



HENRY STREET SETTLEMENT

**COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT,
PUBLIC POLICY, and ADVOCACY
FINDINGS from FOCUS GROUPS
and COMMUNITY TOWN HALL**

MARCH 2016

INTRODUCTION

Community engagement, listening and responding are defining characteristics of the settlement house model, and ones that have been embraced by Henry Street Settlement for 123 years. Building on that legacy, in 2015 our policy team conducted a series of focus groups with clients and staff — from our education and employment, health and wellness, transitional housing, and arts programs — to elicit emerging needs and concerns. The culminating event — the 2015 Town Hall held on October 25 was attended by a standing-room-only crowd of more than 300 community members, clients, elected officials and staff.

Based on information gathered at the Settlement's 2014 Town Hall meeting, and in the numerous focus groups that preceded it, we are proud to share the following new initiatives:

- The establishment of a Community Advisory Board (CAB), comprised of local residents and clients, to create a forum for continuous dialogue with clients, local residents and the broader community.
- The creation of an aftercare program to help families moving from our homeless shelters to permanent housing successfully transition to their new community to address the problem of recidivism among shelter residents. *Henry Street led an advocacy campaign — in collaboration with five other nonprofits — in support of a citywide initiative to enhance resources for the more*

than 11,000 families in NYC's shelters. In the spring of 2015, the City Council allocated \$1 million to this new program — including \$235,000 for Henry Street's aftercare project.

- The expansion of nursing services for seniors in our Naturally Occurring Retirement Community (NORC). *Henry Street testified at City Council hearings and met with elected officials to appeal for additional funding for vulnerable seniors, and reached out to NORCs across NYC to build the case for more resources. The City Council then allocated over \$15,000 to nursing services at Henry Street, and additional funds to support these services in other NORCs.*



This executive summary presents key findings in 2015 for five core topics — EDUCATION, JOBS, HOUSING, PUBLIC SAFETY, SENIOR CONCERNS, and GENTRIFICATION — which will allow us to refine our advocacy agenda to further align our programs and priorities with the community's most pressing needs. The full report is available at www.henrystreet.org/about/advocacy.

EDUCATION

“You have to figure out on your own if your child has special needs. I felt like everything was on me.” – TOWN HALL PARTICIPANT

Henry Street spoke to dozens of high school students; students who didn't complete high school; and parents, including those with special needs children. Their feedback is summarized below:

- Parents need help identifying the best schools for their children and accessing gifted and talented programs, charter schools and enrichment programs.
- Parents need help navigating special education services, and youth, adults and non-traditional students need help applying to college.
- Additional mental health services and/or social workers are needed in public schools.
- Additional enrichment (tutoring, arts, mentoring, and foreign language instruction) is needed during and after school.
- Parents felt that public schools do not sufficiently reflect the interests and needs of their family. Communication is weak between teachers and students, between principals and teachers, and between school administrators and parents.
- Suggestions included a greater emphasis on community engagement by creating community advisory boards and harnessing the power of young people (current students and alumni) to help failing schools by providing tutoring and giving back in other ways.

JOBS

“How do you get jobs when you don't have any experience?” – TOWN HALL PARTICIPANT

Henry Street discussed employment with community members, including 17- to 24-year olds in our youth employment programs; single mothers in our Parent Center and homeless shelters; and long-term unemployed New Yorkers struggling to re-enter the workforce. Their feedback is summarized below:

- Jobseekers feel discriminated against because of age, income level, race or family size.
- The job search process is often discouraging due to the prevalence of group interviews and online applications; increasing competition; and more stringent demand for experience and credentials — even for entry-level jobs.
- Employers should increase scheduling flexibility, particularly for working single parents and for adults who are caretakers of family members. Unpredictable and non-traditional hours of entry level jobs make finding childcare difficult.
- Minimum wage — and starting wages — are insufficient to support NYC's cost of living.
- Internship and apprenticeship opportunities should include programs for adults (24+), provide stipends, and lead to a job.
- Add networking skills to job training programs, because getting a job is often “all about who you know.”
- Because education is crucial to career success, people need access to affordable post-secondary options and jobs that allow them to balance school and work.
- Offer computer training, beyond basics like Microsoft Word and Excel.

