

hotels and boutiques have opened, replacing the discount shops that have so long been a local mainstay.

Gentrification was a major point of discussion in the meetings. The majority of those taking part in these conversations were longtime residents, and they expressed a variety of views. Many welcomed their new neighbors and some believed that, also a result of gentrification, the neighborhood has become safer. However, many expressed serious concern about whether the trend toward market-rate housing and higher cost-of-living would continue and if they would be able to remain in the neighborhood. Many also expressed dismay about gentrification having brought many new resources to the neighborhood, but that they and their families and friends are not in a position to benefit. Others noted that gentrification is endangering the character of the neighborhood, and that it is important that new investments are made in the arts, culture and recreation designed to accommodate all residents.

SENIORS

“There is a sense of just getting by — just surviving.”

– PROGRAM PARTICIPANT

Seniors also identified jobs, housing, education and gentrification as major areas of concern. In addition, seniors identified the following issues:

- LES seniors need better access to fresh, affordable food.
- LES seniors indicate that they would like better transit access, particularly bus service.
- Seniors report that they would like to see the Naturally Occurring Retirement Community (NORC) model expanded beyond HSS’ NORC in Vladeck Houses.
- Chinese-speaking seniors, in particular, indicated that language access is a challenge and that government agencies and the non-profit community needs to offer language appropriate services.
- Seniors also indicated that because they are not online, they feel that they are not accessing information about the complete array of neighborhood services.

WHAT’S NEXT?

HSS will review these findings with key stakeholders — community residents, Henry Street participants, Henry Street staff and 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 program offerings. Special action areas could include the following:

Legislative. HSS will consider engaging in citywide and statewide legislative and policy campaigns to win changes that respond to community need. We anticipate legislative opportunities related to expanding access to education and training for low-income New Yorkers, and potential legislation to raise the wage floor for low-income New Yorkers.

Budgetary. HSS will consider budgetary solutions which will also inform the direction of NYC and NYS policy. For instance, HSS is championing an Aftercare program for our shelter residents to provide ongoing educational, employment, health and other case management services in the communities where they move. As pilot programs are proven successful, we will look to further use these models to shape policy.

Administrative. HSS will consider working with NYC and NYS agencies to create administrative and policy changes that best support our participants, and our community. For instance, HSS is already working with the NYC Department of Education on numerous levels (programmatically and administratively) to ensure that parents in our district can navigate the choice and special education systems effectively. In addition, Henry Street will provide recommendations on key policy areas as opportunities arise — we are working with the new administration on shelter and employment policies, and will consider other opportunities to engage at this level.

Programs. HSS will consider opportunities to both enhance existing programs and create new programs, as needed, in response to participant and resident feedback. For instance, we are looking to enhance professional development for our afterschool staff regarding the special education system. In addition, we will work to link our participants and community residents to jobs created through Essex Crossing.

HSS will continue to engage the community and keep our ear to the ground — through focus groups, Town Hall meetings, and other venues — so that our policy and advocacy agenda, and programs, are dynamic and meet the needs of local residents. We will also create a Community Advisory Board so that residents can continuously help shape and refine HSS’s approach.

“Thanks for listening to us — we have many ideas and opinions to offer and we are intent on being heard.”

– PROGRAM PARTICIPANT



HENRY STREET SETTLEMENT

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

May 2014

INTRODUCTION

Henry Street Settlement (HSS) has a long history of driving public policy innovation based on community feedback and on-the-ground practice — from putting the first nurse in a public school to creating the first family-style shelter. Over the last few years, Henry Street has reinvigorated its efforts to put its ear to the ground, and “bring the street back to Henry Street.” As such, from Fall 2013 through Spring 2014, we deepened our community engagement efforts by conducting approximately 30 focus groups and interviews with key stakeholders, including:

- HSS participants in every service area, including young adults in employment and HIV prevention programs; senior citizens; shelter residents; parents and grandparents; individuals seeking access to public benefits; job-seekers; and those in mental health day treatment programs.
- New York City Housing Authority (NYCHA) Resident Association leaders.
- Elected officials.
- Local residents impacted by Hurricane Sandy.

Through these 30 sessions, as well as conversations with HSS staff across the agency, four major issues — housing, education, jobs, and gentrification — emerged. These were explored in further detail at a Town Hall meeting attended by over 200 community residents on April 6, 2014, with additional break-out sessions for seniors, and Spanish and Chinese speakers.

Henry Street will use these findings — coupled with ongoing community engagement and intelligence from our program staff — to shape solutions that allow Lower East Side residents to more effectively open doors of opportunity. Responses will include legislative/policy, budgetary, administrative, and programmatic opportunities.

The findings listed below summarize results of both the Town Hall and focus groups.



HOUSING

“New developments are expensive and are only constructed for single people, not families.”

