percent of surveyed members said that they lack the staffing levels necessary to serve asylum seekers
- 88 percent of surveyed settlement house members said that they have not received any additional support from government to serve asylum seekers

### Recommendations:

Government should recognize the potential of new arrivals to contribute to New York's social, cultural and economic success, and ensure that settlement houses and other CBOs have the necessary resources to move new arrivals forward on the path to economic self-sufficiency. Recommendations on how settlement houses and other CBOs can partner with government on both immediate and longer-term solutions to address the needs of asylum seekers in New York include:

- Improve frequency of coordination and communication between CBOs and government
- Fast-track work authorization, including exploring the creation of State-level work permits for asylum seekers where the federal government will not, and provide flexible funding for workforce development programs to serve new arrivals without work authorization
- Provide flexibility around government contract requirements and funding to meet needs of newcomers
- Preserve the right to shelter for newcomers
- Increase investment in food assistance and benefits for newcomers, including the creation of a "SNAP for All" food benefit for New Yorkers
- Increase investment in bilingual staff, legal services, and case management
- Increase investment in adult literacy, English, and dual-language programs
- Increase investment in Promise NYC to address the urgent need for child care among asylum-seeking families
- Invest in additional funds for CBO staff trainings in addressing mental health and trauma-related issues

## Introduction

For more than 135 years, settlement houses have welcomed people from all walks of life through their doors. Settlement houses across the State continue to welcome the newest New Yorkers, including thousands of asylum seekers who have fled economic and political hardships in their country of origin. Over the past year, United Neighborhood Houses (UNH) settlement house members have stepped in to help feed, clothe, shelter and educate these new arrivals. In addition to welcoming asylum seekers into their existing programs, many settlement houses have rolled out new services and adapted or expanded their programming to address the needs of newcomers in their neighborhoods.

Of the more than 120,000 asylum seekers who have arrived since spring 2022, New York City is currently sheltering more than 65,000 people,<sup>1</sup> with thousands continuing to arrive weekly. To meet shelter needs, more than 200 sites, including 15 humanitarian relief centers have opened.<sup>2</sup> Mayor Adams has stated that his Administration projects it will cost \$11 billion dollars to house asylum-seeking New Yorkers over the next two years.<sup>3</sup> In response to these projected costs, Mayor Adams has warned that asylum seekers would “destroy” New York City, and he ordered all City agencies to plan for cutting spending by 15 percent, the steepest budget cuts in years. Regardless of the precise costs, it is clear that there are new New Yorkers who can help grow the economy and who today need resources to move towards economic self-sufficiency. Settlement houses have been doing this work for years and with additional support, are well-positioned to continue to provide these resources.

In September 2023, UNH surveyed 25 settlement house members to better understand the most pressing challenges facing the asylum-seeking families they’re serving, the impact of the increase in the number of asylum seekers on their programs and operations, and the support they need from government to serve these populations more effectively. This brief summarizes the key findings from this survey, along with information collected from peer groups of settlement house staff convened by UNH. This brief also provides recommendations for how City and State government can work with settlement houses on both immediate and long-term solutions to address the needs of asylum seekers in New York who are seeking a better future for themselves and their families.

## Challenges facing new arrivals

As the chart below shows, unemployment was listed by most UNH members (91 percent) as one of the most pressing challenges faced by the asylum seekers they serve. President Biden’s administration announced in September<sup>4</sup> that the U.S. government would grant “temporary protected status” to an estimated 472,000 Venezuelan asylum seekers, including tens of thousands of those in New York City. This designation provides protection from deportation and allows these asylum seekers to receive work permits so that they can legally work in the U.S. An estimated 15,000 people in New York City’s shelter system are now eligible.<sup>5</sup> However, Venezuelans make up just 41 percent of asylum seekers who have arrived in New York City since spring 2022,<sup>6</sup> which means that most asylum seekers in New York will not benefit from this expansion of Temporary Protected Status and must choose between not working or working without documentation.

---

<sup>1</sup> <https://gothamist.com/news/nyc-expands-30-day-stay-limits-to-single-adult-migrants-in-dhs-shelters>

<sup>2</sup> <https://comptroller.nyc.gov/services/for-the-public/accounting-for-asylum-seeker-services/asylum-seeker-census/>

<sup>3</sup> <https://www.nyc.gov/office-of-the-mayor/news/875-23/mayor-adams-releases-november-2023-financial-plan-update>

<sup>4</sup> Kriegstein, Brittany and Karen Yi, “We all came to work’ — NYC migrants react to Biden’s relief plan for Venezuelans.” September 21, 2023.

