

184 ELDRIDGE STREET NEW YORK NY 10002 212–453–4555 UNIVERSITYSETTLEMENT.ORG Testimony of University Settlement before the New York City Council

Preliminary Budget Hearing

Committee on Parks and Recreation

Submitted by Veronica Wong Advocacy Director, University Settlement

March 21, 2024

My name is Veronica Wong, and I am the Advocacy Director for University Settlement. Thank you to the City Council Committee on Parks Chair Shekar Krishnan for holding this hearing.

We are testifying in support of the Play Fair for Parks Coalition, which includes over 400 organizations from across the five boroughs.

As a longtime neighbor to Sara D. Roosevelt Park, University Settlement would like to draw particular attention to the resources allocated to smaller parks in the city. Smaller neighborhood parks are essential to the fabric of NYC neighborhoods. They are havens of cooler, green space in the heat of the summer, places to gather for friends and families, and vital play spaces for children. These parks deserve as much attention as the larger NYC parks like Central Park or Prospect Park.

Over the past year, we've been excited to see that more and more people are returning to Sara D. Roosevelt Park, which had seen attendance drop during and immediately after the pandemic. Unfortunately, neighbors still hesitate to return to the park due to concerns about safety, leading to an uneven park recovery. But our neighbors want to use the park.

Last year, University Settlement was able to offer activities in SDR Park on Saturdays in July and August. Our ROAR festival celebrated the vibrancy of our neighborhood and offered resources, performances, and activities for people of all ages. The festival brought out hundreds of people. We need to continue activating public spaces, so more people and families feel comfortable in the park. We need a place for people to gather and receive resources, and the long-awaited return of the Stanton Parkhouse to the community provides a perfect opportunity to create that space.

University Settlement is and has been deeply invested in Sara D. Roosevelt Park. Our early childhood programs bring our youngest New Yorkers there to play on the playground whenever they can; our staff and older adults walk through the park to get to our programming. We ask that the Parks department recognize this as an opportunity to invest in



184 ELDRIDGE STREET NEW YORK NY 10002 212–453–4555 UNIVERSITYSETTLEMENT.ORG Sara D. Roosevelt Park and to partner with community members and organizations to create a safe, inviting park that is the heart of our neighborhood.

Across our city, New Yorkers deserve a fully funded, safe, clean, green and resilient parks system. The budget cuts to NYC Parks this year and the proposed budget for next fiscal year jeopardize the very heart of our communities. These cuts will make it even more difficult for the already understaffed, under-resourced Parks Department to carry out the basic work needed to ensure parks are equitable and accessible for all New Yorkers.

Beyond parks, these cuts will hinder the agency's ability to manage its 15 miles of beaches, 51 recreation centers, 65 pools, 9,900 acres of natural areas, 2,300 athletic courts, 800 ballfields, and 1,000 playgrounds. They will inequitably impact the well-being and quality of life of countless individuals and families. Parks are an invaluable resource that foster physical and mental health, provide spaces for social interaction, and mitigate the climate crisis.

NYC Parks is chronically underfunded and understaffed: there are not nearly enough maintenance workers and PEP officers to keep our parks clean and safe. Parks are critical infrastructure for public health and safety and are drivers of social equity. They should be funded as such. Mayor Adams repeatedly committed to an investment of 1% of the city budget for NYC Parks, but hasn't yet followed through. We urge the City Council to continue to fight on behalf of funding for NYC Parks.

Thank you for your time. You can reach me at <u>awong@universitysettlement.org</u> if you have further questions.