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**Testimony of United Neighborhood Houses**

**Before the New York Assembly Standing Committee on Election Law and the**

**Subcommittee on Election Day Operations and Voter Disenfranchisement**

**Assembly Member Charles Lavine, Chairman**

**Assembly Member David Buchwald, Chairman**

**On Election Reform**

**Presented by Lena Cohen, Civic Engagement Associate**

**November 15, 2018**

Thank you Chair Lavine and Chair Buchwald for the opportunity to testify today. My name is Lena Cohen and I am the Civic Engagement Associate at United Neighborhood Houses (UNH). Rooted in the history and values of the settlement house movement begun over 100 years ago, UNH promotes and strengthens the neighborhood-based, multi-service approach to improving the lives of New Yorkers in need and the communities in which they live. UNH’s membership includes 40 New York City settlement houses and 2 upstate affiliate members, who collectively reach more than 765,000 people across all ages through 680 locations – 670 of these in New York City – each year.

Typical settlement house services range from early childhood education and after-school, to youth employment and college access, to adult education and workforce development, to behavioral health services, homelessness prevention, and older adult services. Essentially, our members provide “one-stop” shopping for all community members—be they children, youth, immigrants, older adults, or working families.

UNH advocates for funding and policies that directly address barriers to thriving communities, ensuring the voices and needs of children and families, immigrants, and older people are part of the decision-making process.

**UNH Voter Engagement Work:**

UNH member organizations actively work to reverse New York’s pattern of low voter turnout. To ensure that community members have a say in how our government is organized and functions, UNH supplements its advocacy work by leading nonpartisan voter mobilization efforts. For example, prior to the 2018 elections, we brought more residents into the democratic process by leading civic education sessions at settlement houses, registering people across New York City, pledging voters to show up to the polls, and reminding them of their commitment through postcards and phone banking. Overall, our network registered and pledged over 2,000 new voters, and contacted over 8,000 voters before Election Day to remind them to vote.

Throughout UNH’s voter mobilization work, community members frequently raised questions and concerns about the accessibility and fairness of elections. For many New Yorkers, their reason for not showing up to the polls is simply because the system doesn’t work for them. The reality of voting in New York is that our electoral process is outdated, places too much pressure on poll site workers, and offers voters only one day of voting with no flexibility for work, childcare responsibilities, education, or illness. These unnecessary barriers result in widespread apathy and low voter turnout.

**Priorities:**

UNH’s draws its priorities from the experiences of our members and community residents who want a more responsive, equitable, and accessible electoral process. UNH, as an active member of Let NY Vote, supports the following reforms: (1) Early Voting; (2) Pre-Registration of 16-17 Year Olds; (3) Automatic Voter Registration, (4) Flexibility to Change Party Affiliation, and (5) Permanent Restoration of Voting Rights to People on Parole.

To ensure that our democracy is open to all New Yorkers, we must address the barriers that New York’s antiquated election laws perpetuate. Today, I’d like to concentrate on one electoral reform that is critical to ensuring every New Yorker has fair and easy access to the polls: Early Voting.

**Early Voting:**

Early Voting would allow eligible voters to cast ballots 12 days before an election. Currently, 37 states already have some form of Early Voting, leaving New York as one of only 13 states without any means to vote early except via absentee ballot. Early Voting is necessary because working New Yorkers, parents, and students would be able to cast their ballot when it is convenient for them. Hard working New Yorkers should not have to choose between their jobs, family care responsibilities, educational commitments, and voting. Rather, they should be able to get to their polling location and cast their ballots when it is convenient for them – not just on one day.

Implementing Early Voting would also be an important addition to New York’s disaster preparedness efforts, helping to avoid the confusion and chaos that can result from extreme weather events, such as Superstorm Sandy and Hurricane Irene.

Additionally, Early Voting has shown to be popular with voters across the political spectrum. According to a January 2018 Siena poll, 65% of New Yorkers support some form of Early Voting regardless of where they live. It is proven to ease pressure on poll sites and workers, save time on Election Day, and improve voter satisfaction. Just this year, we saw a 45% increase in voter turnout nationally compared with the 2014 midterm elections; 38 million of these voters cast their ballot ahead of time, demonstrating the effectiveness of Early Voting. However, in New York, voters were once again faced with a cumbersome and outdated Election Day process.

Unfortunately, even without extreme weather, voters who cast their ballots in New York elections are often met with a mess at the polls. On November 6th, for example, many voters were stuck in lines for hours, ballots were wet from the rain and jammed the scanners, and additional technological problems caused many other scanners to break down. Even with the jump in voter turnout in the 2018 election, many voters are sharing that their frustrating experience at the polls is exactly why they don’t vote regularly.

**Legislative History:**

We appreciate the efforts put forth by the Assembly to modernize New York’s elections. For several years, the Assembly has partnered with election reform advocates by passing Early Voting legislation, and we thank you for your consistent dedication to this important election reform. We came the closest yet to fully passing an Early Voting Program earlier this year -- the Governor’s FY2019 Executive Budget proposed an investment of $7 million to implement Early Voting across all New York State counties in the 12 days preceding an election. The Assembly also pushed Early Voting forward by passing legislation that supported an Early Voting program, and we appreciate Assembly Members Lavine and Buchwald for leading and sponsoring this legislation for several years (bill number A09608B). Unfortunately, the Senate excluded Early Voting altogether in 2018, and when the time came to enact the State’s budget, Early Voting and other election reforms were left out.

**Conclusion:**

Now more than ever, we must commit ourselves to do everything to protect our democracy. In the current political climate, one that is rife with threats against our fundamental values, we must ensure that our elections remain free from partisan attempts to suppress voter engagement. New York’s failure to pass simple solutions for fair and secure elections poses a threat to the civil rights that we have worked so hard to achieve. It is time to protect against the erosion of our democracy by ensuring that every constituent has access to the central avenue for civic engagement: voting.

UNH will continue expanding settlement house civic engagement capacity by offering nonpartisan voter registration training, GOTV activities, peer learning spaces, multilingual resource development, voter registration drives, and phone banking. Higher civic participation among the communities that settlement houses serve will strengthen and promote the neighborhood-based, multi-service approach to improving the lives of New Yorkers in need and the neighborhoods in which they live.

Establishing and funding an Early Voting process in New York is an important first step that can be accomplished in the FY2019-20 budget, and we look forward to working with you to achieve that goal.

Thank you for the opportunity to testify. For questions, I can be contacted at (212) 967-0322 x 313 or lcohen@unhny.org.