

Testimony of University Settlement
before the New York City Council

FY24 Preliminary Budget Hearing

Committee on Youth Services, Chair Althea Stevens

Submitted by Angel Sacarello,
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Thank you to Chair Stevens and the members of the committee. My name is Angel Sacarello, and I am the Senior Program Director for the Cornerstone Division at University Settlement. University Settlement runs three Cornerstones: Campos Plaza in Manhattan and Ingersoll and Atlantic Terminal in Brooklyn.

I'm calling on the City Council to fully invest in youth programs, including capital investment in our community centers. We currently are unable to meet the need of our participants with the current contracts, and a budget cut would be unsustainable.

Every year, 2000 neighbors of all ages visit us at our three Cornerstones for food, arts, sports, and socialization. Older adults gather to learn to knit; youth play basketball and make art. Neighbors of all ages attend our Thanksgiving dinners and holiday celebrations. We are, as "community center" name indicates, central to our neighborhood.

But due to years of divestment and mismanagement, our Cornerstones are in dire need of true capital investment. These city-run buildings consistently have problems with roof leaks, plumbing, and rodents, leading to serious health and safety concerns for our staff and participants.

At Campos Plaza in February, we had yet another sewage flood that was so bad, it flowed into the street. Our staff spent several days cleaning up the mess, with no support from NYCHA or DYCD. In my 8+ years at the center, we've had over 40 sewage floods; one year, we had 17—more than one per month. To be clear, these sewage floods are not just a burst water pipe; they are the contents of your toilet inundating a child's classroom. These sewage floods contaminate the water, infect and damage flooring, and stay in the floor.

This state of unacceptable disrepair is the norm for Cornerstone buildings. Every Cornerstone director can describe significant facility issues that aren't being addressed. It is common for sites to not have working stoves or kitchens and roof leaks. The pest abatement is laughable; there are rats dropping from ceilings, water bugs, and roaches.

Funding for youth programming

Overall, our youth programming needs more support. We do not have enough money to provide the programming that is asked of us. There is not enough money to sustain enrichment programs, so if a CBO wants to offer arts and sports, we need to develop our own relationships. The contracts don't provide enough money to pay for teaching artists & equipment, leading directors to choose between ordering basketballs or hiring basketball coaches.

City agencies and the mayor depend on CBOs to implement their visions without giving us the support we need to do so. For example, recently, in response to the Mayor's statement about gun-related violence in our neighborhoods, DYCD mandated that we extend our programming to 11 pm to provide a safe space for our neighbors to gather. While we appreciate the need, we were given almost no notice and absolutely no extra money to pay for staff now expected to work extra hours.

Ensuring Success for Summer Rising

To ensure Summer Rising 2023 to be successful for all parties, but especially for children and families who deserve summer opportunities that fulfill their needs, the city must consider the following:

CBOs must have control over participant registration, especially families who need additional digital and language support to apply for programming. Allowing CBOs to maintain their own rosters means 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 cannot attend so the slot does not go to waste.

We should also allow families and their youth to choose whether to attend summer school, camp or both, and allow CBOs the chance to record how many young people choose which service.

In addition, Summer Rising 2023 can only be set up for success if there is increased and coordinated support for students with disabilities to make sure CBOs have the necessary resources to properly serve these young people. Paraprofessional support should be provided to CBOs for participants if they are assigned to our programs even if they do not have a 12-month IEP.

We also recommend that the day-to-day schedules are balanced and allow students to have both an academic experience and fully enjoy the traditional summer camp experience that children deserve and many families seek. If academics are happening in the morning portion, we recommend less emphasis on academics from DYCD during the afternoon hours.

Finally, bussing should be provided until at least 5 p.m. so that all participants can participate in the afternoon enrichment portion. We appreciate that families are offered a rideshare for students that stay until 6 p.m., an authorized adult (guardian/family) must be available to use the service, as children cannot be accompanied by a paraprofessional or any other staff



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member. This requirement does not reflect the realities of many families that need the service; these families often do not have other support to step in as an “authorized adult” and cannot be there to take advantage of this option.

Funding the 6.5% COLA & Supporting the Prevailing Wage Bill

Finally, we urge the city to support a Prevailing Wage Schedule for Human Services Workers through the passing of Introduction 510 (Stevens); and the 6.5% COLA for our workers. The gross underpayment of our youth services staff leads to high staff turnover. Our experienced staff are leaving for higher paying jobs. We often can only hire first-time workers, who need additional training and leave when they find higher paying jobs. This is obviously bad for our participants, and it is unacceptable that we cannot pay our staff a living wage based off our city contracts.

Thank you for your time, and I would be happy to answer any questions at asacarello@universitysettlement.org.