

Introduction: In 2015, Henry Street Settlement built upon our tremendous legacy of community engagement by conducting our second annual neighborhood listening tour and Town Hall event. During the summer, our policy team convened focus groups with dozens of staff and consumers from across our education and employment, health and wellness, transitional housing, and arts programs to discuss emerging local needs, concerns, and recommendations. On October 25, 2015, we hosted an enormously successful Town Hall, which attracted over 300 community members, clients, elected officials, and staff. This document summarizes our key findings related to five core topics—Education, Jobs, Housing, Public Safety, Senior Concerns, and Gentrification—which will allow us to refine our advocacy agenda and enable us to continue aligning our programs and priorities with the community’s most pressing needs.

These recent efforts build upon Henry Street’s historic commitment to community engagement. Since our founding in 1893, we have been a passionate advocate for New York City’s most vulnerable residents—on the Lower East Side and beyond—continuously assessing community needs and responding with relevant services and solutions. Henry Street’s commitment to community engagement began with our founder, Lillian Wald, a passionate advocate for the underserved, and now spans 122 years. Throughout its history, Henry Street has been at the forefront of social change: our dining room provided the space for the meeting that led to the foundation of the NAACP; Lillian Wald was involved in the movement towards safer working conditions even prior to the devastating Triangle Shirt Waist Factory fire; and Henry Street nurses were active in the suffrage movement and instrumental in the drive for women’s rights. Our track record of advocacy includes such highlights as: placing the first nurse in a public school in 1902; the creation of the nation’s first apartment-style shelter for families in 1972 in response to a need for safer housing for the city’s homeless; and the launch of a job training program in 2002 that contextualizes English Language instruction with employment readiness to help immigrant workers, displaced by 9/11, re-engage with the workforce. In recent years, under the leadership of Executive Director David Garza and a newly instated policy and advocacy team, Henry Street has renewed and deepened its focus on community engagement. In 2014, our policy team conducted its first community listening tour, which included over 30 focus groups with consumers and staff, and a Town Hall that drew 200 New Yorkers. Over the past year, community feedback gathered through this process shaped our programmatic priorities and public policy strategy, leading to several important achievements:

- ❖ In response to a recommendation from Town Hall attendees, we founded a Community Advisory Board (CAB), comprised of local residents and program consumers, which meets quarterly and enables us to continuously engage with our clients and the broader community; empower CAB members as agency stakeholders; and tailor our services and priorities to local needs.
- ❖ During focus groups with residents of our homeless shelters last year, many individuals reported that a lack of supportive services for families exiting the shelter system was contributing to a destructive cycle of recidivism. Based on this feedback, Henry Street undertook an advocacy campaign—in collaboration with five other nonprofits—in support of a new, citywide initiative to enhance available resources for the more than 11,000 families residing 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, which is allowing us to provide education, employment, and additional case management services geared towards helping formerly homeless families settle into new communities citywide after they leave shelter.

- ❖ Another core issue we identified through our focus groups and Town Hall was a need for additional nursing services for elderly participants within our Naturally Occurring Retirement Community (NORC), which operates out of NYCHA's Vladeck Houses. Henry Street undertook significant advocacy work, testifying at City Council hearings and meeting with elected officials to appeal for additional funding for vulnerable seniors. We also reached out to NORCs across NYC to survey their needs and build the case for additional resources. As a result of this work, the City Council allocated over \$15,000 to nursing services at Henry Street, and additional funds to support critically needed nursing services within NORCs across NYC.

Henry Street is proud of our rich history of community engagement and our recent success in renewing and deepening our efforts in this realm. We also understand that the work is never done: in order to remain in step with our changing community and continue championing local residents' emerging needs, we approach advocacy as a continuous process that requires vigilance, dedication, and ongoing engagement with clients, staff, and community stakeholders.

Education: *"Teenagers have nowhere to go after school. Children and teenagers need a safe place to hang out." "You have to figure it out on your own [if your child has] special needs. I felt like everything was on me."*

Henry Street spoke to dozens of concerned New Yorkers about the City's education system, and encountered diverse perspectives from current high school students; youth who dropped out of high school prior to graduation; and parents, including those who are navigating the special education system. During these conversations, several common themes and recommendations emerged:

Help New Yorkers Navigate the Education System:

- Community members expressed a need for assistance navigating the education system on three levels: 1) Parents need help identifying schools that are the best fit for their child—from elementary to middle to high school—and accessing resources such as gifted and talented programs, charter schools, and enrichment services; 2) Parents need help negotiating the complex and often overwhelming special education system; and 3) Youth, adults, and non-traditional students need additional support with completing the college and financial aid application processes and accessing higher education.

