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**Testimony of United Neighborhood Houses  
Before the New York City Council Committee on Youth Services  
Council Member Althea Stevens, Chair**

**Oversight: Summer 2022 Programming  
Submitted by Dante Bravo, Youth Policy Analyst  
October 25, 2022**

Thank you, Chair Stevens 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 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.

**Summer Programming 2022**

Summer programming, including summer camps and the Summer Youth Employment Program (SYEP), has long been the cornerstone of the positive youth development movement, offering exciting and supportive programs outside of the school year that expose youth to different learning modalities and stem summer learning-loss. A healthy, successful youth services ecosystem that meets the needs of all youth over the summer requires both school-based and community-based programs, and it is crucial that New York City maintain and invest in both to ensure that youth and families have choices and options on how to spend their summer months.

Settlement houses and other community-based organizations (CBOs) are experts in providing responsive services and are uniquely qualified to offer guidance on what must be done for the benefit of all youth and families across the city. CBOs often lead conversations with the families

they serve in their local contexts to decide what programming would be best every given summer, and the City must lean on this wealth of knowledge to ensure that the needs of children and families are met in program design and offerings. Much of this testimony draws on lessons learned from this past summer and feedback from our settlement house members on how to improve going forward. For a successful summer 2023, UNH urges the City to consider the following:

- CBOs need agency over their summer programming offerings to ensure that those offerings are responsive to local need
- Beacon and Cornerstone summer programming deserve cost-per-participant rates on par with their school-based alternatives to ensure secure staffing levels across the system
- The City must register the immediate payment of all outstanding contracts for any work done in Summer 2021 and Summer 2022, and implement procedures that allow for swift registration of contracts for all future services rendered.
- Planning for future summer programming should be modeled after this year's successful expansion of SYEP—by investing early to give sufficient time to prepare and remaining attentive to feedback from providers and advocates.

### *Summer Rising*

This past summer, the City continued Summer Rising—a partnership between the Department of Education (DOE) and Department of Youth and Community Development (DYCD) that began in 2021. While there were some improvements over the pilot year of the partnership, there were still major breakdowns and tensions in the partnership between DOE and DYCD that created tremendous operational challenges on the ground. These challenges were especially problematic given the amount of time and energy CBOs had spent providing feedback after year one. Instead of listening to CBO providers on numerous issues around enrollment, staffing, and other operational concerns, the City moved forward with Summer Rising 2022 repeating many of the same mistakes of the previous year to the detriment of New York City's youth and families.

In concept, positive youth development and academics, both essential pillars to the growth and enrichment of young people, should compliment each other well in a partnership of this sort. Unfortunately, the 2022 Summer Rising model deprioritized positive youth development in favor of academic frameworks. The model in practice robbed youth work professionals of their ability to implement community-driven programming, instead being asked to supplement the DOE's mission.

Summer Rising uses a deficit-based approach in understanding the needs of young people, and mandated summer school becomes the cost for attending free camp. This is despite the fact that this generation of young people have survived a collective traumatic event (COVID-19 and its aftermath) and have demonstrated creativity, resilience, and strength throughout this time. To reduce our young people to academic deficits—and then design programming exclusively on that

basis—ignores the urgency for a more nuanced, multi-disciplinary approach in understanding their needs after a disruptive crisis. CBOs, in traditional summer camp, have been using a strengths-based framework for decades, but Summer Rising undermines much of the life-changing work CBOs do because quantitative academic outcomes have been prioritized. The City has yet to provide meaningful data or research to compel New York City’s families to continue in this model, which essentially forces low-income families to enroll their children in summer school with few other alternatives. This despite the fact that clear evidence has shown that traditional summer camp had positive academic benefits while *also* helping to develop other core skills that are difficult to attain in a classroom setting.<sup>1</sup>

UNH urges the City to shift to a K-8 summer programming model that draws from the best aspects of Summer Rising and the summer camp models that preceded it. Aspects of Summer Rising have been tremendously positive, including ensuring that young people who do participate in summer school can access camp as well (something that was previously difficult with conflicting schedules) and an increased investment in cost-per-participant rates which resulted in wider access for families. However, along with these elements, the City must restore power to CBOs to do the following:

