

Community Engagement, Public Policy and Advocacy Findings from Focus Groups and Community Town Hall 2016: Full Report

In 2016, Henry Street continued to build on its 124-year legacy of community engagement by conducting both a listening tour and a large public Town Hall meeting.

The **listening tour** — facilitated by our policy team — consisted of dozens of focus groups with program participants and staff from our education and employment, health and wellness, transitional housing, and arts programs. In September, our third annual **Town Hall** meeting brought together over 200 community members, Henry Street staff, and elected officials for an important afternoon of conversation about the four core topics identified by our participants — **Housing & Gentrification, Education, Jobs, and Public Safety & Policing**.

The Settlement — a fierce advocate for the community since it was founded in 1893 — is known for its innovative initiatives to improve public health, human rights, housing, education, mental health, income inequality and more.

Initiatives that have emerged from past listening tours and Town Halls include two new programs. In response to concerns about recidivism in the shelter system, we created an **aftercare program** to provide support services to help families successfully transition from shelter to permanent housing. This program has received \$235,000 from the New York City Council for each of the past two years. Our **Community Advisory Board (CAB)**, formed in response to community feedback, has increased in size and impact since its establishment in 2014. The CAB planned and hosted a summer Community Day and played a leadership role at our most recent Town Hall.

This document provides the full report of our findings in 2016 on the four core topics. The Executive Summary is on our website.

Housing & Gentrification:

“What is being built in these communities—both residential and commercial—is not being built for the people who already live here.”

1. The Lack of Truly Affordable Housing

- Lower East Side residents of all ages feel that the neighborhood and city in general has an insufficient and diminishing supply of affordable housing.
- New developments in the neighborhood are extremely expensive and cater to wealthy newcomers. Although many of these luxury developments set aside “affordable” units, residents feel that developers should be setting aside far more affordable units.
- The major issue with affordable housing development, our community agreed, is the criteria used to determine affordability. The affordability criteria currently used by the city and the developers is falling short citywide—allowing middle and moderate-income residents to access precious “affordable” units that remain out of reach for the vast majority of low-income New Yorkers.
- Changing the definition of affordability—and including low-income New Yorkers in that conversation—is essential in order to solve the city’s affordable housing crisis.
- Our community has many additional concerns about the city’s affordable housing lottery system, HousingConnect. In addition to the issues related to affordability criteria, it lacks accessibility for non-English speakers and for people without computers or computer skills. Some residents who have participated in the lottery felt as though they were discriminated against at some point during

the process—based on their race, ethnicity, or personal history (such as educational background or history with substance abuse).

- Despite these flaws, many feel that the city should make a much more concerted effort to advertise and explain new HousingConnect opportunities through outreach and community forums.
- For those who hope to secure permanent affordable housing with the help of voucher programs—such as former shelter residents or tenants with a history of substance abuse—a common issue is that landlords do not accept vouchers or charge additional fees. Many residents with whom we spoke appreciate the city’s voucher programs but believe that city officials should do more to ensure that vouchers actually lead to affordable housing.
- Community members agreed that landlords should not have an unregulated ability to raise rents each year (on unregulated apartments) and that the city should create and enforce stronger rent control laws.

2. Concerns about Neighborhood Change & Displacement

- With the development of luxury and market-rate housing in the Lower East Side far outpacing the development of genuinely affordable housing, our community is seriously concerned about being “priced out” and displaced from the neighborhood.
- Community members of all ages have already experienced some form of displacement: Our young people have either seen their families move or are worried about affording the neighborhood when it comes time for them to live on their own. Many longtime LES residents now shop outside the neighborhood because affordable businesses have been displaced.
- Of all the businesses being displaced, residents are most concerned with the lack of affordable food in the neighborhood. Much of the LES remains a food and supermarket desert, with local vendors that are either too expensive and/or sell poor quality food. As a temporary solution, residents would like to see more public and non-affiliated food pantries and fresh fruit and vegetable cards in the neighborhood.
- Residents are also concerned that, as the neighborhood changes, so will the nature of important programs and social services. For example, some expressed concerns about schools losing their universal free lunch programs, while others worry that arts and education programs—like those offered at Henry Street—will become less and less affordable. It is important to note that Henry Street is absolutely committed to providing services that all neighborhood residents can access, regardless of income.
- Some residents feel that some elected officials are not doing enough to advocate for the community in the face of neighborhood change. They urged elected officials to be more present in the neighborhood, more in touch with community concerns, and more willing to challenge the developers who are transforming the neighborhood in favor of the wealthy.