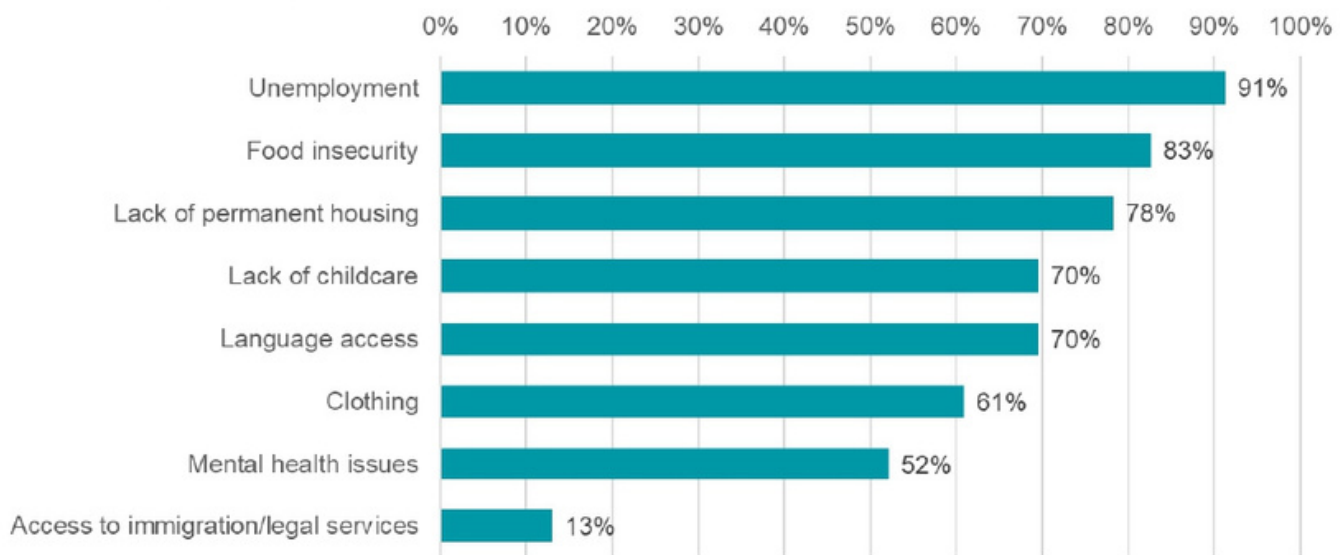
<https://gothamist.com/news/we-all-came-to-work-nyc-migrants-react-to-bidens-relief-plan-for-venezuelans>

<sup>5</sup> September 21, 2023 Zoom meeting on coordinating asylum seekers between NYC nonprofits and government. Hosted by the Mayor’s Office of Asylum Seeker Operations (OASO), Mayor’s Office of Immigrant Affairs, Mayor’s Office of Engagement, NYC Service, Mayor’s Office of Nonprofits, and NYC Emergency Management.

<sup>6</sup> <https://www.cityandstateny.com/policy/2023/08/venezuela-and-colombia-are-top-countries-origin-nyc-asylum-seekers/389888/>

## Unemployment is the most pressing challenge faced by asylum seekers

Q: What are the most pressing challenges faced by the asylum seekers you are serving?



**Red Hook Initiative** recently hosted a job fair near the ferry terminal in Red Hook, Brooklyn, but was unable to connect asylum seekers to jobs because they lacked work authorization. Settlement houses also noted that the inability to obtain work authorization was limiting the ability of young adult asylum seekers to participate in youth employment programs. “It’s unfortunate that we are not able to provide salaries or stipends that we offer to our young adults or high school students to migrant youth, because they are undocumented,” noted Yvonne Brathwaite, the Chief Program and Policy Officer of Red Hook Initiative.

### **Heightened food insecurity**

In addition to unemployment, the majority—83 percent—of UNH members surveyed reported that food insecurity is a pressing challenge facing the asylum seekers families they are serving. However, members report inadequate funding for their emergency food assistance programs. **Project Hospitality**, a UNH member based in Staten Island, noted that they have seen a dramatic increase in food pantry utilization by asylum seekers: “Our food pantry numbers are higher than ever and just like other vulnerable populations we are seeing more asylum seekers on the lines these days,” noted Jaclyn Stoll, the Executive Director of Project Hospitality. She added that many of these families, particularly those in emergency shelters, do not have the option to prepare food for themselves and they are looking for more culturally appropriate and ready to eat items.

### **Language access and bilingual support**

Seventy percent of UNH members who responded to the survey identified language access as a pressing challenge for the asylum seekers they serve. “Language access is a huge need,” noted Molly Murphy, Chief Program Officer at **Educational Alliance** on the Lower East Side, where there is a concentration of shelters housing asylum seekers. Others have noted that asylum seekers are facing language barriers and that more Spanish-language support is needed, particularly in schools. For example, **St. Nicks Alliance/School Settlement** noted that asylum-seeking children are being placed in schools where Spanish is not the dominant language or teachers don’t speak Spanish fluently. A recent Center for an Urban Future report found that there has been a surge in demand for English for speakers of other languages (ESOL) programs run by settlement houses: **Center for Family Life in Sunset Park**, Brooklyn, enrolls 300 people in its English for speakers of other languages (ESOL) programs each year, but recently had more than 700 people on its waiting list, while