Enhance Supplementary and Social Services:

- Parents expressed a need for additional onsite mental health services and/or social workers for youth in NYC's public schools.
- New Yorkers agreed that there is a demand for more enrichment, both during and after the school day. Suggestions included tutoring, arts enrichment, mentoring, and foreign language instruction.

Improve Communication and Emphasize Community Voices:

- There was general consensus among community members that NYC public schools do not sufficiently reflect the interests, needs, and voices of parents and youth. Communication is weak on multiple levels: between teachers and students, between principals and teachers, and between school administrators and parents.
- Participants encouraged schools to place a greater emphasis on community engagement; for example, by creating community advisory boards and harnessing the power of young people

(both current students and alumni) to help out within failing schools by providing tutoring and giving back in other ways.

Jobs: *“I just wish there were more opportunities out there.” “How do you get jobs when you do not have any experience?”*

Henry Street discussed employment in NYC with community members representing a range of ages and backgrounds, including 17- to 24-year olds in our specialized youth employment programs; single mothers in our Parent Center and homeless shelters who strive to balance childcare and work; and long-term unemployed New Yorkers struggling to re-enter the workforce. These individuals consistently raised the following key issues and suggestions:

Support New Yorkers Both During the Job Search and On-the-Job:

- **Job Search:** Many respondents agreed that jobseekers in NYC are too often discriminated against or stigmatized in the job market due to their age, income level, race, or family size. The job search process is often discouraging and impersonal due to the prevalence of group interviews and online applications; increasing competition; and ever more stringent demand for experience and credentials—even for entry-level jobs.
- **On-the-job:** Community members pointed to a lack of employer support and scheduling flexibility, particularly for working single parents and for adults who are caretakers of elderly/infirm family members. Many parents described a struggle to secure reliable childcare to cover the hours of typical entry-level jobs in NYC, which are often non-traditional and unpredictable. Finally, across the board, community members agreed that minimum wage—and starting wages in general—is far from sufficient to support NYC’s cost of living.

Strengthen and Diversify Workforce Development Programming:

- Many community members expressed interest in internship and apprenticeship opportunities and noted that the majority of existing programs are targeted exclusively to youth and young adults. Participants suggested that these programs be expanded to include adults (24+), provide stipends, and—as with all job training program activities—be directly tied to eventual job placement.
- Focus group participants and Town Hall attendees shared a common belief that obtaining a job in NYC is difficult and is often “all about who you know.” Community members consistently identified networking as a critical skill, which should be incorporated into job training programs.
- Community members expressed near-universal agreement that education is a crucial factor in career success. Many said they would benefit from assistance finding affordable post-secondary options and support with balancing school and work.
- Finally, as our culture becomes increasingly computer-driven, many New Yorkers expressed a need for more comprehensive computer training, beyond basics like Microsoft Word and Excel.

Housing: *“They’re slowly kicking us out.” “Where do you expect people who live in the projects to go?” “It is terrible that this is where people live with the amount of money they pay to live in these apartments.”*

The Lower East Side ranks third highest in NYC for its population density, and contains the fourth highest concentration of NYCHA public housing in the City. Our community district also has the

fourth highest income diversity ratio, in part due to rapid gentrification. The vast majority of individuals Henry Street encountered during our neighborhood listening tour had strong concerns about the state of housing in NYC. From residents of our homeless shelters who described their struggle to secure permanent housing, to NYCHA tenants who expressed concern over quality of life issues within public housing, to lifelong Lower East Side residents—young and old—who voiced a fear of displacement due to the community's rapid development, common recommendations included:

Create Truly Affordable Housing:

- Housing issues in NYC are inextricably linked to gentrification: among New Yorkers in our focus groups and Town Hall break-out sessions, we observed a tremendous and widespread fear of being “priced out” of the community and a sense that new housing developments in the neighborhood are neither affordable nor intended for long-time residents and families—and are targeted instead to wealthy newcomers.
- Housing issues are also closely tied to employment. Many community members reported that the average job in NYC does not support rapidly rising rental costs, particularly for those raising children.
- Across the board, most participants agreed that so-called “affordable housing” is not truly affordable; public housing is not accessible; and there is a scarcity of housing for low-income people.