- Design their programming such that it is responsive to local needs
- Manage their own budgets without having to go through inefficient processes to justify their spending and secure approval,
- Enroll families, especially families who need additional digital and language support to apply for programming, and
  - Maintain their own rosters so that if there are young people who cannot attend the CBO’s programming, CBOs have the power to unenroll that youth and give that slot to a young person who can attend so the slot does not go to waste
- Maintain SACC licensing ratios of staff to youth and allow for budgets that account for the additional staff and OTPS costs
- Access more robust and comprehensive trainings to support District 75 youth who do want to enroll into summer experiences in addition to having resources available for that child’s specific needs (accessibility equipment, consistent paraprofessional staff presence, clear escalation protocols, and additional layers of support)

Non-academic experiences are what our young people’s wealthier counterparts get to experience in the summer, and it is fundamentally unfair that low-income students or those whose families cannot afford expensive private camp experiences must therefore enroll in summer school to access something similar. If the City continues to do a one size fits all for K-8 summer programming by only investing in Summer Rising as the end-all, be-all model, then we are complicit with a long, painful history of denying families of less means choice. Working parents of all incomes and backgrounds deserve better options for their families than a program that essentially amounts to summer school with minimal elements of recreation in the afternoon; this

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<sup>1</sup> Taken from [Socioeconomic Effects of the COVID19 Pandemic K-12 Educational Achievement](#), 2021

is especially true for Black and brown families whose young people want summers of recreation, play, and meaningful connection with their peers and supportive adults in a non-academic setting.

*Beacons, Cornerstones, and the Need for Community Based Summer Programming*

Community center sites like Cornerstones and Beacons allow CBOs to create programming that centers the needs of their local community. This style of programming allows young people an intentional space to develop holistically within a supportive community in an assets-based program framework rather than within a deficit model that does not recognize the skills, knowledge, and multiple intelligences our young people already possess.

Unfortunately, despite all of the incredible work and potential of these programs, Beacons, Cornerstones, and other community-based programs have been left behind in the City's rush to fund school-based programming. These programs were already underfunded compared to traditional SONYC and COMPASS rates, and that gap between contracts became a chasm with the influx of investment in the form of Summer Rising's enhanced rates, despite these centers being open for longer hours (including weekends) than their school-based counterparts.

The under-funding of community-based programs is especially concerning in the summer when staffing levels need to be increased so that providers are not forced to work their Beacon or Cornerstone staff overtime, resulting in increased expenses and burnout. The reality is that contract budgets do not cover these basic needs, forcing providers to choose between over-working and under-paying their staff, or moving independently-raised funds—which many providers do not have—into these programs to meet the bare minimum staffing levels and wages required. While some larger, more-established providers have been able to make in-kind contributions to their Cornerstone contracts to offer compelling and engaging programming through the summer months, this is an unsustainable solution that locks smaller providers with less fundraising capabilities out of the program.

Cornerstones in particular also face the challenge of running program within an NYCHA-based spaces which means the same issues with mold, lead, vermin, and crumbling infrastructure that NYCHA residents face in their apartments plague NYCHA community center sites, and those challenges make it difficult to run effective programming.

If the City continues to underfund Beacon or Cornerstones' contracts, it creates a staffing crisis for these programs in a field that is already severely underpaid and in an unprecedented staffing scarcity. Despite the fact that Cornerstone and Beacon staff do the similar work to their counterparts in SONYC, COMPASS, and Summer Rising programs, they are paid at a lower rate, putting a CBO who has many of these contracts in the difficult position of legitimizing wage disparity for staff that serve the same communities.

UNH recommends that Beacon and Cornerstones contracts receive a cost-per-participant rates on par with the rates school-based programs received for Summer Rising, if not higher cost-per-participant rates given that these programs are responsible for facilities maintenance, more hours of operation, and many more concerns not present in a school-based program. This investment should be sufficient to raise wages for existing community center staff so that those with similar jobs to their school-based counterparts receive equal pay for equal work. Allowing this discrepancy in funding is the equivalent of defunding youth and families who could not or chose not to access the Summer Rising program, despite the fact that these young people reside in the same communities the City wants to support through Summer Rising's programming.