Manhattan-based **Greenwich House** has a 60-student capacity for its ESOL program, but has 300 to 500 on its wait list.<sup>7</sup>

### ***Lack of access to permanent housing***

More than three-quarters of UNH members surveyed cited lack of access to permanent housing as a pressing challenge facing the asylum seekers they are serving. Mayor Adams recently announced that the City is limiting shelter stays for asylum-seeking families with children to 60 days, and that families will have to reapply for shelter after 60 days. However, even before the Mayor's recent announcement, hundreds of asylum-seeking families were already subject to 28-day limits on hotel shelter stays through a separate program called the Hotel Vouchering Program run by the city's Department of Housing Preservation & Development (HPD).<sup>8</sup> Families must now navigate these new rules around the City's emergency shelter system while searching for longer-term or permanent housing options. One member noted that the City needs more concrete plans regarding permanent housing, and another noted that there is a need for "more available housing that is suitable and affordable" for asylum seekers.

### ***Child care challenges***

Seventy percent of UNH members surveyed noted that lack of access to child care is another pressing challenge faced by asylum seekers. Settlement houses note that there is a particular need for child care among asylum-seeking families living in the City's shelter system, especially for infants and toddlers, because they are not yet eligible for 3-K for All or Pre-K for All, which do not require a child to demonstrate their immigration status. Furthermore, families with older children who are already enrolled in 3-K and Pre-K programs are also in need of extended care outside of traditional school-day hours.

### ***Impact of new arrivals on settlement house programs and operations***

Of the 25 members surveyed, 76 percent reported that they have seen an increase in asylum seekers seeking emergency food assistance, 72 percent saw an increase of asylum seekers in their youth programs, and 64 percent reported increases in their legal services programs.

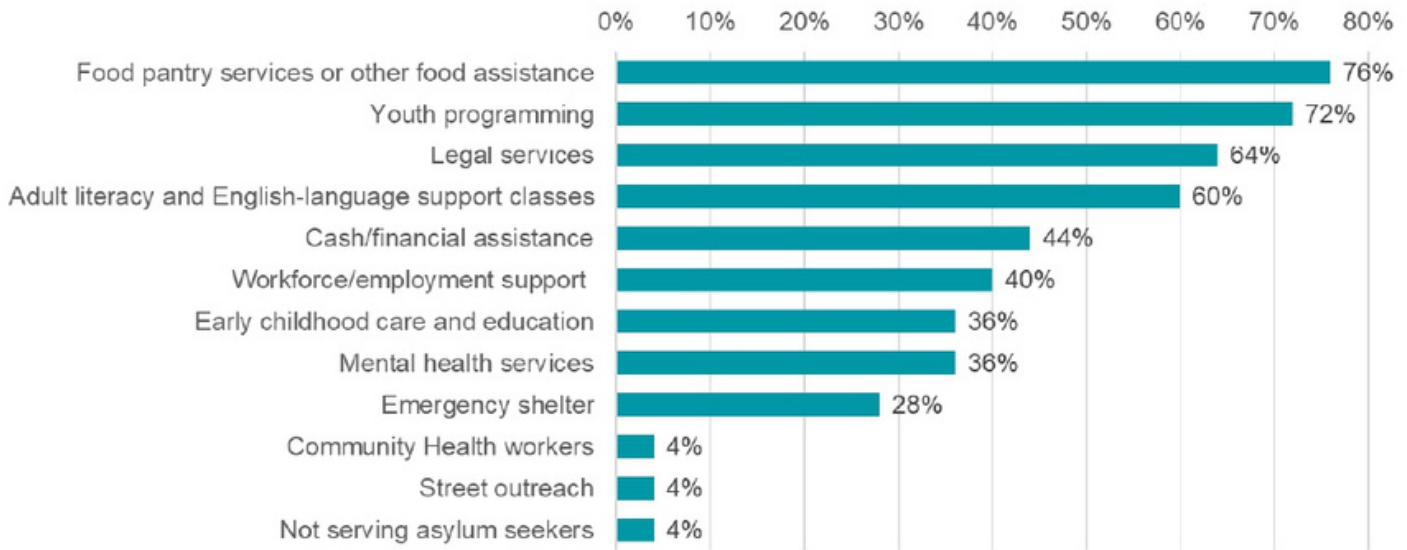
---

<sup>7</sup>De La Hoz, Felipe. Center for an Urban Future. "Preparing today's asylum seekers to be tomorrow's workforce." September 2023. <https://nycfuture.org/research/preparing-todays-asylum-seekers-for-tomorrows-jobs?eType=EmailBlastContent&eld=c17115b5-5b00-4d76-bb48-f5daddb07ffe>

<sup>8</sup>Whitford, Emma and Daniel Parra. City Limits. "They Assigned Us Far Away': As Shelter Limit Policy Expands, Some Families Are Already Too Familiar." <https://citylimits.org/2023/10/18/they-assigned-us-far-away-as-shelter-limit-policy-expands-some-families-are-already-too-familiar/>. October 18, 2023.

