

UNITED NEIGHBORHOOD HOUSES

PROFILES IN PRACTICE:

# CIVIC ENGAGEMENT



FEATURING:

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QUEENS  
COMMUNITY  
HOUSE

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United Neighborhood Houses

# PROFILES IN PRACTICE: CIVIC ENGAGEMENT

Settlement houses in New York City, deeply embedded in and committed to their communities, routinely identify and share effective practices. They encourage other organizations and members of their community to develop solutions to diverse community and family needs. The civic engagement projects profiled in this document display a shared commitment and ability among settlement house communities to organize and engage in collective action to address issues of public concern.

Civic engagement describes activities that community members engage in to promote a higher quality of life in their neighborhoods by advancing better public policies. These activities are strengthened when a community-based organization elevates the voice of its program participants to influence the policies that affect their lives. By responding to the constantly changing political needs of a neighborhood and advocating for sustainable policies and investments to support their communities, settlement houses act as drivers of civic engagement.

While for over a century settlement houses across the City have incorporated civic engagement both into their mission statements and into their work, it has most often been accomplished without the specific terminology of “civic engagement,” much less the funding to carry it out. As a result, many settlement house staff have been leading civic engagement efforts in their communities for years without even realizing it.

The following profiles highlight civic engagement efforts to support the advancement of priorities unique to each community. This is the first installment in a series that will showcase a diverse portfolio of civic engagement projects, all of which were possible because settlement house staff are well-positioned to take advantage of community building opportunities.

## PROFILES IN PRACTICE SERIES

This series highlights innovative practices in settlement houses to serve as a guide for the UNH network and encourages the replication of promising models. Settlement houses are paving the way toward a more civically engaged city. To promote settlement houses' awareness of, discussion about, and action around civic engagement, this series showcases projects in which staff and community members identified a community problem, organized a response, and called upon elected officials for acknowledgement and resolution.

## ABOUT THE AUTHOR: LENA COHEN

As the Civic Engagement Associate at United Neighborhood Houses, Lena Cohen works closely with settlement houses to promote higher levels of civic engagement across New York City by leading nonpartisan voter mobilization, promoting the inclusion of all residents in the 2020 Census, expanding participatory budgeting, and advocating for modernized election laws. She supports the Policy and Advocacy department with work ranging from organizing lobby days to developing educational opportunities for the UNH network to learn more about policy, advocacy, and civic engagement.

## UNITED NEIGHBORHOOD HOUSES

United Neighborhood Houses (UNH) is the membership organization of 39 New York City settlement houses and community centers providing services that directly impact the neighborhoods in which they are located. As a membership organization rooted in the history and values of the settlement house movement, UNH supports its members through policy development, advocacy and capacity-building activities.

# QUEENS COMMUNITY HOUSE

## INTRODUCTION

Staff and community members have demonstrated civic engagement in various ways throughout the history of Queens Community House (QCH). To fulfill its mission of providing individuals and families with the tools to enrich their lives and build healthy, inclusive communities, QCH integrates social justice, leadership development, and community building into its services. Together, staff and community members cultivate strong relationships with their elected officials and leverage them to secure benefits for the community. By working to embed civic engagement into the fabric of its organizational structure, QCH has activated thousands of residents to hold government accountable for supporting their community.

## CONTEXT

This practice of holding government accountable became crucial in 2012 when multiple sites within Queens' largest public green space, Flushing Meadows Corona Park, were targeted for redevelopment. According to QCH, Flushing Meadows Corona Park is a precious resource to everyone that lives in the neighborhoods near the park, including Jackson Heights, Elmhurst, Forest Hills, Flushing, and Corona. With very little warning, QCH learned of three proposals to alter Flushing Meadows that were simultaneously descending upon the community. The three proposals to seize portions of Flushing Meadows' public park land included a new Major League Soccer stadium, the expansion of United States Tennis Association's footprint in the park, and the development of a mall on park land.

"We felt like these proposals were a full-frontal assault on the community," explained Anna Dioguardi Moyano, Director of Community Building at QCH. "Part of the settlement house model is really being embedded in the community so we know what's going on and what needs to be addressed. When the community was coming to us in such great numbers to voice their concerns about the park, the organization felt we had a responsibility not only to provide services but also respond to the big picture needs. It wasn't hard to get people passionate and organized on this topic because everyone understood how important [Flushing Meadows Corona Park] is to the community."

