Testimony of University Settlement
before the New York City Council

 FY24 Executive Budget Hearing

 Committee on Finance, Chair Justin Brannan

Submitted by Pete Graves,
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Chair Brannan and Council Members, thank you for the opportunity to testify.

My name is Pete Graves, and I am a human services worker here in New York City working at University Settlement, where I am the Education Supervisor of the Adult Literacy program.

As a human services worker, I, along with my colleagues, provide essential services in our community and support a growing immigrant population as they look to better their own lives and the lives of their families here in New York City. Our adult literacy program helps people find jobs, better their English language skills, connect to services and programs all over the city, and much more.

Even though human services providers help connect New Yorkers to lifesaving resources, employees at human services agencies receive low wages that barely cover the cost of living. Our work is necessary to New York City’s economy and safety, and we deserve to be paid fairly under City contracts. A 6.5% Cost of Living Adjustment would raise the wages of City-contracted human services workers to better align with inflation and allow us to better support ourselves as we support New Yorkers in your districts.

Because of low wages, it is difficult for community-based organizations to attract and retain qualified employees. Many potential employees refuse offers, and people who do accept offers are often forced to look for a new job outside of our organization shortly after they start because they cannot afford to provide for themselves and their families with wages as they stand today. Considering the New York City Rent Guidelines Boardhas tentatively approved a 7% rent hike for two-year leases, it’s no real surprise that people need to look for work that pays better. Some employees, because they are driven by our mission, will take on second jobs just to try to stay with us, which they should not have to do. But in the end, inevitably, against rising costs and rents, many of those employees will seek employment elsewhere out of necessity. Along with those employees goes a wealth of experience and institutional knowledge. It’s demoralizing to see good, qualified people leave again and again because they simply cannot afford to stay. It’s not good for employees, and it’s certainly not good for the communities we serve. A COLA is vital to retaining these employees so that we can serve our communities as best as we possibly can.

Additionally, I am urging the City Council to reject the Mayor’s Executive Budget calls for a 65% cut to DYCD-funded adult literacy programs – from $26.2 million in funding in FY23 to $9.1 million in FY24. This cut would bring DYCD’s adult literacy funding to its lowest level since 2016. With more than 2.2 million New Yorkers in need of adult basic education, ESOL, or high school equivalency classes, and with over 60,000 largely non-English speaking asylum seekers and refugees having arrived in New York since last spring, this cut would be unconscionable.

DYCD cuts directly reduce our program’s ability to serve our students. Currently, DYCD funds four of our ESOL classes, which amounted to over 110 beginning and low beginning ESOL students this past year. Thanks to this funding, we have been able to further invest in our teacher support through new staff positions and fund substitute teacher positions, as well as make technology and equipment upgrades for classrooms. Having substitute teachers on call means that we do not need to shift staff from their other important duties to cover for other teachers who are absent. Substitute teachers this year have covered over 160 hours in the classroom this year so far.

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!

Thank you for your time.