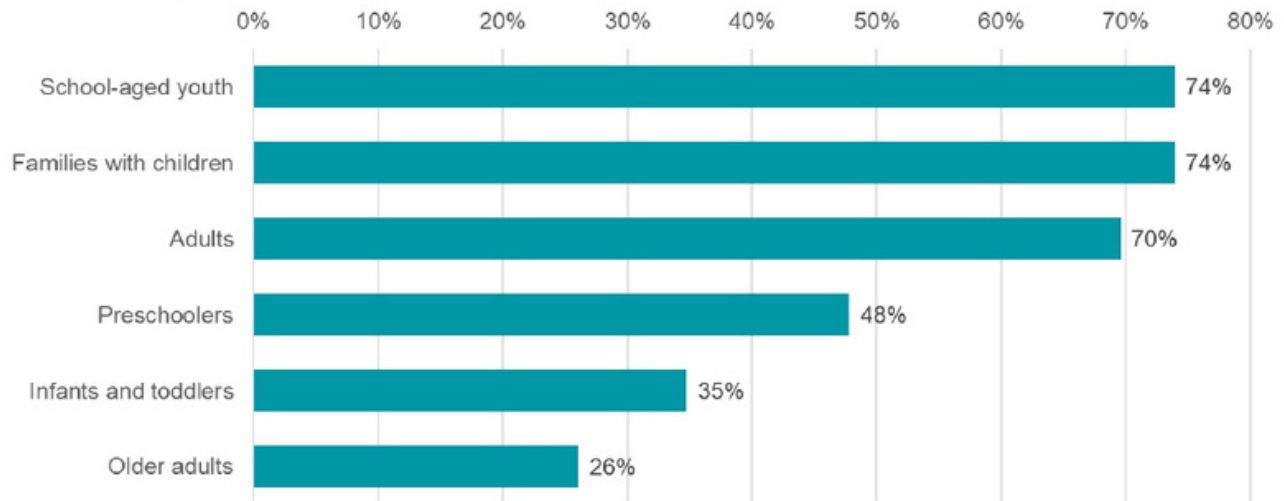
**Many settlement houses have seen an increase in asylum seekers in their emergency food assistance, youth programming, legal services and adult literacy programs**

Q: In the programs you run, where are you currently seeing an increase of asylum seekers?



**Settlement houses are predominantly serving school-aged youth and families with children**

Q: Which groups are you currently serving within the asylum-seeker population in NY?



Of the UNH settlement house members surveyed, nearly three-quarters (74 percent) are serving school-aged youth and families with children. This is not surprising given that families with children currently make up 72

percent of asylum seekers in the City's care,<sup>9</sup> and around 26,000 asylum-seeking children are now enrolled in public schools.<sup>10</sup>

**St. Nicks Alliance/School Settlement** reported that half of students at its transfer school in North Brooklyn are asylum seekers. Members note that they often receive referrals from DOE schools, given that they are well known and respected in the communities they serve. Erica Oquendo, the Division Director for Youth and Family Services at **Cypress Hills Local Development Corporation** in East New York, Brooklyn, noted that she has spoken to multiple guidance counselors and parent coordinators who are looking to provide more support to asylum-seeking families: "The options DOE has for referrals to outside organizations for food and healthcare are limited. They're reaching out to us for more resources."

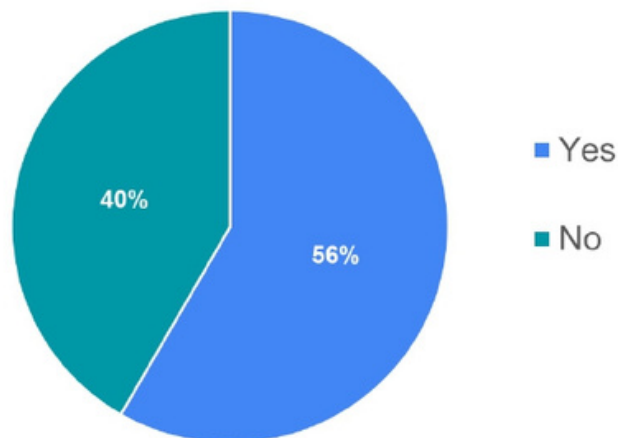
**Educational Alliance** noted that many asylum seekers are coming into their East Broadway location and into the local schools on the Lower East Side. "Several school administrators last year reached out to us and asked, what does [your settlement house] have that can help people," noted Molly Murphy of Educational Alliance. Educational Alliance's Askwith Kenner Family Resource Center currently provides an array of services for asylum-seeking families that includes monthly "Welcome to New York" events where asylum seekers are able to sign up for services and receive immediate support, bilingual social workers to provide counseling and connection to external resources, parenting classes, mental health support, English-language instruction, and assistance with government forms such as work permits. To date, Educational Alliance has served approximately 450 asylum seekers across several program sites since spring 2022. **Red Hook Initiative** is also focused on connecting neighborhood schools with resources to support asylum seekers, noting that basic needs such as clothing and food are critical and take precedence over other programming.