## THREE-PRONGED STRATEGY

To protect the park, QCH tapped into its network of civically engaged community members to launch a multiyear campaign which ultimately shut down each of the proposals threatening Flushing Meadows Corona Park. This strategy included:

**(1) recruiting volunteers to join the campaign**

**(2) partnering with other community-based organizations with shared interests**

**(3) leveraging existing relationships with elected officials to join in a unified front against the developments.**

## 1 RECRUITMENT OF VOLUNTEERS

QCH incorporated a civic engagement component into many of their program and service delivery models. English for Speakers of Other Languages (ESOL) classes in particular provided an ideal platform to educate and mobilize concerned residents: Dioguardi Moyano shared that “QCH has a very intentional model of civic engagement work within the provision of ESOL.” To leverage their robust network of over 800 ESOL participants, Dioguardi Moyano and her colleagues worked closely with the ESOL program to bring public education, advocacy workshops, and community organizing recruitment into the classroom.

This model proved successful. QCH recruited a high volume of student volunteers willing to donate their time and resources to this campaign. Lilian Castillo, an ESOL student who was inspired by these lessons, became an essential leader in the campaign. “As individuals, we don’t necessarily make a lot of progress,” Lillian shared. “But as a community united, that’s really when we can move things in the right direction. The threat to this park helped us realize what we have in common, and our campaign to stop the development allowed us to unify.”



Rebecca Sanchez de Solis (pictured left), another ESOL student who emerged as one of QCH’s strongest advocates, added that “sharing education and knowledge brought people together to recognize what’s at stake. Sometimes when you see what you’re going to lose, you know what you have to do to save it.”

## 2 COALITION IN ACTION

Since QCH did not have the capacity to take on three different developers simultaneously, they helped organize and lead the Fairness Coalition of Queens. The Fairness Coalition included about 25 groups at the table representing the diverse communities that would be negatively impacted by the proposed projects. Through these newly established partnerships, the coalition had a constantly growing network of concerned residents willing to show up for organized advocacy events. Together, coalition members mobilized thousands of residents to attend marches, press conferences, public hearings, community board meetings, and more. By increasing the visibility and uplifting the voice of the community, the Fairness Coalition helped residents realize the power of collective action.

The coalition also successfully executed a messaging strategy that played a key role in getting the most effective message out. Externally, the coalition used specific language that illustrated the severe impact losing parkland would have on this community. For example, the coalition juxtaposed this conflict with other communities in NYC and explained that this would never happen in Central Park. “The word attack was appropriate in this context because it really did feel like a specific kind of community was being targeted in a way that residents of more affluent communities would never experience,” explained Dioguardi Moyano.

Internally, the coalition encouraged higher levels of civic participation among community stakeholders. QCH recognized that communities with high voter turnout were more likely to impact government decisions. By raising awareness of the low voter turnout in the neighborhoods surrounding the park, Dioguardi Moyano added that QCH encouraged residents to register and vote in upcoming elections: “That’s where the civic engagement piece really clicked with our community – we highlighted the disparities in voter turnout among different neighborhoods in the city, and how these numbers influenced the decisions made among elected officials.”

## 3 WORKING WITH ELECTED OFFICIALS

When the campaign launched, the QCH community already had strong relationships with its elected representatives. Joel Ponder, originally an ESOL student at QCH who went on to become a Community Organizer at QCH and is now their Senior Housing Specialist, pointed out that these relationships were only possible because QCH prioritized educating community members on the power they have as constituents. Joel reflected that “throughout every transition I’ve undergone at QCH, I’ve witnessed the power of encouraging community members to engage with their elected officials. As a result, we have members that speak up and elected officials that listen to us.” Their representatives recognize QCH not only as an organization that provides services, but also one that advocates for and with its community.

Over the multiple years of the campaign, QCH built upon these relationships by organizing meetings with elected officials, testifying at public hearings, and using any opportunity for dialogue to promote more transparent processes across the three development proposals. For instance, QCH advocated for hearings about the proposals to be held during times of day that would be most convenient for residents, that translation would be available, and that the community board would publicize the locations and times of their meetings. Through their efforts, QCH and its partners transformed the development process to be inclusive of the local community and ensure that these stakeholders could contribute to the conversation.