– PROGRAM PARTICIPANT

Regardless of the original purpose of the focus group, housing invariably emerged as a major concern. Lower East Side residents are extremely concerned about the affordability of housing. They see the housing crisis as intricately tied to the homeless crisis. They are also concerned about the quality of services they receive from NYCHA and private landlords.

Following are issues that were repeatedly raised:

- Rent continues to increase – in some cases beyond affordability for those with low and moderate incomes.
- Homelessness in NYC is at an all-time high, and a sizable portion of homeless shelter residents are working. Many shelter residents — including those who are working one or more jobs — have extreme difficulty finding an affordable apartment in NYC.
- In some cases, residents are living in overcrowded apartments, sometimes with more than one unrelated family or group sharing a single apartment. Multiple families sharing apartments is of particular concern to the Chinese community.
- Conditions in public housing are sometimes unsafe, with drug dealers and users intimidating others.

- In public housing, it frequently takes a long time for common maintenance and repairs to be made.
- The “In-Fill” initiative promoted by the former Mayor’s administration to bring market-rate housing and other revenue-generating enterprises to public housing property is a source of major concern. Many residents of public housing see it as a threat to their homes and their open spaces, even if the ultimate intent is to improve NYCHA services and increase access to affordable housing.
- With much of public housing in the neighborhood situated appealingly along the water-front, some are concerned that these buildings will ultimately be replaced by market-rate housing. In-fill plans, as they were presented by the last administration (with little discussion), only fueled these concerns.
- Though the Essex Crossing project is slated to include a considerable amount of affordable housing, some are skeptical about whether that will come to pass.
- Residents want to provide early and meaningful input into policies and plans that will shape the future housing stock for the neighborhood.
- There simply are not sufficient affordable housing opportunities for New Yorkers, which at times places residents in precarious situations. We heard anecdotal evidence of young adults trying to contract HIV to secure affordable housing, for instance, and residents being given unnecessary mental health diagnoses to secure housing.

EDUCATION

The Lower East Side is home to dozens of public elementary, middle and high schools serving thousands of students. Parents, grandparents and young adults involved in HSS programs, expressed many concerns about education.

“There should be more outreach to kids who drop out of school at an early age — you can sign a piece of paper in the office and walk out.”

– PROGRAM PARTICIPANT

- There is a perception that performances of schools populated by students of middle- and upper-income households are typically stronger than those populated by students from lower-income households.
- Parents remain uncertain about how to navigate District 1’s school choice policy, particularly with regards to entering select high schools. It appears that parents with the best access to information — generally the wealthier parents — have a better understanding of how to navigate the system.
- Parents of children with special needs similarly experience difficulty in coordinating with the Department of Education in attempts to accommodate their children. Parents indicated that they need additional support — possibly from a community based organization — to help navigate the special education system.
- Drop-out rates remain alarmingly high, and some schools and communities lack sufficient strategies to identify and support youth susceptible to dropping out. Young adults in our youth employment programs said they felt ignored by the schools and that “nobody cared” when they dropped out.
- There is much concern about the increasing emphasis on standardized testing and, with that, a loss of emphasis on critical thinking, creativity and social and emotional development.
- There is a strong belief that schools should offer more arts education as well as greater opportunities to participate in sports and recreation.



JOBS

Many reported that finding and maintaining a job that pays a living wage is a major challenge. Following are descriptions of the points most frequently put forth:

“In order to get better paying jobs, we need training, but we need money now — to survive.”

– PROGRAM PARTICIPANT

- Participants believe that local economic development opportunities should lead to good jobs for local residents. There is some concern that this is not always the case. Residents believe Essex Crossing — a major development project on the Lower East Side — should provide living wage job opportunities for local residents.
- To live reasonably on the Lower East Side, a salary of between \$40,000 and \$50,000 for a single adult is necessary, an amount that significantly exceeds the salary of many local residents.
- Furthering education and obtaining training is very often cost- and time-prohibitive, especially for adults caring for children.
- Homeless shelter residents experience great difficulty in efforts to gain employment with wages that allow for transitioning to permanent housing.
- Public assistance recipients are often compelled to accept low-wage jobs without genuine opportunities for growth (like in the City’s Work Experience Program), preventing them from pursuing educational and training opportunities.
- In certain situations, employers do not provide reasonable working conditions and do not adhere to laws regarding wages and benefits.
- Many residents expressed interest in paid training and internship programs that would serve as a vehicle to career growth and new careers.
- Among the fields about which residents expressed interest are: health care, hospitality, customer service, public service, retail and commercial driving.

GENTRIFICATION

“Gentrification may improve the quality of life, but it brings to the neighborhood constant fear of being pushed out of one’s community while new people are moving in.”

– PROGRAM PARTICIPANT

The Lower East Side has undergone significant change over the last several decades. While the neighborhood remains home to a very sizable low-income and immigrant population — many living in a large concentration of public housing — thousands of formerly affordable apartments have been converted to market-rate housing and hundreds of additional market-rate units have been developed. Many new upscale restaurants, bars,