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**Testimony of United Neighborhood Houses
Before the New York City Council Committee on Public Housing
Honorable Alicka Ampry-Samuel, Chair
At the Hearing on NYCHA Development and Privatization**

**Presented by J.T. Falcone, Policy Analyst
October 30, 2018**

Good morning Chair Ampry-Samuel and members of the City Council Committee on Public Housing. Thank you for the opportunity to testify. My name is J.T. Falcone, and I am here on behalf of United Neighborhood Houses of New York (UNH). UNH is New York's association of settlement houses. Rooted in the history and values of the settlement house movement begun over a century ago, UNH promotes strong organizational practices that keep neighborhoods resilient and thriving for all New Yorkers. Our membership includes 40 New York City settlement houses and two upstate affiliate members who collectively reach more than 765,000 people across all ages.

Settlement houses have partnered with the New York City Housing Authority (NYCHA) since it was established in the 1930s. Settlement house leaders helped to bring the national public housing movement to New York and were integral in the founding and early success of NYCHA. There is a natural complement between the settlement house model and that of public housing. Today, 23 of our members operate out of 125 public housing sites, offering services to residents of all ages, running childcare programs, Cornerstones, and senior centers.

We are here to call on the City Council to work with the Administration to convene a joint task force comprised of a cross-section of stakeholders in order to establish a clear process that governs the rollout of privatization and development at NYCHA-owned properties.

As NYCHA has moved forward with Permanent Affordability Commitment Together (PACT), the local implementation of the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development's (HUD) Rental Assistance Demonstration (RAD), they have done so with limited input from outside stakeholders. Though NYCHA leans on settlement houses and community-based organizations (CBOs) informally to support their work by communicating with residents, convening meetings, and helping to manage the transition of services, there is no formal opportunity for settlement houses and CBOs to share ideas on how to improve the

process and proactively contribute. All too often, our members are only asked for feedback once the plan to convert a development has been cemented and the developers chosen.

Settlement houses and CBOs have a unique perspective to contribute, and they share a mutual trust with the communities they serve. Many of our members have been operating for decades in the same sites. They have served the older adults in their centers through their entire lives. Based on these long histories working with and serving communities, they often hear stories or receive feedback that elected officials or representatives from NYCHA may not. They are credible messengers who are able to manage challenges that may arise from confusion or a lack of transparency – both real and perceived – and NYCHA has leveraged that credibility to mitigate residents’ fear of privatization.

Without a formal process to follow, NYCHA has made unilateral decisions on the rollout of RAD and infill across the City. From RAD conversions which are permanent transfers, to infills with 99-year leases for private contractors developing on NYCHA-owned land, it is absolutely necessary that the City take the time to get this right the first time. The only way to ensure this happens is to open up the conversations and ensure that a wide variety of stakeholders have an opportunity to contribute. **Too many of these plans are made behind closed doors and without input from community stakeholders. We must shine daylight on these conversations in order to ensure NYCHA is held accountable and these major decisions reflect the needs of the communities they serve.**

Settlement houses and CBOs should be brought in to the planning process. With decades of experience serving communities, their perspectives will be integral to getting the transition right. They need a chance to understand the plan, ask questions, and provide feedback. Especially in instances where NYCHA plans to use them as “community liaisons” and messengers, they must be given an opportunity to contribute.

We call on the City Council to work with the Administration to convene a joint task force comprised of a cross-section of NYCHA leadership, agency representatives, elected officials, high-level representatives from the administration, and community stakeholders like settlement house staff and residents. This task force would be an opportunity for NYCHA to receive direct feedback about the community and operational impact of privatization in NYCHA, and for them to share updates on the rollout *NextGeneration*. **The group would be tasked with establishing protocol for the rollout of RAD and infill projects that emphasizes transparency, equity, and partnership.**

I’d like to point to two specific examples of UNH members who have direct experience with the privatization and development of NYCHA sites: Ocean Bay Community Development Corporation (OBCDC) and Stanley M. Isaacs Neighborhood Center (Isaacs Center).

- OBCDC has been a critical resource to NYCHA and the developers involved in the first NYCHA RAD conversion of 1,400 units at Ocean Bay (Bayside) in Far Rockaway. Through the process, they have advocated for the needs of residents and were in the unenviable position of navigating completely uncharted territory. Now, after the conversion, they have begun to see

areas where RAD has worked well, but have also seen areas where residents and the providers that serve them have run into issues. For instance, residents of recently-converted RAD units have been unable to access job search and placement services managed by NYCHA due to arcane rules.

- In upper Manhattan, Isaacs Center operates out of the Stanley M. Isaacs Houses, which is the proposed site for Holmes Tower, one of NYCHA's first infill projects. The Isaacs Center has helped to facilitate multiple public meetings for community members. They have worked to manage the expectations of and communicate directly with residents throughout the rollout. NYCHA has relied on the Isaacs Center to act as a credible messenger for them and serve as a liaison for the community, speaking on behalf of particularly vulnerable residents who may not have otherwise had advocates at the table.

UNH is eager to work with the City Council and NYCHA to preserve and improve services for public housing residents while working to raise critically-needed funds in order to improve residents' quality of life and provide new affordable housing. Settlement houses can play an integral role in accomplishing that goal, but they are only able to if they are invited to the table as partners.

I would be happy to answer any questions at this time and can also be reached at jfalcone@unhny.org for more information.