Testimony of University Settlement     
before the New York City Council   
   
 FY24 Executive Budget Hearing

 Committee on Finance, Chair Justin Brannan

Submitted by Rachel Ramos,  
Director of Special Needs, Early Childhood,   
University Settlement  
    
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Chair Brannan and Council Members, thank you for the opportunity to testify.

My name is Rachel Ramos, and I am the Special Needs Director of the Early Childhood Division at University Settlement's Early Childhood Program.

Since 1886, University Settlement has been providing holistic social services to New York families. Currently, we have over 30 program locations across Lower Manhattan and Brooklyn, where we provide programs including early childhood education, youth afterschool, mental health services for all ages, tenant support, and older adults.

I stand before you today to advocate for JustPay and the need for a 6.5% COLA for human services workers. By supporting the workforce and, JustPay can reverse the staff turnover rate and has the potential to transform the lives of families and children with special needs in our great city.

As the Special Needs Director, I have witnessed firsthand the challenges that families face when seeking services for their children with special needs. Navigating the complex web of paperwork, appointments, and financial obligations can be overwhelming, exacerbating the already significant stress that these families endure. These families rely on staff like ours to help them through the special education system and receive the services their children need to thrive.

Our early childhood educators are the backbone of our programs, providing essential care, guidance, and support to children with special needs during their formative years. However, the current state of compensation for these educators is unjust and unsustainable. Many talented individuals are forced to leave this noble profession due to inadequate wages, making it increasingly difficult to attract and retain qualified staff. This ongoing staffing crisis directly impacts the quality of care we can offer our children and hinders their progress and development.

JustPay offers an opportunity to address this issue by ensuring that early childhood staff receive fair and competitive compensation for their invaluable work. A 6.5 % COLA will improve the quality of life for these educators. When teachers feel supported and valued, they are more likely to stay in their positions, creating a stable and nurturing environment for the children in their care. Continuity and consistency in the classroom are crucial for the well-being and development of children, especially those with special needs. Families can have peace of mind, knowing that their children are in the hands of dedicated professionals who are valued and respected for their contributions. By supporting early childhood staff through the JustPay campaign, we ultimately enhance the support available to children.

The lack of a COLA in the Mayor’s Executive Budget means this budget does not fully represent a commitment to essential services and “working New Yorkers.”

Human services workers keep our communities safe and functioning, and in return, the City gives them poverty wages that do not account for inflation. As a result, many human services workers need the same programs they provide, including SNAP and housing shelters. Our organization struggles to attract and retain workers - and communities suffer when we cannot fully staff programs. NYC would not be the same without human services workers, and it’s time for their wages to reflect their essential role.

The City needs to start caring for the people who care for New York City.  Please fund a full 6.5% cost-of-living adjustment (COLA) at an estimated $200 million in the final budget!

I urge each member of the City Council to support a 6.5% COLA for human services workers, which will send a powerful message: that our city values those who ensure the well-being of our children with special needs and their families. JustPay has the power to transform lives, promote inclusivity, and foster a more compassionate and equitable society

Thank you for your time and consideration.