Like other settlement houses, **Queens Community House** is serving asylum-seeking children at their school-based programs. Queens Community House Family Support Coordinators have also been visiting hotels in Jamaica, Queens where asylum seekers were placed. Family Support Coordinators provide information sessions and connect asylum-seeking families to available resources and referrals to legal support, food pantries, public benefits and other assistance provided by the Mayor's Office of Immigrant Affairs. To date, Queens Community House has served approximately 300 asylum seekers since spring 2022.

### **More than half of UNH members are providing new services to asylum seekers**

Several UNH members like **CAMBA**, **BronxWorks** and **Jacob A. Riis Neighborhood Settlement** are providing the same services they always have but are seeing greater demand from asylum seekers. To date, Jacob A. Riis Neighborhood Settlement has served at least 550 asylum seekers through its Immigrant Services programs, which include ESOL (English Speakers of Other Languages) classes, case management and legal services. Given its proximity to more than 10 shelters in the immediate neighborhood, Jacob A. Riis Neighborhood Settlement has served over 300 asylum seekers through its adult ESOL program, including three new daytime classes for parents at local schools that received many new families. A

Q: Are you providing services for asylum seekers that you didn't provide before?



<sup>9</sup> Office of Comptroller Brad Lander. "Accounting for Asylum Seekers."

<https://comptroller.nyc.gov/services/for-the-public/accounting-for-asylum-seeker-services/asylum-seeker-census/>

<sup>10</sup> PIX11 News. "On the Record with NYC Schools Chancellor David Banks: Migrant crisis adds 26,000 new students."

<https://pix11.com/news/politics/pixonpolitics/on-the-record-with-nyc-schools-chancellor-david-banks-thousands-of-new-students-enroll-amid-migrant-crisis/>. September 24, 2023.



Recent Center for an Urban Future report found that CAMBA has tripled its workforce development staff to accommodate the increased demand for job training from new arrivals—the number of participants in programs such as security guard training, OSHA certification, and programs for heating/cooling technicians rose from less than 200 participants to almost 900.<sup>11</sup> Similarly, **Henry Street Settlement** has not launched new programs but they are seeing this population in the majority of their programs.

Overall, 56 percent of UNH members we surveyed reported that they are providing services to asylum seekers that they hadn't provided before, reflecting the nimbleness of settlement houses in adapting and expanding their programming to address the needs of newcomers in their neighborhoods.

The new services provided by UNH settlement house members have been focused on those that meet basic needs such as food and clothing. In Lower Manhattan, **Educational Alliance** is operating a food pantry for asylum seekers and providing hygiene products, clothing and educational supplies. "We now have adult clothing and shelf stable food," noted Educational Alliance's Murphy. "Some of the same households come in multiple times for assistance."

Settlement houses like **Cypress Hills Local Development Corporation** have stepped up to coordinate efforts with other human services providers to address basic needs such as food and clothing, as well as provide services to asylum-seeking families in their communities. Cypress Hills is currently working with a coalition of human services providers in East New York to do pop-up events, distribute food and clothing, and bring legal services agencies to the community.

UNH members are also providing other new services or expanding existing offerings, such as English-language support classes, bilingual workforce training, and legal support. **Queens Community House** is now providing ESOL classes for high school students and expanding family support services to shelters. **Greenwich House** is providing new services such as OSHA (Occupational Safety and Health Administration) construction training in Spanish and ESOL classes. **Kingsbridge Heights Community Center** in the Bronx has partnered with legal service providers and domestic violence nonprofits to provide legal consultation clinics related to asylum inquiries and domestic violence situations. **SCAN-Harbor** in East Harlem is now offering ESOL classes, healing circles for single mothers and their children, bilingual afterschool support, and legal advocacy and referrals. In other cases, some members have expanded their existing offerings—**Arab-American Family Support Center** has increased the number of ESOL classes through its Adult Readiness program, which supports the City's immigrant and refugee populations as they learn English-speaking and literacy skills, and is providing additional hot, prepared Halal meals once a week.

Three UNH members—**Northern Manhattan Improvement Corporation (NMIC)**, **Center for Family Life**, and **Chinese-American Planning Council**—are also working to address the child care challenges faced by asylum seekers and other undocumented families through the Promise NYC program, which began as a \$10 million pilot program in January 2023. These three settlement houses, along with a fourth provider, La Colmena, contract with the NYC Administration for Children's Services (ACS) to implement a child care voucher program for undocumented families in each of their respective boroughs (NMIC in the Bronx and Manhattan, Center for Family Life in Brooklyn, Chinese-American Planning Council in Queens, and La Colmena in Staten Island).