3. Concerns about NYCHA

- NYCHA residents share many of the same concerns that private housing residents have about displacement and neighborhood change. Many fear that NYCHA NextGeneration will accelerate the process of gentrification by converting open spaces and parking lots into market-rate housing.
- Residents are also concerned about the NYCHA NextGeneration efforts to digitize the lease renewal process, which would present challenges to those without computer access or computer skills and could ultimately cause tenants to lose their leases if they do not receive support navigating this process.
- Much of our community shares the belief that NYCHA is chronically underfunded, which affects both the quality and quantity of available housing units. Many expressed frustration with being on NYCHA waitlists for many years and even decades, while others complained about major delays in requesting unit transfers for special needs or older adult tenants. The application process itself was

also a major source of frustration, with residents citing a lack of communication about how the process works and what is required of applicants.

- In terms of housing quality, maintenance and repair issues are the most common concerns we heard from our community. Residents almost universally felt that NYCHA maintenance staff do not keep buildings clean or complete repairs in a timely manner and that these issues are continuing to worsen.
- Residents shared many personal experiences and frustrations related to unit repairs, which included: a complete lack of response or misinformation about how or when repairs will be done; major delays and long waitlists for repairs; incomplete repairs such as unfinished paint jobs or forgetting to replace faulty appliances; or poorly-done repairs such as replacing broken appliances with old, faulty appliances.
- One major takeaway from all of our conversations was that tenants want a better understanding of their rights in NYCHA housing, with respect to repairs, information, or other occupancy-related issues. Furthermore, a number of residents would appreciate more support in dealing with NYCHA-related issues, including applying for units/unit transfers, filing complaints, getting repairs, etc.

4. Access to Information & Resources in a Changing Neighborhood

- As the Lower East Side continues to rapidly change, there is a vital need for residents to be able to readily access information and resources related to community events, job opportunities, housing issues, and social services.
- Much of our community shared the belief that elected officials, tenant leaders, social service providers, and community organizations should make an even more targeted effort to ensure that LES residents—particularly seniors and those most vulnerable to displacement—are fully informed about issues in the neighborhood and the resources and supports available to them.
- Many of our Town Hall attendees appreciated the event and suggested that more Town Halls and community forums take place neighborhood-wide—especially in NYCHA buildings or residences with a large senior population.

Education: *“As parents, the message we keep hearing is ‘if you don't like the schools, then you should move to another district.’ There does not seem to be a focus on doing better for these kids.”*

Education continues to be a top priority for LES residents, who are particularly concerned about the overcrowded and underperforming schools in District 1. In conversations with parents, grandparents, students, and educators, we learned about the following:

1. General Concerns about the State of District 1 Schools

- Many in our community are concerned that District 1 elementary, middle, and high schools are overcrowded, lacking vital resources, and consequently failing many of their students.
- District 1 teachers are dealing with classrooms with high concentrations of English Language Learners (ELL) and special needs students, and many lack the proper training, experience, or capacity to support all of their students.
- Parents, in particular, are concerned that students in struggling schools are encouraged to either “be competent” or “just get by.” If principals and teachers have low expectations for their students and their schools, students will neither believe in nor achieve their full potential.

- Our community is particularly concerned about the middle schools in District 1, explaining that they believe there are only two quality middle schools in the district with very few available seats.
- When it comes time for parents to select middle and high schools for their children, many feel that the message they hear from District 1 is to look elsewhere or switch to the charter system. While some parents are glad they made this switch, others would like to see a more concerted effort to improve middle and high school options *within* District 1.

2. *Supporting English Language Learners (ELL) and Special Needs students*

- One reason for underperformance in District 1 schools, many local residents agreed, is that classrooms with ELL and special needs student do not have adequate resources to support these students.
- In classrooms with a high concentration of English Language-Learners, students struggling with English literacy are not receiving enough support in the form of appropriately-trained educators or interpreters. At times, English-speaking students must serve as translators for their peers, causing entire classes of students to fall behind.
- Many agreed that there should be more in-school support for special needs students, with more teachers/paraprofessionals in the classroom that have the appropriate training and experience.

3. *The Need for Improved Communication and Engagement with Parents*

- A common concern that we heard from parents is that Department of Education staff at all levels—from superintendents to teachers—do not effectively or consistently communicate with families in the district.
- A number of parents do not feel informed about their options within the district and, consequently, do not feel empowered to select the best school for their children. The middle and high school selection process is extremely complex throughout the city, and LES parents were particularly concerned about how to find a quality school and secure a seat within District 1.
- Many also asked for better communication surrounding special needs students. For some parents, the breakdown in communication occurs with the diagnosis itself: they are told that their child has ADHD or is autistic without a proper evaluation being done. Many parents cannot afford these evaluations, so they remain uncertain and concerned about their child’s status. One parent shared the experience of her child being removed from a special needs program with no explanation.
- For non-English speaking families, communication with teachers and administrators was a major issue. Many of the Chinese-speaking parents with whom we spoke, for example, explained that important school-related flyers and notices are rarely translated into other languages. They also shared stories of their children acting as translators during parent-teacher conferences, making it impossible for them to know if the feedback they are receiving from teachers is accurate.
- Improved and targeted parent engagement efforts would also help teachers to understand how students’ home lives are affecting their attendance and behaviors in school.