Implement Solutions to Homelessness:

- Henry Street's listening tour coincided with a period of record homelessness in NYC, with more than 50,000 individuals (over 40% of them children) residing in the shelter system. Community members—particularly residents of our shelters—expressed a need for more support and dedicated programming for homeless single mothers, including childcare, education, employment, and housing services. Community members, as well as Henry Street's shelter staff, also expressed a need for more support for Domestic Violence survivors, who—along with single mothers—represent a major contingent of NYC's shelter population.
- Consumers and staff also reported that the City's LINC (Living in Communities) subsidy is not yet achieving a measurable impact on the shelter population, and is hindered by landlords who are reluctant to accept subsidies and by the fiercely competitive housing market in NYC.
- Community members and staff described a gap in the availability of supportive housing for diverse populations, including adults who have cognitive and developmental disabilities or are raising disabled children.

Address Quality of Life Issues, Especially in Public Housing:

- Many Henry Street consumers reside in local public housing developments—eight of our 17 program sites are situated within NYCHA buildings. We spoke to numerous NYCHA residents who were frustrated by lack of responsiveness and frequent delays related to repair and maintenance requests and a general sentiment that many developments are in poor condition. Further, local NYCHA residents were concerned about widespread rat infestations as well as public safety issues, including violence and drug-related activity within their developments.

Public Safety *“The relationship with the police has deteriorated quite a bit over the past few years. It was better when the cops knew everyone by name.”*

Public safety stands out as a major, growing concern amongst Lower East Side residents. Concerns about gun violence and police-community relations were expressed by a wide variety of community members—ranging from youth and parents to seniors and police officers.

Gun violence is a major safety concern in the Lower East Side:

- Many residents reported hearing gun shots in the neighborhood and do not feel safe leaving their apartments when it is dark out.
- A number of residents reported concerns that more and more kids are finding ways to access guns and other weapons.
- Another reason for escalating gun violence, residents tended to agree, is that fights and petty arguments are more quickly turning into shootouts. While drug-dealing continues to be a concern in the neighborhood, there is a sense that gun violence is escalating far beyond drug-related incidents. Many expressed concern that gun violence is often the result of minor disagreements, and there is widespread concern that people are less inhibited with guns than they used to be.

Residents also expressed concerns about police-community relations:

- Some residents felt that the neighborhood is lacking in police presence. One resident said that there was a time when police officers knew community members by name. Now, many agreed, you might hear gun shots and see drug deals in areas where trusted officers are nowhere to be found. While some asked for more police officers in the neighborhood, others felt that what the community really needs is officers who are well-known and trusted.
- In both our summer focus groups and fall Town Hall, there was significant discussion—and some disagreement—amongst residents about stop-and-frisk policing in New York City. Stop-and-frisk—an NYPD practice and crime-prevention strategy designed to target suspicious people and behaviors—was ruled discriminatory by a federal court and banned in 2013. While some community members feel that crime and violence have worsened since the repeal of stop-and-frisk, others view the policy as discriminatory, abusive, and rightfully banned. The teenagers who attended our Town Hall expressed their belief that the biggest issue with stop-and-frisk was not the policy itself but rather the police officers who enforced it: If cops harbor racial prejudice, these young people explained, their policing practices tend to be discriminatory. Similarly, if cops are trained to reach arrest quotas, they often spend too much time policing poor neighborhoods in search of minor offenses, our teens report.
- A number of residents agreed that police-youth relations are of particular concern in the Lower East Side. Many parents felt that, in the past, young people in the LES trusted the police and could count on officers for safety and support. Now, residents are concerned about the fear and distrust that increasingly exists between youth and police officers. Parents

are particularly concerned with this change, and many feel unsure about how to talk to their kids about the police and prepare young people for interactions with law enforcement.

- A number of residents acknowledged that the intensification of media coverage of police brutality nationwide is fueling negative perceptions of the police. Amidst these frequent news stories, many young people are becoming fearful of police officers who are not known and trusted in their community. The police officers who attended the Town Hall have sensed this lack of trust and expressed that they are already working on changing this perception.

Residents and representatives from the DA's Office and the NYPD shared their ideas about how police-community relations can be improved:

- Residents were in agreement that policing should be more community-based. If officers understand the neighborhood and the people in it, residents agreed, they can better prioritize the safety and well-being of their constituents. A number of residents expressed the desire for more “cops on the beat”—or cops who are assigned to a particular community and make regular efforts to build relationships with residents. In response, a representative of PSA 4 was able to clarify that efforts to establish more cops on the beat are already underway.
- Residents and law enforcement agreed that they must work together to improve police-community relations. Some parents and young people felt that learning to respect and trust the police starts at home. Others felt that the District Attorney's office and NYPD should be doing more to build rapport with their community—such as hosting more community meetings, doing more outreach for these meetings, and participating in other events and meetings in the neighborhood. In response, DA and NYPD representatives urged residents to get involved with existing partnerships between law enforcement and community groups.
- Town Hall attendees also agreed that police-community relations could be improved in more informal ways such as through sports, conversation, and mentorship.