For **NMIC (Northern Manhattan Improvement Corporation)**, this venture into child care services was new for the organization. Remarkably, they did not need to do extensive outreach efforts; the program's popularity was swift and substantial, emphasizing the pressing need for child care services, particularly among undocumented community members. Similarly, **Center for Family Life** has reported that about 50 percent of the children they have enrolled into Promise NYC live in shelters or are part of newly arrived families. Families that participated in Promise NYC have shared that access to child care has allowed them to seek out work opportunities, to pursue ESOL classes, and to participate in workforce training programs.

---

<sup>11</sup><https://nycfuture.org/research/preparing-todays-asylum-seekers-for-tomorrows-jobs?eType=EmailBlastContent&eld=c17115b5-5b00-4d76-bb48-f5daddb07ffe>

Providers were contracted to serve a total of 600 children citywide for the remainder of the fiscal year through June 2023, and the program was renewed for FY 2024. However, the program falls short of addressing the demand. **NMIC** was only able to serve 110 children in Manhattan and 125 in the Bronx, while over 400 children were waitlisted.<sup>12</sup> **Center for Family Life** has reported that they have about 150 asylum-seeking children from shelters on their waiting list, demonstrating the enormous need for child care among new arrivals.

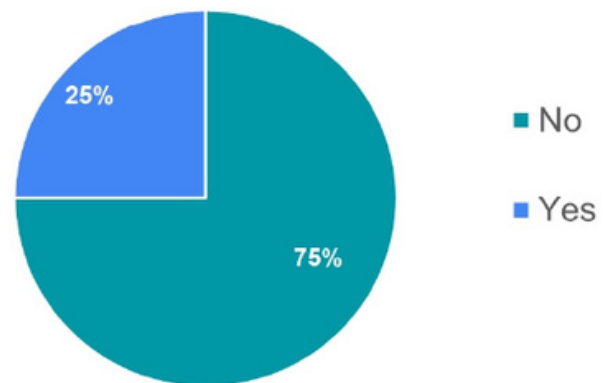
### ***Most members lack sufficient staffing levels to serve newcomers***

Although most surveyed members said that they are providing services that they hadn't provided before, three-quarters of surveyed members said that they lack the staffing levels necessary to serve asylum seekers. Of those who said they lacked sufficient staffing, more than three-quarters cited inadequate funding in existing contracts to support the hiring of additional staff, and 64 percent cited insufficient funding for higher salaries in contracts. Several members have received funding from the City to open new emergency shelters, but most members (88 percent) said that they have not received any additional support from government to serve this population. The majority of surveyed members noted that the influx of asylum seekers has impacted their ability to run programs. Sadie Mahoney, Chief Program Officer for Youth and Family Services at **Kingsbridge Heights Community Center (KHCC)** in the Bronx, noted that KHCC and CBOs could provide more support to new arrivals if they had additional funding and staff: "Newly arrived kids are having lots of adjustment challenges in school. The DOE needs a system for acculturating students and families to their neighborhood and schools - this could be delegated to CBOs if we had more funding/staff."

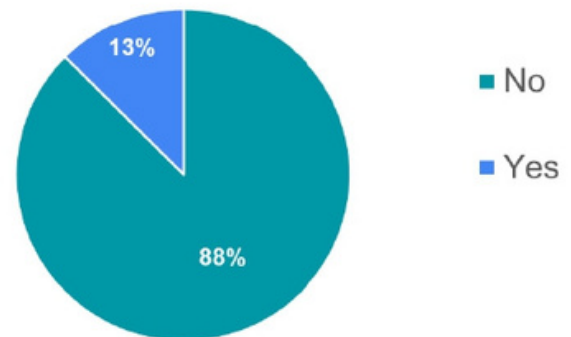
### **Recommendations**

New York City and State have welcomed and benefited from immigration for centuries. As they have for more than a hundred years, settlement houses are stepping up to support the most recent wave of newcomers, through meeting basic needs such as food, clothing, and shelter, expanding ESOL classes, and providing child care and other workforce supports. Settlement houses can continue to successfully welcome asylum seekers with a coordinated strategy that acknowledges the important role of new arrivals in strengthening New York City and State's economy and neighborhoods. Moving forward, here are recommendations on how settlement houses

Q: Do you have the necessary staffing to support asylum seekers in your programs?



Q: Has government provided you with any additional support (financial or other) to provide these services to asylum seekers?



<sup>12</sup> United Neighborhood Houses, Testimony of Paula Inhargue before the NYC Council Committee on Women and Gender Equity <https://uploads.prod01.oregon.platform-os.com/instances/542/assets/UNH%20Testimony%20-%20Universal%20Child%20Care%20Hearing%2009.21.23.pdf?updated=1695323661>. September 21, 2023.

and other CBOs can partner with government on both immediate and longer-term solutions to address the needs of asylum seekers and asylum seekers in New York.

