Testimony of University Settlement

Before the New York City Council

FY 2022 Executive Budget Hearing: Committee on Finance

Council Member Justin Brannan, Chair

Wednesday, May 25, 2022 at 10 A.M.

Presented by Bryan Fotino,
Case Manager for Project Home
 at University Settlement

Good afternoon, and thank you Chair Justin Brannan, and members of the New York City Council Committee on Finance.

My name is Bryan Fotino and I have worked in the human services sector for two years. I currently work as a Case Manager at University Settlement, an organization that has been serving NYC families for over 135 years. Across 30 locations in Brooklyn and Manhattan, University Settlement provides early childhood education, mental health and wellness, benefits assistance and eviction prevention, adult literacy and education, healthy aging, community and recreation centers, performing and visual arts, and youth development services.

We support the #JustPay Campaign and a 5.4% COLA for human services workers, so sector employees under contract with New York City and State can be paid fair wages for their labor.

Essential human services sector workers earn one of the lowest wages in New York’s economy due to the chronic underfunding from New York City government contracts. Like other organizations, University Settlement’s work is funded by a significant amount of government contracts. While my organization fundraises and uses private philanthropy to try to raise wages, we need government, which is the main driver of our sector’s wages, to do their fair share.

Human services workers generally make about $20,000 a year less than a public sector worker with a comparable education. As someone starting out in my career, I chose a lower-paying job that helps tenants facing eviction because I believe in working to make a positive material difference in people’s lives. The COVID-19 pandemic underscores the housing and economic precarity that so many of my neighbors live in every day. The support that I, along with my colleagues, provide keeps New Yorkers in their homes.

I have many friends who would have gone into social service work like I have, but they couldn’t afford to do so. For those who do enter the sector, low wages set in City contracts lead workers understandably to leave the sector for higher pay. In my time at University Settlement, I have seen qualified, caring colleagues leave. This turnover removes experience and knowledge from the sector. It can also undermine the trust that social service workers build with their clients, and trust is essential when you are working on eviction and housing issues.

We know that the need has increased across the city for support from programs like ours. Facing our own increased costs of living, human service workers cannot continue to sacrifice their ability to pay for rent, food, and bills. According to The New School’s Center for New York City Affairs Report, “[a]nnual pay in 2019 in the New York City core social assistance sector averaged only $34,000, making it the fifth-lowest-paid … sector in the city’s economy.”[[1]](#footnote-1) Some of us sector workers still need to work multiple jobs to cover minimal living expenses. Though I am dedicated to my clients and work, I do not know how long I will be able to stay in this sector because my wages may not match the rising costs of living.

The City must acknowledge the work of human services workers like me. We are asking the City adapt these core reforms that the #JustPay Campaign is fighting for.

* Establish, fund, and enforce an automatic annual cost-of-living adjustment (COLA) on all human services contracts.
* Set a living wage floor of no less than $21 an hour for all City and State funded human services workers.
* Create, fund, and incorporate a comprehensive wage and benefit schedule for government contracted human services workers comparable to the salaries made by City and State employees in the same field.

Thank you again for providing me with this opportunity to testify, and for your partnership on all the issues impacting our sector.

1. Parrot, James A. and L.K. Moe. The Case for Ending Poverty Wages for New York City's Human Services Workers, The New School Center for New York City Affairs, March 2022, 14, https://www.centernyc.org/reports-briefs/the-case-for-ending-poverty-wages-for-new-york-citys-human-services-workers [↑](#footnote-ref-1)