### *Contracting Concerns*

In addition, UNH calls on the City for the immediate payment of all outstanding contracts for work done in Summer 2021 and 2022, as contracts must be registered promptly and with as little back-and-forth with providers as possible per the Mayor's promise earlier this year in creating the office of Nonprofit Contracting. Moving forward, all contracts should be year-round, 12 month contracts to make the procurement process as efficient as possible.

Indirect rates must be paid in full, in accordance with the City's Indirect Cost Rate Initiative. As new contracts take effect after a new RFP takes place for SONYC and COMPASS programming that will impact summer programming, the City must allow providers to claim those rates at the outset, not have a placeholder rate that later gets amended. Cost escalators must be included in the contracts, in accordance with inflation.

### *SYEP*

This summer, the City made an unprecedented investment in summer employment for young people, expanding the number of jobs available up to 100,000 baselined slots. 90,000 of those jobs were offered through SYEP. While a 20% expansion of any program, let alone a program that was already serving tens of thousands of people, is always going to be a challenge, this expansion was necessary because each year tens of thousands of young people were turned away from SYEP when their names were not drawn from the lottery. Despite those challenges, the expansion was a success, thanks in no small part to herculean efforts by SYEP providers and DYCD to pull off the biggest single-year expansion in the program's history.

Here are some successes in operations that made SYEP 2022 possible:

- **Early investment:** The Mayor announced plans to expand SYEP early in the budget process, including baselined funding to cover the expansion in his Preliminary Budget Proposal. This early investment allowed providers and DYCD time to prepare to ramp-up programming and develop partnerships with more employers.
- **Collaborative planning:** DYCD and the Mayor's Office of Youth Employment (MOYE) worked collaboratively with providers and advocates, sourcing ideas for how to streamline

programming and create efficiencies that would allow providers to serve more young people. DYCD worked hard to make key changes to reporting that would save time during enrollment, including eliminating family income documentation requirements and sharing information with providers on how auditing would work to allow CBOs to streamline their own collection procedures.

- Common-sense budgeting: Before 2022, SYEP contracts bridged the City's fiscal year, which meant that providers had to guess how much of their budget would be needed for start-up costs and how much they would use for operational costs. If providers guessed wrong, they would be forced to leave money on the table that could have been used to provide better service to young people. DYCD worked hard to move the program to calendar-year budgets this year, which allowed providers to remain nimble and respond to unanticipated challenges by moving money around to meet current needs.

SYEP 2022 is a great example of what happens when providers, advocates, and the City come together to meet a shared goal. Everyone wanted to see more jobs made available to young people, and the City listened to what providers said would make expansion possible, paving the way towards a Universal SYEP model that makes lottery admissions a thing of the past.

Moving forward, universal SYEP will mean that no young person who wants to work and earn income for themselves or their family is left behind. This will take coordinate effort and thoughtful planning, with a particular eye towards access for youth who are undocumented and youth with disabilities. The City has work to do to ensure that universal SYEP means universal access, but following the same approach taken this summer will go a long way towards making it happen on a timeline that is reflective of the needs of New York City's young people.

### *Conclusion*

It is UNH's ultimate goal that any New York City family who needs quality youth programming regardless of income will be able to access it. UNH hopes to see more program planning processes in youth development move in the direction of SYEP's 2022 expansion: Early investment, collaboration between the City and provider/advocate community, and common-sense programmatic changes to increase efficiency. UNH urges the City to learn from that experience to harness the potential for expansive K-8 summer programming that allows families to choose options that best fits their youth's unique needs by tapping the expertise of the provider community, drawing them into program planning conversations, and listening to youth and families who are asking for choice and flexibility.

As the City prepares for Summer 2023, UNH will continue to be a resource for our partners in City government to continue to build towards universal SYEP, and after-school and summer programming of quality that continues to set New York City as the country's leader in youth development. 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).