## CONCLUSION

This story exemplifies the local victories that settlement houses are capable of achieving through civic engagement. It’s an example of QCH staff reaching beyond their daily programs and services to emphasize the power of unity as a mechanism to protect vulnerable communities. In a neighborhood with a large number of noncitizens, QCH prepares all residents to feel comfortable speaking up about what is important to them regardless of their status, and did so in this campaign. By working to spread these values throughout its organizational structure, Queens Community House educates, inspires, and empowers people to hold their elected officials accountable for protecting the best interests of local residents.

# CENTER FOR FAMILY LIFE IN SUNSET PARK

## INTRODUCTION

Center for Family Life in Sunset Park (CFL) is a settlement house that promotes positive outcomes for children, adults, and families in Sunset Park through the provision of a comprehensive range of neighborhood-based family and social services. CFL partners with the community to provide access to resources and opportunities for personal growth and development. By using service delivery as a platform for building and elevating community voices, CFL's approach is to provide tangible services that respond to the changing needs of their community. They consider the experiences of participants as valuable perspectives that influence the organization's priorities. When one of CFL's programs for older adults was set to end due to expiring funding, program participants came together to advocate for its preservation. While they ultimately did not secure the resources they were hoping for, through the process of working with each other and with staff to advocate for something they believed in, community members built their civic engagement muscle and remain connected in meaningful ways.

## CONTEXT

Over the past decade, CFL saw a rapid increase in the number of immigrant older adults seeking assistance to perform their daily activities, both inside and outside of CFL. In particular, staff heard from older participants that they had trouble signing up for public benefits because they lost track of necessary documents, faced language barriers in the community, and felt insecure traveling to and from their appointments without company, all of which contributed to their isolation. In recent years, the poverty rate for immigrant elderly in Sunset Park increased dramatically: in 2010 it ranked third highest among New York City communities with a poverty rate of 31%, up from eighteenth in 2006. Additionally, staff shared that this population experienced high levels of social isolation because of a lack of senior centers in the neighborhood. In response, CFL creatively met the need for direct services for older adults by developing a program called "Amigas" that offered personal assistants to older adults facing challenges performing their daily activities, connected program participants to one another through social gatherings, and trained participants to engage in advocacy with their local elected officials.

"I'm paralyzed in my right arm, and while I can still walk, it's hard for me to go outside; I can't even put on my own shoes," explained Josefina, age 75, a resident of Sunset Park. "I tried getting a personal assistant to help me once a week through Medicaid, but I was not eligible. It was hard knowing that I didn't qualify for anything despite the fact that I had contributed to society for so many years."

Josefina is a member of the Amigas program, which CFL piloted in 2016 through a partnership with Golden Steps Elder Care, a worker-owned cooperative that provides companionship and home care to older New Yorkers who want to remain safe and independent at home. CFL helped form and support the cooperative in 2011 to address the need for affordable senior services in Sunset Park. By funding and resourcing a community-based cooperative designed to spread CFL's work throughout hard-to-reach communities, CFL established an informative feedback loop that helped shape the organization's next steps toward meeting the need among older adult immigrants for more direct services.

Julia Jean-Francois, Co-Director of CFL, explained that the evolution of the Amigas program is linked directly to the partnership between Golden Steps and CFL: "For several years, the Golden Steps worker-owners expressed concerns that there were many low-income women in the community who did not have the resources to purchase assistant hours but needed the services all the same." CFL responded to this need by applying for and receiving two-year foundational grants to support the development of the Amigas program.

In 2018, toward the end of the grant period that supported Amigas, program participants requested support from CFL staff to raise awareness of the issues facing older adult immigrants in Sunset Park. Mercedes Rodriguez, CFL's program coordinator and a worker-owner of Golden Steps, reflected upon the civic engagement that developed in the program: "I learned we were advocates and we could make a difference in our community, but only when we brought our voices to the table and built upon our shared skills. Only then would our outreach to elected officials make a difference."

## APPROACH

In some ways, CFL was preparing Amigas participants to advocate for the program before they knew it. Many of the Amigas gatherings included presentations and opportunities for skill development. The participants met with doctors, tech developers, and other experts in various fields, which provided valuable educational opportunities that also helped the group become more comfortable in professional atmospheres. A core group of dedicated program participants requested that CFL staff organize additional opportunities to learn how to become successful advocates. Through peer learning, Amigas participants came to view CFL as a safe space to facilitate deep and personal discussions with diverse audiences. "That's why I like coming here," shared Josefina. "I get to connect with others, share in their pain, and truly see their perspective. It was so important that we all unified our voices, because with unity came power."