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

Seniors echoed many of the concerns of their fellow community members—particularly with respect to gentrification and public safety. Amongst our seniors' primary concerns are the affordability of the Lower East Side and the safety and quality of the life in the neighborhood. Seniors also expressed a desire for improved access to the arts and shared their concerns about medical care, case management and other senior services.

Seniors are concerned about the decreasing affordability of the Lower East Side:

- Access to healthy, affordable food is a major issue for seniors in the LES. Since the closing of the Pathmark, seniors are forced to shop at Fine Fare, which many feel are too expensive and lacking in quality and variety. Seniors also expressed that the neighborhood farmer's

markets are not affordable. Many suggested the need for more places like Essex Market to exist throughout the neighborhood. Others expressed their desire to see open markets and produce vendors on NYCHA campuses.

- Seniors agreed that basic neighborhood essentials—such as drug stores and haircuts—are becoming too expensive. Instead of meeting the need for affordable local businesses, incoming resources are coming in the form of expensive restaurants and bars. These new businesses are not accessible to seniors, many of whom must travel to the East Village, Chinatown, and Alphabet City to do their shopping.

Many seniors want to see improved neighborhood safety and quality of life:

- Seniors expressed that crime—such as gun violence, drug dealing, and theft—are prevalent in certain areas in the Lower East Side, and these residents hope for a strong police presence to address this issue.
- Many seniors shared concerns about pedestrian safety in the neighborhood. They agreed that the sidewalks are in poor condition, that traffic signals should be longer, and that better street lighting would make their community safer.
- Many shared concerns about garbage collection and littering in the neighborhood. They explained that there are not enough trashcans in the neighborhood, that there are many issues with dog waste and rats, and that street cleaning operations in the community could be improved.
- While some seniors are happy with the quality, cleanliness, and affordability of their NYCHA apartments, many expressed their concern that the maintenance of NYCHA buildings and apartments continues to worsen—leaving many of them with outstanding requests for repairs.

A number of seniors want to be able enjoy greater access to the arts, and they are hopeful that Henry Street's Abrons Arts Center will play a part in making this possible:

- Seniors expressed the need for a greater diversity of artistic and cultural activities. Amongst their suggestions were more dance and music classes, a wider range of visual arts classes with higher quality supplies, and more organized cultural trips. Henry Street has already redoubled its efforts to ensure that all seniors in the neighborhood are fully aware of the full array of affordable, high quality options at the Abrons Arts Center.
- Many shared the feeling that arts programming in the LES should be more accessible to Chinese and Spanish-speaking seniors.
- A number of seniors expressed their desire to see more family-friendly, matinee, and free performances throughout the neighborhood.

Seniors expressed a continued need for access to medical care, case management, and other services:

- While a lot of seniors have been able to access affordable health insurance in the neighborhood, many expressed difficulty finding medical providers that will accept their insurance.
- There continues to be a strong need for case management and other services for seniors. Seniors articulated that, while there are great options for case management in the neighborhood, they could use some help finding the right services and providers for their specific needs. In addition, many seniors hope for a greater variety of service offerings—such as legal assistance and computer trainings.
- There is a continued need for medical and social services throughout the neighborhood to have translators for Spanish and Chinese-speaking seniors.

Gentrification *“It’s pushing people out who can no longer afford to live here. Stores in the LES are becoming way more expensive, and this is a predominantly low-income area—it’s scary.”*

Lower East Side residents of all ages are very concerned about the gentrification of the neighborhood. During our summer focus groups and our October Town Hall, residents voiced their concerns about displacement, the distribution of resources in the neighborhood, the Essex Crossing development, and the development process in general.

Work to prevent displacement and the rising cost of living in the Lower East Side:

- As rents and the cost of living are steadily increasing citywide, many feel that gentrification is pushing lower-income residents out of their homes and communities yet leaving them with nowhere to go.
- Families who reside in the Lower East Side expressed the fear that they will soon lose their homes and that kids who grew up in the neighborhood will not be able to stay.
- The cost of living on the LES is becoming particularly difficult for seniors and single parents to afford.
- Echoing concerns of the housing discussion groups, LES residents are deeply concerned about the lack of affordable housing in their community and long waitlists for NYCHA apartments. Even residents who were able to secure NYCHA housing had concerns about maintenance, rat infestation, and other quality-of-life issues in NYCHA developments.
- The loss of the Pathmark as a truly affordable local supermarket has effected a lot of people, many of whom do not feel that incoming businesses and resources are benefitting long-time residents.