## **Recommendations to improve operations and programs**

- ***Improve frequency of coordination and communication between CBOs and government***

UNH members have noted that centralized resources and a greater level of coordination is necessary between City and State government and CBOs working with asylum-seeking families on the ground. This coordination would enable settlement houses and other CBOs to identify creative solutions and work together to rapidly address the needs of asylum seekers. A cohort of City agencies, including the Mayor's Office of Asylum Seeker Operations, the Mayor's Office of Immigrant Affairs and the Mayor's Office of Nonprofits recently co-hosted Zoom meetings in August, September, and October 2023 with nonprofits that included more than 300 people in attendance. However, these were the first wide-scale meetings with nonprofits convened by the City to address the rapid influx of asylum seekers since January 2023, and future convenings are not scheduled or anticipated. These convenings should happen regularly so that organizations with capacity to help or that have questions on coordination know where to go in order to aid the City's efforts to support this population. Furthermore, increased coordination is also necessary between CBOs and State agencies who also play a vital role in helping asylum seekers.

In August 2022, the City launched Project Open Arms, an interagency plan to provide wraparound services for asylum-seeking students entering the City's public school system. However, challenges remain with coordination between the City and CBOs that are working to provide these supports for asylum-seeking students. Settlement houses have shared that there is a need for better integration of housing and navigation centers for asylum seekers with nonprofit providers of child care and in-school supports. Separately, many UNH members are interacting with asylum seekers and providing services to them through referrals from DOE schools or their school-based youth programs—this highlights the ways in which settlement houses and other CBOs are more adept and nimble than government in identifying challenges and service gaps facing asylum-seeking families. The City must improve coordination and communications between nonprofits and the DOE and the NYC Department of Youth and Community Development (DYCD).

- ***Fast-track work authorization, including exploring the creation of State-level work permits for asylum seekers where the federal government will not; provide flexible funding for workforce development programs to serve new arrivals without work authorization***

A majority of UNH members surveyed shared that unemployment was the one of the most pressing challenges facing the asylum seekers they are serving in their programs. UNH members with workforce development programs are grappling with the tension of assisting newcomers who are not legally allowed to work but could be (or already are) working in the informal economy and receiving off-the-books income. Settlement houses have noted that an overhaul of eligibility guidelines for work authorization and public benefits is necessary, as well as more funding for job training in construction and other in-demand sectors such as home care that are experiencing worker shortages and are more likely to employ new immigrants. UNH members have also shared that expediting work authorization would help young adult asylum seekers who are interested in participating in programs supported by DYCD such as the Summer Youth Employment Program and Work, Learn, & Grow. It is unclear whether asylum-seeking youth whose parents receive work authorization would then be eligible to participate in DYCD youth employment programs, and the City must ensure that contracted providers receive clear guidance on how to handle these cases when they arise.

While the recent decision by the Biden administration to redesignate Venezuelans for temporary protected status is a promising first step, more action must be taken to expand work permits to new arrivals outside of Venezuela. At the State level, Assembly Member Catalina Cruz introduced legislation that would grant two-year State work permits for asylum seekers who have applied for asylum. New York State Senator Zellnor Myrie has also proposed the creation of a New York City asylum seeker work permit that is modeled after the IDNYC

municipal ID program. Given that this is the most pressing need cited by settlement houses, and that our federal government appears unable to act on this matter, it is important that New York State explore all options for work permits and lead by example where possible.

- ***Provide flexibility around government contract requirements and funding to meet needs of asylum seekers***

UNH members have noted that more flexibility in government contract requirements is necessary to serve asylum seekers more easily, such as relaxing eligibility documentation requirements for proof of address and income for ESOL classes. The documentation requirements apply to ESOL slots in City contracts that receive partial funding from federal Community Services Block Grant funds, but DYCD is also applying these same requirements to City-funded slots under the same contract. Other members note that granting flexibility to redeploy existing staff on existing City contracts to serve asylum seekers would also be helpful.

### **Recommendations to sustain proven models and expand programming**

- ***Preserve the right to shelter for newcomers***

The Adams Administration announced that it would limit shelter stays to 60 days for asylum-seeking families without a plan for moving these families into long-term housing. This policy change is incredibly destabilizing for families, as leaving and reapplying for shelter every 60 days is disruptive to their children's education. Asylum-seeking families may be forced to move into shelters far from where their children are currently enrolled in school. This change comes after the Adams Administration already moved to limit single adult shelter stays to 30 days, a policy change which undermines New York City's Right to Shelter, as established under 1981's *Callahan* consent decree. While we recognize that providing shelter is costly, undermining the Right to Shelter with few viable alternatives leaves people with few housing options, and will surely force individuals to sleep outside on the streets. Preserving the Right to Shelter is the "baseline of humanity and decency."<sup>13</sup>

- ***Increase investment in food assistance and benefits or newcomers, including the creation of a "SNAP for All" food benefit for New Yorkers***

More than three-quarters of UNH members surveyed reported that food insecurity is a pressing challenge facing the asylum-seeking families they are serving, underscoring the urgent need for increased food assistance for families. Project Hospitality has a contract to operate two emergency shelters for asylum seekers, but noted that has not seen any additional money for their food pantries, despite food pantry usage levels that are higher than ever before. There must be increased government investment in food pantries, including through City government programs such as the NYC Council's Food Pantries Initiative and HRA's Community Food Connection program (formerly known as the Emergency Food Assistance Program). New York State should follow the lead of California by creating a "SNAP for All" program for New Yorkers ineligible for SNAP due to immigration status, as laid out in S.7692 (Salazar)/A.5933 (González-Rojas), which would analyze how to create such a program in New York State. The State should also increase funding for the Hunger Prevention and Nutrition Assistance Program (HPNAP) and Nourish NY, as well as maintain funding levels for the Nutrition Outreach and Education Program (NOEP), which funds public outreach and education around participation in SNAP and promotes participation in WIC, school meals and summer meals.

