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Testimony of University Settlement  
before the New York City Council  
Oversight Hearing: The Mayor's November Plan  
Committee on Finance, Chair Justin Brannan

Submitted by Veronica Wong,  
Advocacy Director, University Settlement

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Chair Brannan and members of the committee, thank you for the opportunity to testify. My name is Veronica Wong, and I'm the Advocacy Director at University Settlement.

Every year, University Settlement partners with 40,000 New Yorkers in Lower Manhattan and Brooklyn through programming for all ages, serving our very youngest through early childhood programs, after school programs; our families through tenant eviction prevention programs and community centers; and our oldest through older adults centers. We also provide mental health support for all ages.

The Mayor's proposed cuts will undermine the ability of community-based organizations like University Settlement to continue providing high-quality programs and services to hundreds of thousands of New Yorkers every day.

We would like to address two of the administration's main talking points regarding these cuts.

First, the administration argues that it can cut senior centers, early childhood, after school and preventive service because of lower enrollment. This doesn't take into account the massive societal comeback from the pandemic that we are still experiencing. Using lower than normal enrollment in the last two years is using a faulty benchmark; the human services sector is not the only sector in NYC that has yet to rebound to pre-pandemic numbers, and our sector faces unique challenges as we seek to be responsive to the communities we serve.

Many of our participants, such as our older adults, continue to be hesitant to participate in in-person activities for health and safety reasons. The communities and families we serve, many of whom are immigrant, working class New Yorkers and New Yorkers of color, have faced rapid inflation, high housing costs, linguistic and bureaucratic barriers, and other potential environmental changes or stressors. As a settlement house with deep roots in our neighborhoods, we are uniquely situated to do the outreach and connect with families who need our essential services, but this type of outreach takes time and commitment.

Second, the administration has blamed programmatic and service cuts in our sector on the incoming asylum seekers. We reject this framework. Our services and programs should not be pitted against these needs. As New Yorkers, we refuse to scapegoat our newest neighbors.

In fact, we know that strengthening our sector strengthens the ability of the city to meet this moment. Instead, we have seen years of divestment from our sector and disrespect for our workers, including a lack of any COLA for our staff, many of whom qualify for the very services they provide due to their low, city-contracted wages. Shame on the City for now threatening these cuts to programs and their jobs.

Nonprofits like ours already operate our high-quality programs on lean budgets, and we cannot absorb a 15% cut in our contracts without reducing our services. For University Settlement, this means thousands of New Yorkers will no longer be able to access our programs, New Yorkers who depend on us so they can go to work, feed themselves and their families, and receive mental health support.

For just our programs, a 15% cut means at minimum:

- Almost 500 young people will no longer be able to receive after school services, impacting hundreds of working families
- Almost 400 young people will no longer be able to receive summer camp services, impacting hundreds of working families
- Almost 9,500 homebound meals per year will no longer be served for older New Yorkers and fewer seniors in senior centers

Additionally, these cuts threaten community schools, which engage and support students and their families by prioritizing access to social supports, mental healthcare, and the arts. They could potentially lead to a reduction of upwards of 10,000 early childhood slots in the city, something that NYC families cannot afford to lose in a city where childcare is increasingly unaffordable to all but the very wealthiest. While the administration states that there is under enrollment of early childhood slots, we know that there is a mismatch: what is currently available often does not match what type of slots families need and where families need childcare, such as infant care and full-year and true full day care for working families. And we also know that families are not always aware of the childcare options that are available to them, and that the DOE has full control over the enrollment process, which undercuts community-based early childhood programs from directly enrolling families. We urge the administration to conduct outreach and work with CBOs to ensure all families can access childcare instead of eliminating these slots altogether.

This is not the time to undercut the working New Yorkers and the community-based organizations that help our city thrive. This is the time to invest in our young people and children, to show that NYC cares for our elders and most vulnerable, and to strengthen our families and our neighborhoods.

University Settlement joins over 225 organizations in the #WHY15 campaign to ask for transparency and inclusion in the City’s budget. We call on the City to partner with the nonprofit sector and work toward creative solutions - not



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hinder us further. The City cannot withstand a 15% cut to its budget, and any additional cuts to the nonprofit sector will only undermine the public safety, health, and cleanliness of New York City.

I am happy to answer questions. You can reach me at:  
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