4. *Improving Education, from the Perspective of the Students:*

- This year, we asked youth in our programs ages 14 and up—who attend schools citywide—to share their own concerns about NYC public schools.
- Youth from all different schools agreed that schools should stop focusing so much on standardized testing, which enforces a singular, by-the-book learning style that causes many students with different learning styles to fall behind and lose interest.
- A number of students agreed that standardized tests add extra stress and work without producing positive results. Students believe that many teachers do not properly prepare students for tests like Regents, causing students to either have to cram on their own or receive low scores. All of this takes away from more substantive learning opportunities and academic growth, they report.

- Students would like to participate in more “real-world” learning opportunities, such as discussing current events, social justice, and personal experiences within the classroom.
- We heard many concerns from students about the quality of their teachers and the lack of appropriate teacher evaluation processes in their schools. Many students in schools citywide feel that their feedback regarding their teachers is not heard or taken seriously and that counselors/administrators rarely take action to address student feedback.
- Both youth and parents noted that teachers often blame students for issues in their classrooms—such as poor performance and low test scores. Many students shared the belief that teachers should be more amenable to student feedback and more willing to improve and adjust their teaching methods.
- Students agreed that college readiness and application support is very minimal in NYC public schools. They shared stories of absent or overbooked counselors and peers who lack a basic understanding of the college process and relevant deadlines. One student shared that, without Henry Street’s Expanded Horizons, she would be completely lost as a college applicant.

Employment: *“How are we supposed to get experience if we can’t even get an entry-level job or a paid internship?”*

Throughout the past year, we spoke to community members of all ages with a wide variety of jobs and forms of income. The common thread amongst them was that consistently worrying about money, employment, and finding the right path to financial security. We asked our community about their experiences and concerns regarding employment, unemployment, and strengthening New York City’s workforce. We discussed the following:

1. *Supporting Jobseekers of All Ages & Experience Levels*

- Residents discussed the need for more employment programs for adults (24+). While acknowledging the importance of preparing youth for success in the workforce, our community would like to see more paid internships and training programs for adults seeking work experience and skill development.
- A number of adults shared the feeling that age discrimination is a very real issue, echoing the importance of creating employment programs that serve adults of all ages.
- For adults with children, the ability to balance work responsibilities with caretaking presents constant challenges. Many people have struggled to find/keep jobs while caring for children and have had difficulty finding affordable daycare spots with hours that work for them.
- LES youth and adults alike feel that they would be great assets to local businesses and organizations and agreed that employers should make more an effort to advertise jobs and hire locally. Henry Street agrees and is proud to serve as a leader in the Lower East Side Employment Network, a coalition of LES nonprofits and the Community Board 3 that works collaboratively to promote local hiring.
- The young people with whom we spoke had their own set of frustrations about the job search, and the majority expressed frustration with the extensive experience requirements for entry-level positions and internships.
- In the process of looking for jobs, our youth have faced strict age and experience requirements, long and competitive interview processes for service industry jobs, and demanding application processes for unpaid internships. Even after putting in all this work, these young people explained, it is still rare to even get a call back unless you have a connection.
- One great way to get work experience in NYC is through the city’s Summer Youth Employment Program (SYEP), and most of our youth agreed that this program should be expanded.

2. *Strengthening & Diversifying Workforce Development Programming*

- Residents appreciate the resume help, interview prep, and other supports that are often provided to jobseekers through workforce development programs. However, many still experience the frustration of applying to countless jobs without being called back.
- Community members of all ages would like to see workforce programs that more directly connects jobseekers to employment or to skills-based training programs that are directly linked to vocational certificates and job placements. We agree wholeheartedly with this feedback and assure our community that Henry Street’s Employment Services division is always seeking out new opportunities for our clients, building relationships with employers, and connecting clients to other workforce development resources through our membership with LESEN.
- Residents also expressed their desire to see a wide range of vocational training opportunities offered in the community. Henry Street already connects our clients to vocational training opportunities throughout the city and offers a hospitality training in house, and we will continue to explore opportunities to bring more vocational trainings to the community.
- Many in our immigrant community shared that speaking English, in their experience, is the most important job qualification in NYC. Native English speakers added that being bilingual is also an advantage. Both groups agreed that language courses are an important part of the job search and would like to see more programs like Henry Street’s ESL program, which contextualizes language instruction with employment readiness.