- ***Increase investment in bilingual staff, legal services, and case management***

The City and State must provide more funding to CBOs that it contracts with to hire additional staff—especially on-site bilingual case managers and legal staff—to support new arrivals; this was the most common response offered by settlement houses when they were asked about what they needed from government to better serve asylum seekers in their programs. One settlement house noted that they are in need of "increased budgets to support additional staffing and provide additional support to existing staff who are doing more to support the

---

<sup>13</sup> <https://www.coalitionforthehomeless.org/mayor-adams-save-the-right-to-shelter/>

families.” Other members shared that they need funds for in-house legal and case management support given the great demand for these services.

- ***Increase investment in adult literacy, English, and dual-language programs***

Many UNH members reported increasing numbers of asylum seekers in their adult literacy and English-language support programming, highlighting the need to boost government investment in these programs. Asylum seekers arrive in New York City with little to no English literacy or ability to navigate City or State systems. Adult literacy programs are prime locations where newcomers can receive not only English language instruction but also support in accessing education, healthcare, legal services, and housing. However, limited resources will prevent programs from being able to provide new students with the support they need. Now is the time for the City and State to invest in adult literacy education programs to ensure programs can meet the surge in demand for basic English classes, retain and hire full-time teachers, and cover the rise in costs for classroom materials, space, and technology. In particular, New York State’s Adult Literacy Education Program (ALE) is well positioned to serve asylum seekers, as it is one of the few adult education programs targeted at lower-level learners.

- ***Increase investment in Promise NYC***

Promise NYC is a beacon of support for asylum seekers and undocumented families in meeting their need for subsidized child care. While the program has received widespread acclaim from the families it was able to serve, the need for the program far exceeds the original number of 600 contracted slots, as evidenced by long waitlists kept by settlement house contractors. Promise NYC was renewed for FY 2024 with \$16 million in funding. However, the budget allocation still falls short of addressing the demand for the program.

- ***Invest in additional funds for CBO staff trainings in addressing mental health and trauma-related issues***

Given the trauma they have endured in their home country and on their harrowing journey to the U.S., mental health was identified as a pressing challenge for asylum seekers by half of member survey respondents. Settlement houses have been able to use existing government funding in creative ways, including State child care stabilization funds for mental health supports. Furthermore, City family shelters are now required to provide on-site mental health services.<sup>14</sup> However, the City must conduct outreach to CBOs who currently operate family shelters and ensure that they are aware of this new requirement and provide them with additional funding to ensure that they have the staffing and resources to comply with the new law. Government must also provide additional funding to settlement houses and other CBOs for training staff in providing trauma-informed care. A Lower East Side-based UNH member who is an early childhood education provider for several asylum-seeking families noted that more trauma counseling is necessary and that this is a service their staff are not trained to provide. Similarly, a Queens-based member noted that they need more staff training on how to provide trauma-informed services and new types of service areas for asylum seekers.

## **Conclusion**

New York State is already home to 4.5 million immigrants, who make up 23 percent of the population.<sup>15</sup> Immigrants are a source of economic opportunity for the State—they represent \$130 billion in spending power in New York and they pay \$61 billion in taxes.<sup>16</sup> Instead of debating the cost of serving newcomers, government should recognize the potential of new arrivals to contribute to New York’s social, cultural, and economic success, and ensure that settlement houses and other CBOs have the necessary resources to move new arrivals forward on the path to economic self-sufficiency.

---

<sup>14</sup><https://gothamist.com/news/mental-health-services-are-coming-to-nycs-family-shelters-but-staffing-concerns-loom>

<sup>15</sup> US Census Bureau, 2022 American Community Survey data.

<sup>16</sup> <https://data.americanimmigrationcouncil.org/map-the-impact/>

***Published by United Neighborhood Houses | December 2023***

***Contact: Irene Lew at [ilew@unhny.org](mailto:ilew@unhny.org)***



***United Neighborhood Houses (UNH) is a policy and social change organization representing neighborhood settlement houses in New York City and state that reach over 770,000 New Yorkers from all walks of life.***

[www.unhny.org](http://www.unhny.org) | 45 Broadway, 22nd Floor, NY, NY 10006 | 212-967-0322 | [info@unhny.org](mailto:info@unhny.org)