HOUSING

“Where do you expect people who live in the projects to go?” – TOWN HALL PARTICIPANT

The Lower East Side ranks third highest in NYC for population density, and has the fourth highest concentration of NYCHA housing. The city’s homeless population is also at an all-time high. Feedback from community members, including those living in NYCHA housing and homeless shelters, is below:

- There is a widespread fear of being “priced out” of the community and a sense that new housing developments are targeted primarily to wealthy newcomers.
- The average job in NYC does not support rapidly rising rents, particularly for those raising children.
- “Affordable housing” is not truly affordable; public housing is not accessible; and there is a scarcity of housing for low-income people.
- Increase support and programs for homeless single parents (childcare, education, employment, housing services), and for domestic violence survivors.
- The City’s LINC (Living in Communities) subsidy is hindered by landlords’ reluctance to accept subsidies and by the fiercely competitive housing market.
- Increase supportive housing for adults with cognitive and developmental disabilities and for those who are raising disabled children.
- NYCHA residents report frequent delays to repair and maintenance requests, rodent infestations, crime and the poor condition of developments.

PUBLIC SAFETY

“It was better when the cops knew everyone by name.” – TOWN HALL PARTICIPANT

Public safety is a growing concern among Lower East Side residents — from youth and parents to seniors and police officers. Gun violence and police-community relations were addressed.

- Many residents hear gunshots and do not feel safe leaving their apartments after sunset.
- More kids are finding ways to access guns and other weapons. Fights and petty arguments are more quickly turning into shootouts. There is a sense that gun violence is escalating far beyond drug-related incidents, and people seem less inhibited with guns than they used to be.
- The neighborhood is lacking in police presence. Policing should be more community-based so officers assigned to a particular community can build relationships with residents. A police representative said these efforts are underway.
- Residents are divided on Stop-and Frisk, an NYPD crime-prevention strategy to target suspicious people and behaviors, which was banned in 2013. Some feel that crime has worsened since its repeal; others view the policy as discriminatory.
- Many parents are concerned that young people no longer trust the police, and feel unsure about how to prepare their children for interactions with law enforcement.
- Media coverage of police brutality is fueling negative perceptions of the police, causing many young people to fear police officers who are not known and trusted in their

community. The police officers at the Town Hall said they are working to change this perception.

- Residents and law enforcement agreed that they must work together to improve police-community relations. The District Attorney’s office and NYPD should do more to build rapport — such as hosting more community meetings and participating in neighborhood events. The DA and NYPD representatives urged residents to get involved with existing partnerships between law enforcement and community groups.
- Police-community relations could be improved in more informal ways through sports, conversation, and mentorship.

SENIORS

“Don’t close your doors! Senior services feel like a lifesaver in this community.”

– TOWN HALL PARTICIPANT

Seniors echoed many of the concerns of their fellow community members — particularly with respect to gentrification and public safety. Also discussed were affordability, quality of life, access to the arts, and access to medical care.

- Accessing healthy, affordable food is difficult. The affordable neighborhood supermarket closed, and farmer’s markets are too expensive. Suggestions included markets/produce vendors on NYCHA campuses and the expansion of the Essex Market to other locations.
- Basic necessities — such as drug stores and barber shops— are becoming too costly. New businesses are not accessible to seniors, many of whom must travel to other neighborhoods to do their shopping.
- Crime — gun violence, drug dealing and theft — is prevalent in certain areas, and residents hope for a stronger police presence to address this issue.
- Pedestrian safety should be improved by repairing the many sidewalks in poor condition, increasing street lighting and lengthening traffic signals.
- Additional trash cans are needed, there are many issues with dog waste and rats, and street cleaning could be improved.
- While some seniors are happy with their NYCHA apartments, many said the maintenance of NYCHA buildings and apartments continues to worsen — leaving many with outstanding requests for repairs.
- Increase the diversity of artistic and cultural activities and add more dance and music classes, a wider range of visual arts classes with higher quality supplies, more family-friendly matinee and free performances, and more organized cultural trips. *Henry Street is working to ensure that all seniors are fully aware of the array of affordable, high quality options at the Abrons Arts Center.*
- Many expressed difficulty finding medical providers that will accept their insurance.
- Seniors said that while there are great options for case management in the neighborhood, they need help finding the right services and providers for their specific needs. Many seniors want additional services, like legal assistance and computer training.
- There is a need for medical and social services, and access to the arts for Spanish and Chinese speaking seniors.