## CONCLUSION

While funding for the Amigas personal assistant services was ultimately not renewed for Fiscal Year 2019, both CFL staff and participants of the Amigas program remain optimistic that their advocacy to get government funding for senior services in Sunset Park will eventually be successful as long as they present a united front and engage civically. Fortunately, the infrastructure to provide the social components to the Amigas program remains intact, and CFL will continue to hold periodic community events for the Amigas participants to maintain the momentum and excitement of their collective civic engagement. The evolution of CFL's Amigas program proved that older adults with diverse backgrounds remain anchors of society and powerful advocates who, through collective action, are leading their society into a future that supports residents of all ages and backgrounds. As Josefina shared, "the more people that stand with us, the more power we have. Unification brings power, and we will continue to use our power to build opportunities for our community."

**"It's so important that we all unify our voices, because with unity came power."**

**-Josefina**

After months of developing a compelling narrative designed to convey how valuable the Amigas program was to older adult immigrants, the group invited their council member to visit the CFL Community Center. The group used visual presentations and individual storytelling to inform their council member of the urgent need for social services and community programs among older adult immigrants. The Amigas participants presented their priorities for increased access to case management services, ESOL programs, and computer literacy trainings. The final piece of their presentation stated: "Elders are an important group who bring wisdom and compassion to our community; we need to show them that they are trusted and respected!" By elevating their priorities to the attention of their local representative, the Amigas participants felt confident that their council member walked away from the meeting with a stronger understanding of the critical needs facing older adult immigrants, and the role that CFL plays in supporting and uplifting this population.

# GRAND ST. SETTLEMENT

## INTRODUCTION

As a vital service provider to residents living in Baruch Houses, Manhattan's largest public housing project, Grand St. Settlement (GSS) connects New Yorkers to opportunities that inspire, services that keep families strong, and programs that bring communities closer. True to the settlement house model, GSS employs an organizational-wide culture of listening to the concerns of staff and community members. The foundation of GSS's service model is rooted in the voice of the community, which dictates the direction of the organization's advocacy platform.

The organization's priorities took on a new dimension in 2017 when, according to GSS staff, residents of Baruch Houses became victims of the exclusion and prejudice that so often plagues the lives of public housing residents: Masaryk Towers, a Mitchell-Lama complex of 1,100 subsidized apartments stationed between neighboring New York City Housing Authority (NYCHA) developments, erected a gate around its property that would stop public housing residents from walking between the east and west sides of the neighborhood via the Rivington Walkway.

## CONTEXT

Rivington Walkway, located directly in front of GSS, is a wide stretch of pavement that the City designated as a protected pedestrian passage about 50 years ago. Adjacent and across from GSS are Samuel Gompers Houses to the west and Masaryk Towers to the east. All three neighboring entities share direct access to the Rivington Walkway. On the east side of Masaryk is Baruch Houses, Manhattan's largest public housing project. Baruch Houses occupy the easternmost portion of the Lower East Side, a community that has dealt with decades of underdevelopment and limited resources due to its extremely restricted access to the rest of the neighborhood.



The Rivington Walkway had been the primary thoroughfare that allowed Baruch residents to access the rest of the community. The walkway provided a direct route for residents living east of Masaryk Towers to quickly cross over to GSS's central location. Older adults and families with children trying to access GSS's programs depended on the Rivington Walkway as a safe passage to avoid having to walk around the perimeter of the cluster of complexes on Rivington Walkway – an alternative route that, in addition to adding up to 15 minutes of travel time, was plagued with pollution and poor lighting.

## STRATEGY

Neither GSS nor the community residents received notice from the Masaryk Towers management prior to the gate closure that took place one unexpected evening in May 2017. "People's daily routines were immediately disrupted because they couldn't get in and out - staff, residents, delivery people, everyone was affected," recalled Emily Lederman, Manager of Advocacy and Community Engagement at GSS. As the lead organizer on the advocacy campaign to reopen the walkway, Lederman witnessed the negative impact the gate closure had on the community: "Frail older adults had trouble making it to the senior center because of the added time and distance. The youth traveling home from our after-school program were forced to walk an unfamiliar, dark and roundabout way to get home each night. We were shocked, and there was no implementation strategy to work with."