3. *Creating Paths to Financial Stability & Independence*

- As NYC continues to become more and more expensive, raising the minimum wage is one necessary step toward ensuring financial security for low-income New Yorkers.
- In addition to higher wages, residents felt that jobs should come with better benefits—especially for part-time workers or working parents.
- Much of our community believes that internships and training programs are excellent opportunities, but these opportunities must be paid in order to include low and middle-income job seekers.
- Many residents agreed that the public assistance system is complex, difficult to navigate, and prone to technological glitches. Some shared their experiences with their cases being lost or mishandled, and others expressed that the system is particularly challenging for non-English speakers, seniors, and individuals with special needs. The difficulty of navigating the safety net system underscores the continued need for case management services—such as those provided by Henry Street’s Neighborhood Resource Center—to help residents secure benefits and entitlements.
- Some residents shared their frustrations with the fine line between eligibility and non-eligibility for public assistance, Medicaid, and/or the SNAP program. Changes in eligibility, which can stem from even a slight rise in income, can cause setbacks for low-income families seeking a gradual path toward financial stability and independence.

Police-Community Relations: *“We need to recruit the right people for the police force. We need people from the community and people who understand and care about us.”*

Lower East Side community members of all ages expressed concerns about safety in the neighborhood. Many shared the perception that, as drug usage, crime, and violence increase, police presence and responsiveness to community concerns seems to be lacking. Furthermore, many in our

community—especially young people—shared their concerns about police misconduct and the need for police reform.

1. *Strengthening the Relationship Between Police & Community*

- Many longtime LES residents agreed that they would like to see a stronger police presence in the neighborhood. Seniors were especially concerned about the visibility of local police; they shared that they typically only see officers once a month, that officers almost never get out of their cars, and that it is rare to see the same officer on a regular basis.
- NYCHA residents—especially seniors—felt strongly about the need for more foot patrols and building patrols in local NYCHA developments. These types of patrols are more visible and consistent, allowing community members to build a relationship with the officers and feel safer in the neighborhood.
- Improved police responsiveness is another desire in our community. A number of residents shared that they would feel safer if local police were more responsive to concerns raised by NYCHA Resident Watch groups and community members in general. In response to these concerns, a few residents suggested that local precincts and PSAs offer “community education” programs on how to report and respond to crime and suspicious activity.
- Adults and youth alike agreed that the relationship between local police officers and the community could be improved with increased outreach and engagement. The NYPD should prioritize relationship building in every community, through formal opportunities like meetings and Town Halls and informal opportunities like pick-up basketball and volunteering.

2. *Addressing Racial Profiling & Police Brutality*

- In addition to commenting on the need for better police-community relations, young people in our community had a wider range of concerns about the police.
- Many youth of color—especially those living in public housing—shared the feeling of being targeted and racially profiled by the police. A number of youth felt frustrated that local police seem to be prioritizing the safety of incoming, wealthier residents and making low-income youth of color feel like intruders in their own neighborhood.
- Young people living on Avenue D have had many negative experiences with the police, and many of them shared that they are stopped frequently. During these interactions, a number of youth have experienced aggressive questioning and searching, disrespectful treatment, and fear of the interaction turning violent.
- Youth in our community acknowledged that increasing social media coverage of police brutality have heightened their fear and mistrust of the police. However, many felt that this fear is warranted after witnessing cases of police violence nationwide—many of which continue to go unpunished.

3. *Working Toward Change through Policy & Advocacy*

- Adults and youth alike agreed that communities must work together in order to discuss their concerns and advocate for improvements in police-community relations. While police issues are often discussed on social media, many stressed the need for physical spaces—particularly for youth—to come together and organize around police reform.
- The vast majority of our community agreed that the NYPD can make officers more visible and trusted by deepening their commitment to community policing and establishing more foot and building patrols.
- Many residents also agreed about the need for significant police and criminal justice reform beyond the community level. Some residents suggested decriminalization of drug usage and others expressed the need for a more serious commitment to curbing racial profiling.
- As a policy response to police brutality, some residents favored the usage of body cameras while others felt that video footage still rarely leads to justice being served.