GENTRIFICATION

“It’s pushing people out who can no longer afford to live here.”

– TOWN HALL PARTICIPANT

Lower East Side residents of all ages are very concerned about the gentrification of the neighborhood. A summary of their feedback regarding cost of living and local development concerns is below.

- Gentrification is pushing many lower-income residents out of their homes; longtime families fear they will soon lose their homes and that kids who grew up in the neighborhood will not be able to stay because of the lack of affordable housing and long waitlists for NYCHA apartments.
- The cost of living on the LES is becoming particularly difficult for seniors and single parents
- Resources for the long-term LES community are shrinking. Services and businesses that residents depend on are being displaced by new bars, expensive restaurants and luxury high rises.
- Keep arts programming and performances affordable and add more family-friendly performances, arts scholarships, and discounted shows and exhibits.
- Bolster failing neighborhood schools. All schools must be equitable in terms of resources, not just the ones serving higher-income students.

- Increase youth programs and services — including affordable childcare, afterschool, college preparation, and arts programs. *Henry Street is a major provider of these programs, and will ensure that more youth in our community access the full array of services.*
- Increase the investment in parks and public spaces for local youth.
- Add more bus routes to increase transportation options, especially for seniors.
- Neighborhood newcomers can lessen the negative impact of gentrification by demonstrating that they care about local youth and families, and by contributing to the community through volunteerism, philanthropy and advocacy.
- Residents want to be connected to job opportunities created by Essex Crossing. *Henry Street Settlement — through our partnership with the Lower East Side Employment Network — will be involved in the hiring process for these businesses and will engage clients and community members in this process.*
- Residents would like more opportunities to talk to developers about their plans with respect to affordable housing and are concerned that the “affordable” housing at Essex Crossing will remain out of reach for low-income residents.
- Developers and Essex Crossing representatives should attend future Town Halls. *Henry Street will take the lead in trying to make this happen.*

WHAT’S NEXT?

Henry Street Settlement will use these findings to shape a community-driven policy and advocacy agenda and to inform our future program offerings. We look forward to continuing the conversation and moving forward in the following areas:

Legislative: Henry Street will consider engaging in citywide and statewide legislative and policy campaigns (minimum wage, e.g.) that would benefit many LES residents.

Budgetary: Henry Street will consider budgetary advocacy as a means to address community-wide issues and impact city and state policy. It was budgetary advocacy that allowed us to create a pilot aftercare program for our shelter residents and to increase nursing services for our NORC residents. In the coming year, we will continue to pursue policy change and innovation by engaging with city and state budget leaders.

Administrative: Henry Street Settlement will consider working with NYC and NYS agencies to create administrative and policy changes that support our participants and our community. For instance, we will continue to work with the NYC Department of Education to ensure that parents in our district can navigate the choice and special education systems effectively. In addition, Henry Street will continue to provide policy recommendations and feedback to city and state government agencies.

Programs: Henry Street will consider opportunities to both enhance existing programs and create new ones in response to community feedback. For instance, we launched an aftercare program for our shelter residents, which we will continue in the years ahead. We also deepened our program for parents with special needs children and will advocate to continue our school choice navigator programs, efforts we developed in close collaboration with students and parents. In addition, we are working to link LES residents to jobs created within the Essex Crossing development.

Community Engagement: Through the Henry Street Settlement Community Advisory Board, residents can help shape Henry Street’s programs and policy agenda by a) helping to ASSESS community need, b) serving as AMBASSADORS for Henry Street programs, and c) taking ACTION to create a stronger community and stronger Settlement programs.

To become involved, please contact Talia DeRogatis at tderogatis@henrystreet.org.