Ensure that incoming resources are targeted toward the existing community groups—such as youth and seniors—who need them most:

- Many residents shared the feeling that resources for the long-term LES community are shrinking. Services and businesses—like the Pathmark—that residents depended on are

being displaced by new bars, expensive restaurants, and luxury high rises for the neighborhood's newcomers.

- A number of people shared their hope that arts programming and performances will remain affordable for long-time LES residents. Many parents and seniors expressed that they would like to see more family-friendly performances, arts-related scholarships, and discounted shows and exhibits throughout the neighborhood. Henry Street is committed to ensuring the community is fully aware of all the affordable, family-friendly opportunities at the Abrons Arts Center.
- Residents expressed frustration that, despite the influx of new resources and wealthier residents to the LES, the neighborhood still has multiple failing schools. Residents agreed that significant effort is needed to make sure that all schools in the district are equitable in terms of student performance and access to resources. Every school in the LES—not just the ones serving higher-income students and families—should have quality teachers, counselors, equipment, and facilities.
- There is also a perception amongst LES residents that the neighborhood is in need of more youth programs and services—including affordable childcare, afterschool, college preparation, and arts programs. Henry Street is already a major provider of these programs, and we will continue working to ensure that more youth and families in our community know about and have access to our youth programs.
- Residents also expressed their desire to see a greater investment in parks and public spaces for local youth.
- Despite all the new development in the neighborhood, many felt that transportation options in the LES are still lacking. Seniors, in particular, do not want to have to depend solely on the M21 bus to get around and would like to see more routes on which buses run more consistently.

Address questions and concerns about Essex Crossing and make the development process more accountable to community needs:

- Residents shared the desire to learn more about Essex Crossing—particularly about the employment and housing opportunities it will create.
- Of the new housing units that Essex Crossing will create, 50% of these units are projected to be “affordable.” However, there is widespread concern that these affordability guidelines are not suited for the vast majority of LES residents. For instance, many of the new affordable units will be reserved for middle and moderate income families – and will remain out of reach for low-income LES residents. Furthermore, residents agreed that affordability guidelines are falling short citywide—and that much of the Mayor’s affordable housing plan will support moderate and middle income families, and not those most in need of affordable housing.

- A number of residents shared the belief that developers should engage and interact more with the LES community. Residents would like more opportunities to talk to developers about their plans with respect to affordable housing.
- In terms of the new businesses that Essex Crossing will establish in the neighborhood, residents would like to be connected to job opportunities that these businesses create. Henry Street Settlement—through our partnership with the Lower East Side Employment Network—will be involved in the hiring process for Essex Crossing businesses and will make sure to engage our clients and community members in this process. Residents also suggested that developers and Essex Crossing representatives should attend future Town Halls, and Henry Street will certainly take the lead in trying to make this happen.
- Finally, while there were many concerns that focused on developers, residents also felt that newcomers to the neighborhood could do more to lessen the negative impacts of gentrification. Long-time community members want to feel that newcomers are invested in the neighborhood, care about local youth and families, and contribute to the community through volunteerism and advocacy.

What's Next? *“I feel like I’m getting a lot of help here—I just wish there were more opportunities out there.”*

Henry Street Settlement will review these findings with key stakeholders—community residents, program participants, program staff and staff leadership, government and elected officials, tenant association leaders, policy experts, and other partners—in order 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 any and all of the following areas:

Legislative: Henry Street will consider engaging in citywide and statewide legislative and policy campaigns to win changes that respond to community need. We anticipate upcoming legislative opportunities related to increasing the minimum wage, for instance, which would have a positive benefit on many LES residents.

Budgetary: Henry Street will also 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 in-home 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 also consider working with NYC and NYS agencies to create administrative and policy changes that support our participants and our community. For instance, we have and 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 government agencies at the city and state levels.

Programs: Henry Street will consider opportunities to both enhance existing programs and create new programs, as needed, in response to participant and resident feedback. For instance, we launched an aftercare program for our shelter residents, which we will continue to run 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 our community. In addition, we are working to link members of the Henry Street and LES communities to jobs created through Essex Crossing.

Community Engagement: At Henry Street, we believe that listening to and engaging with our community is a continuous and ongoing process. We will continue to welcome community feedback through focus groups and annual Town Hall meetings. In addition, we have created a Henry Street Settlement Community Advisory Board through which residents can become actively involved in shaping 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 HSS programs. If you would like to become involved in the HSS Community Advisory Board, please contact Talia DeRogatis at tderogatis@henrystreet.org.

“Listen to our concerns and try to do as much as you can.”