- Other policy responses that are favored by our community include limiting the amount of cops who have guns and reforming police training to eliminate racial bias and emphasize de-escalation tactics.
 - While a fair amount of those we talked to believe in the potential of community policing and police reform, others noted that substantial change in the American justice system is necessary to address police brutality. Youth in particular are troubled by instances in which police officers do not face consequences for breaking protocol or using excessive force. Without harsher and more consistent punishment for police misconduct, youth agreed, lasting change will not occur.
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Response from Henry Street

Henry Street is committed to making our programs as strong as possible by allowing community feedback to shape the work that we do. Based on feedback we heard in 2016, we are pursuing the following program enhancements:

ADVOCATING FOR OUR COMMUNITY

- Henry Street works to ensure that the New York City and New York State budgets reflect the needs of our community. For example, we participate in lobby days for the Summer Youth Employment Program so that more youth can get paid summer jobs, and we have received city funding for our shelter aftercare program.
- Henry Street maintains regular contact with our state and local officials and provides feedback on the policies and programs impacting those we serve. Last year, for example, we worked with local parents in a letter writing campaign to the Department of Education to urge continued funding for our Middle School Success Center.
- Henry Street closely monitors legislative and policy campaigns at the city and state level and supports campaigns led by our social services partners — such as calls to increase the minimum wage and increased funding for education and senior services.
- Henry Street is an active member of United Neighborhood Houses and the Human Services Council and consistently plays a lead role in budget and policy advocacy at the City and State level.
- The Settlement is also involved in the city's Nonprofit Resiliency Committee, working with citywide partners and leaders to ensure that nonprofits receive enough city funding to support our work.
- In response to the new federal administration's directives that we believe are detrimental to our community, we have created an Action Center on our website to instruct community members how to voice concerns and have opened the Speak Up Station at the Abrons Arts Center, where community members can call their elected representatives.
- Henry Street is a co-founder of the Lower East Side Employment Network, a consortium of local nonprofits that connects Lower East Side residents with jobs created by local development.

OUTREACH AND ENGAGEMENT

- In response to concern about the lack of healthy and affordable food options, Henry Street will continue exploring ways to bring additional food resources into the neighborhood.
- In response to concerns about police-community relations, Henry Street will explore possibilities for engaging our community and local police to build trust and ensure accountability. We look forward to working with our partners at the District Attorney's office and the NYPD. We are also hosting Know Your Rights workshops for community members.
- In response to concerns about gentrification and the loss of affordable housing, Henry Street will work with our partner GOLES to educate people about rights and opportunities in public and private

housing. We are always exploring ways to work with partners to create and preserve affordable housing.

- We are committed to creating more opportunities for community-building, information-sharing, formal and informal gatherings, and free events and activities. Last year, we hosted a variety of free events and gatherings — from a carnival-style Community Day to a panel discussion on gentrification.
- In response to feedback about the need for increased, targeted outreach in the neighborhood, Henry Street has hired two Community Outreach Assistants who will help us connect with more Lower East Side residents who can benefit from our programs.
- Henry Street will continue to welcome community feedback through focus groups and annual Town Hall meetings. In addition, we will continue to provide a direct vehicle for community involvement through the Henry Street Settlement Community Advisory Board (CAB). Established in 2014 in response to feedback from our first Town Hall, the CAB has developed a strong membership base that includes seniors, parents, youth, and Lower East Side residents of all ages and backgrounds. If you would like to become involved in the HSS Community Advisory Board, please contact Talia DeRogatis at tderogatis@henrystreet.org.

ENHANCING OUR PROGRAMS

- At the Abrons Arts Center, we will work to incorporate more family-oriented, affordable, culturally-diverse, and free/public performances that are inviting to our entire community. We will also work to ensure that more members of our community take advantage of available scholarships/tuition assistance for the arts classes that we offer.
- In our Education programs, we will try to build upon our current offerings with more thorough academic support and more opportunities for youth enrichment—such as trips and leadership development opportunities. In 2015, for example, we started a Youth Leadership program for 10th and 11th graders in our Expanded Horizons programs that are interested in learning about public policy and becoming agents of change in their communities. Henry Street's youth leaders have opportunities to lobby in NYC and Albany, attend policy-related meetings and events, and learn from a variety of New York City-based change-makers.

- Other policy responses that are favored by our community include limiting the amount of cops who have guns and reforming police training to eliminate racial bias and emphasize de-escalation tactics.
- While many believe in the potential of community policing and police reform, others noted that substantial change in the American justice system is necessary to address police brutality. Youth are troubled by instances in which police officers do not face consequences for breaking protocol or using excessive force. Without harsher and more consistent punishment for police misconduct, youth agreed, lasting change will not occur.

Henry Street Settlement is committed to pursuing budgetary, legislative, administrative and other policy changes that will positively impact our services and our community.