



HENRY STREET SETTLEMENT

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

MARCH 2017

INTRODUCTION

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 a brief summary of our findings in 2016 on the four core topics. The full report can be seen at henrystreet.org.

HOUSING & GENTRIFICATION

“What is being built in our community — both residential and commercial — is not being built for the people who already live here.” – TOWN HALL PARTICIPANT

For the third consecutive year, one of the top concerns of Lower East Side residents in both public and private housing was the lack of affordable housing and the fear of being “priced out” of their community. Below are selected comments.

- New housing developments in the neighborhood cater to wealthy newcomers. There are too few “affordable” units in new buildings.
- The government criteria used to determine affordability makes them out of reach for the vast majority of low-income New Yorkers and must be revised.
- The city’s affordable housing lottery system, HousingConnect, is inaccessible to non-English speakers and those lacking internet access. It should also be advertised and explained better. Some residents say they were discriminated against based on their race, ethnicity, or personal history.
- Landlords’ responsibility to accept housing vouchers and all rent increases should be regulated, and stronger rent control laws are needed.
- Families are being displaced and young people can’t afford to live where they grew up.
- There is concern about the displacement of affordable retail stores, especially grocery stores. Current stores sell food that is too expensive or of poor quality. Many residents must shop outside the neighborhood and would welcome food pantries with fresh produce.
- Residents are concerned that social services will disappear, that schools will lose the free lunch programs, and that arts and education programs will become unaffordable.
- Elected officials should have a larger presence in the community to understand community concerns, and should challenge developers who are transforming the neighborhood in favor of the wealthy.

- Many fear that NYCHA NextGeneration will accelerate the process of gentrification by converting open spaces and parking lots into market-rate housing. They are also concerned about efforts to digitize the lease renewal process, which would present challenges to those without internet access, causing tenants to lose their leases if they do not receive support navigating this process.
- Many expressed concerns about long waitlists for NYCHA apartments, the difficult and obtuse application process, and delays requesting unit transfers for special needs or older adult tenants. Residents requested support to deal with these issues, as well as a better understanding of their rights.
- NYCHA residents expressed frustration with long waits for building repairs, and incomplete and/or poorly done repairs. They also said that NYCHA does not keep buildings clean and that these issues are continuing to worsen.
- Elected officials, tenant leaders, social service providers, and community organizations should make a greater effort to ensure that residents — particularly seniors and those most vulnerable to displacement — are fully informed about neighborhood issues and the resources available to them, including community events, job opportunities, housing, and social services.
- Many suggested that additional Town Halls and community forums take place — especially in NYCHA buildings or residences with a large senior population.

EDUCATION

“As parents, the message we hear 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.” – TOWN HALL PARTICIPANT

LES residents are concerned about the overcrowded and underperforming schools in District 1. In conversations with parents, grandparents, students, and educators, we heard the following:

- Students in struggling schools are encouraged to “just get by.” If principals and teachers have low expectations, students will not achieve their full potential.
- There is a lack of quality middle schools and lack of seats in the two well-performing ones. The message parents hear from District 1 when selecting middle schools and high schools is to leave the district or switch to charter schools. Many would like to see improved middle and high school options *within* District 1.
- More support for English Language Learners and special needs students is required, with additional teachers/paraprofessionals in the classroom that have the appropriate training and experience.
- More effective and consistent communication from schools is needed, including help navigating the school selection process. Parents were particularly concerned about securing a seat in a quality District 1 school.
- Better communication for families of special needs students is needed, including help accessing evaluations and diagnoses.
- Multilingual communication is needed for non-English speaking families, including the translation of important flyers and notices. Interpreters are needed for parent teacher conferences.
- Improved parent engagement efforts would help teachers understand how students’ home lives are affecting their attendance and behaviors in school.
- Youth (age 14 and up) in our programs offered the following thoughts: Less focus on standardized testing, which is stressful, unfair to students with different learning styles and takes away from more substantive learning; teachers do not properly prepare students for standardized tests; student feedback regarding teachers is ignored; too much blame on students for poor performance; much more additional support is needed to help students apply to college.