**"Here's why civic engagement is important: when people are activated about a policy that negatively impacts them, they deserve to have power in the equation."**

**-Robert Cordero**

GSS Executive Director Robert Cordero prioritized this issue as an organizational-wide concern, and his first step was to offer GSS as a center for community stakeholders to organize their concerns into an advocacy platform. "Here's why civic engagement is important: when people are activated about a policy that negatively impacts them, they deserve to have power in the equation," Cordero explained. "Our primary stakeholders are participants. So our number one responsibility at that time was to create opportunities for participants and elected officials to unite and express their frustration with the closure of the Masaryk Towers gate. But in this case, there was nothing in their toolbox of legal remedies that they could do," Cordero shared. "The board of Masaryk exercised their right as directors to control this policy, and government officials did not have the power to reverse their decision."

Once it became clear that a legal strategy would not work, GSS focused solely on organizing opportunities to raise the profile of the issue. Their strategy included holding rallies outside the gate, working with local media to write stories on the gate closure, and facilitating community conversations between residents, the Masaryk board, and elected officials.

GSS had a large number of advocates within the community to call upon. "Our most active constituents were our seniors," said Ines De La Nuez, Program Director of the Grand Coalition of Seniors at GSS. "They are dedicated to reaching out and conversing with their elected officials. Since this issue most directly impacted seniors, they were the leading voices throughout this campaign."



Carmen R. Sotomayor (left), a 76 year-old participant at GSS's senior center, volunteered to speak at rallies on behalf of her community. As a resident of Baruch Houses for over 50 years, she was utterly dismayed by the Masaryk gate closure. "It's been a year since the closing and it's still having negative impacts on my life," Sotomayor shared. It now takes Sotomayor an extra 15 minutes to get to GSS. She started advocating because many of her friends were unable to visit the senior center at GSS anymore due to the longer commute: "Many of them are in wheelchairs or they use walkers and canes, so I understand. We always had that walkway, and to have it close all of a sudden was really a hardship we were unprepared for. I still come to the center because I am able to, but what happens when my arthritis gets worse? I've started to feel like a victim of discrimination in my own neighborhood." Sotomayor's message was amplified by the hundreds of residents who advocated alongside her. Eventually, their actions spoke loud enough draw a reaction from the rest of the City.

## RESOLUTION

The tipping point was achieved when GSS staff captured the attention of New York Times journalist Ginia Bellafante, who published an article on the conflict titled "Subsidized Complex Turns Itself into a Gated Community" (June 22, 2017, New York Times). Bellafante highlighted the perspectives of community members who were left dealing with the consequences of the Masaryk board's abrupt decision. Cordero emphasized how critical this piece was to their advocacy efforts: "Immediately after the Times published it, I got the call from Masaryk management saying they were willing to negotiate a limited number of IDs for residents outside of Masaryk Towers to pass through the gate. People finally started to understand that this was an unfair power play, and there was a community need that had to be addressed."

After multiple negotiations between GSS and the Masaryk management, the parties settled on an agreement to provide up to 25 IDs reserved for the frailest and most disabled senior residents of Baruch Houses. While this did not satisfy everyone impacted by the Masaryk gate, Cordero explained that he was cognizant of the time sensitivity surrounding this issue and therefore prioritized negotiating a solution. One year has passed since this agreement was reached and GSS continues to receive such a high volume of requests from community members for more IDs that it is impossible to quantify the need. GSS hopes that in the future Masaryk Towers will be willing to expand the number of available IDs.

## CONCLUSION

Residents involved in the advocacy effort to reopen the gates displayed a powerful commitment to building a stronger neighborhood, which stands as a testament to GSS's role as a conduit for positive community change and civic engagement. While this issue continues to divide parts of the community, GSS staff and local leaders will keep fighting to reverse the negative impact of the Masaryk Towers gate. As Sotomayor explained, "Civic engagement around this community problem is critical. As a senior I have to fight for my rights because people are going to threaten them. I've learned that every little grain people put together grows into a bushel. So by speaking up for my community, I'm just trying to add my little grain."

# NOTES:

**“The aim of the settlement house or neighborhood house is to bring about a new kind of community life. It is the home of friendly neighbors, and a center of information, organization, and service. It is in the community or neighborhood that people seek and fight for solutions to their concrete, daily, local, and immediate problems.”**

**– Mary Simkhovitch, founder, Greenwich House**



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**United Neighborhood Houses of New York**

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

Executive Director, Susan Stamler

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