EMPLOYMENT

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

– TOWN HALL PARTICIPANT

Many community members worry about money, employment, and finding the right path to financial security. Selected comments are below.

- There is a need for more job training programs and paid internships for adults (24+).
- A number of adults said that age discrimination is an issue, echoing the importance of creating employment programs that serve adults of all ages.
- Parents have difficulty finding affordable day care available during their working hours, and struggle to balance work with caretaking responsibilities.
- LES businesses should make an effort to hire local residents.
- Young adults are frustrated with the extensive experience required for entry-level positions and internships, long and competitive interview processes for service industry jobs, and demanding application processes for unpaid internships. Even after putting in all this work, it is rare to get a call back.
- Expand the Summer Youth Employment Program (SYEP) to allow more youth to get job experience.
- There is a need for workforce programs that directly connect jobseekers to jobs and/or skills-based training and

credential/certification opportunities, as well as a need for more vocational training opportunities.

- Many immigrants shared that speaking English is the most important job qualification and want more programs like Henry Street’s ESL program, which contextualizes language instruction with employment readiness.
- Raising the minimum wage is needed to help ensure financial security for low-income New Yorkers. Better benefits are needed, especially for part-time workers and working parents.
- The public assistance system is complex, difficult to navigate (especially for non-English speakers, seniors and those with special needs), and prone to technological glitches. Changes in eligibility from a slight rise in income can cause setbacks for low-income families seeking 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.” – TOWN HALL PARTICIPANT

Residents are concerned about safety in the neighborhood, and many shared the perception that, as drug use, crime, and violence increase, police presence and responsiveness seems to be lacking. Many — especially young people — are concerned about police misconduct and the need for police reform.

- Many longtime LES residents, especially seniors, want a stronger police presence, including more foot patrols in the neighborhood and NYCHA housing.
- Improved police responsiveness to concerns raised by NYCHA Resident Watch groups and community members in general is needed. Local precincts and PSAs should offer “community education” on how to report and respond to crime and suspicious activity.
- The NYPD should prioritize relationship building through meetings and Town Halls, and informal opportunities like pick-up basketball and volunteering.
- Many youth of color — especially those living in public housing — said they are targeted and racially profiled by the police. Police seem to prioritize the safety of incoming, wealthier residents and make low-income youth of color feel like intruders in their own neighborhood.
- Young people living on Avenue D shared that they are stopped frequently. During these interactions, some have experienced aggressive questioning and searching, disrespectful treatment, and fear of the interaction turning violent.
- Youth acknowledged that social media coverage of police brutality has heightened their fear and mistrust of the police.
- Communities must work together in order to advocate for improvements in police-community relations. There’s a need for youth to meet in person (instead of on social media) to organize around police reform.
- The NYPD can make officers more visible and trusted by deepening their commitment to community policing and establishing more foot and building patrols.
- The need for significant police and criminal justice reform is beyond the community level. Some suggested decriminalization of drug use and others called for an end to racial profiling.
- Some residents favored police body cameras while others felt that video footage rarely leads to justice.

- 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.



RESPONSE FROM HENRY STREET

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

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 tderogetis@henrystreet.org.

ENHANCING OUR PROGRAMS

- At the Abrons Arts Center, we will incorporate more family-oriented, affordable, culturally-diverse, and free/public performances that appeal to our entire community. We will also ensure that more people take advantage of scholarships/tuition assistance for our arts classes.
- In our Education programs, we hope to build upon and enhance our current academic support offerings and youth enrichment opportunities — such as trips and leadership development. We plan to expand, for example, upon our Youth Leadership Council, which empowers young people to become change agents in their community.
- The Good Companions Senior Center will consider adding additional arts and fitness activities. The senior services division, in response to requests for free case management (as neighborhood costs rise), will connect as many seniors as possible — particularly non-English speakers — to case managers for language, health, and housing issues.

Thank you for reading this report. Please send feedback to info@henrystreet.org.