



**Department of  
Youth & Community  
Development**

**TESTIMONY  
BEFORE THE NEW YORK CITY COUNCIL  
COMMITTEE ON YOUTH SERVICES**

**OVERSIGHT HEARING:  
“Connecting Young People to Volunteer  
Opportunities”**

**PRESENTED BY  
ASSOCIATE COMMISSIONER  
DARRYL RATTRAY**

**JANUARY 20, 2016**

Good morning Chairman Eugene and members of the Youth Services Committee. I'm Darryl Rattray, Associate Commissioner, Community Centers and Strategic Partnerships. I'm joined by Tracy Garcia, Director, Service Learning. Thank you for inviting us to testify today. We appreciate the City Council's interest in how young people become connected to volunteer opportunities. Research supports that volunteer opportunities can positively engage young people and give them experiences to learn and develop skills. A report entitled "Connecting Youth and Strengthening Communities: The Data Behind Civic Engagement and Economic Opportunity," released in September 2014 by Opportunity Nation states that:

*"...Volunteering is recognized as both a worthwhile activity in itself and as a pathway to long-term societal engagement, instilling a sense of civic responsibility that carries into adulthood. Researchers also find that youth who participate in service projects and join groups are significantly more likely to become adults who vote and engage in service to their community. Perhaps most importantly, volunteering often enables the acquisition of transferrable job-readiness and professional skills (computer literacy, problem solving, communication, teamwork, project management, etc.) and the strengthening of relationships and networks that build social capital which, in turn, can lead to additional positive opportunities."*

At DYCD, volunteer, community service, youth leadership and service learning opportunities permeate the programs we administer and fund. We have several long standing initiatives and programs that cultivate a sense of service and volunteerism among youth. These initiatives are created and driven by us, and allow DYCD providers to "plug in" to annual volunteer projects we already coordinate. At the program site level, DYCD providers also develop their own volunteer projects, with input from provider staff and the young people they serve. In my testimony today, I will highlight examples of both DYCD and provider initiated volunteer projects.

In response to President Obama's call to service in 2009, DYCD created Summer of Service, a 7-week initiative designed to encourage young people to take an active role in their community. In 2015, community service and volunteer events were held on 5 Thursdays from July 9 to August 7. DYCD partnered with the Neuberger Berman Foundation to make grants of \$2,500 dollars to \$3,500 dollars to 12 organizations to implement meaningful service and volunteer activities in communities across the city. In total, the projects engaged at least 600 elementary, middle, and high school youth volunteers and other community members. Summer of Service projects included:

- A mosaic artmaking project in the Bronx, that explored the borough's diverse communities. Participants researched the Bronx's various ethnic and cultural communities, built their awareness of different groups, and strengthened bonds with one another. Volunteers then created individual art pieces that were combined to form a larger mosaic art piece.
- Growing herbs and vegetables and maintaining and beautifying a community garden that benefits residents of the Urban Horizons affordable housing and community development center, nearby PS/IS 218, and the Morrisania Medicaid Center. The garden's fresh produce is crucial to supporting healthy eating habits, since one in four Bronx residents is obese. Produce grown in the garden is also used in Urban Horizons' kitchen, and distributed to the Morrisania Medicaid Center's single mothers.

Teen ACTION (Achieving Change Together In Our Neighborhoods), is DYCD's service learning program, offering participants the chance to engage in structured learning, service projects, and reflection. Participants, in grades 6 to 12 are provided an opportunity to develop life skills while making a meaningful contribution to their community. Program sites must complete two civic engagement projects per year. The young people take ownership of the projects from start to finish, which better instills a commitment to volunteerism and giving back. Teen ACTION programs seek to cultivate an ethic of service, develop life skills, critical thinking skills and leadership skills, and promote commitment to academic achievement.

Currently, there are 50 Teen ACTION programs. This year, up to 100 service-learning projects will take place in the 5 boroughs and cover the following themes: strengthening communities, civic engagement, education, health & well-being, social justice, and the environment. Each project incorporates youth voice and choice and engages the local community. Examples include volunteering at a local senior center as part of an intergenerational project, and visiting patients in a local hospital as part of a "Pillow Buddies" project where youth created handmade pillows to deliver.

Since 2009, DYCD has worked with non-profit providers to operate Cornerstone community centers in New York City Housing Authority developments. In 25 of the DYCD Cornerstone centers, we offer mentoring programs. One of the four pillars of Cornerstone mentoring programs is to help youth cultivate an ethic of service. To achieve this, programs engage youth in volunteering by participating in two (2) one-day community service projects each year. One is a large volunteer event, planned by DYCD. In Fiscal Year 2015, mentors and mentees completed 390 hours of community service at large-scale service events in partnership with MillionTreesNYC, Student Conservation Association, Friends of Van Cortland Park, and the Nature Conservancy's Jamaica Bay Wildlife Refuge. The second volunteer event is planned by the program's mentoring coordinators in partnership with the mentors and mentees. At the program site level, mentees have engaged in community beautification and park clean-up projects, and food and toy drives.

Our newest program where young people can develop leadership, civic participation and community service skills is the Mayor's Youth Leadership Council (MYLC), a two year project that offers 20 young people the chance to research a public policy issue and recommend proposed solutions to the Mayor. The first year is spent researching an issue and developing solutions. The second year is spent implementing solutions after meeting with the Mayor to hear his feedback. Youth were recruited citywide to join the Leadership Council, and required to submit an application and undergo interviews in order to be selected. Once selected, the teens were assigned hubs to represent. The hubs correspond to 10 Beacon or Cornerstone programs throughout the five boroughs, and also reflect specific regions of the boroughs. The 20 youth represent the interests and viewpoints of their local hub by strengthening their existing connections to the Beacon and Cornerstone programs in those neighborhoods or learning about them for the first time. Each hub also organizes and completes a community benefit project that offers volunteer opportunities for local youth and community members. Through this integrated citywide-neighborhood structure, youth learn how to develop public policy that is informed by local knowledge and community input.

DYCD funds hundreds of COMPASS (Comprehensive Afterschool System of NYC) afterschool programs each year. In addition to social, academic, arts and recreational activities, COMPASS programs offer special leadership and community service opportunities to its youth participants. This year, DYCD has initiated the following service projects:

- **SONYC (School's Out NYC) Game Changers** is an interactive youth-led leadership opportunity that will take place January through May across the city and culminate in a competition at DYCD's Youth Conference in May 2016. SONYC middle school participants develop and implement meaningful and community relevant leadership projects in the areas of sports and leadership, civic-engagement, arts and leadership, service-learning, and youth councils. Winning projects will demonstrate (1) an intentional focus on leadership skills, (2) a program design that supports learning by doing leadership or action and (3) opportunities for youth to reflect on their action or projects. Winners will present projects and compete at DYCD's Youth Conference in May 2016.
- From Jan. 18 to Jan. 31, COMPASS is sponsoring days of service in honor of Martin Luther King Jr. entitled "**Strengthening Communities and Creating Solutions.**" The MLK Days of Service allows young people to translate Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.'s life and teachings into community action that helps to address social problems. During these two weeks, COMPASS youth participants are encouraged to celebrate Dr. King through service projects with the themes of strengthening communities, empowering individuals, bridging barriers, and creating solutions. An example of one project is a letter writing campaign to establish a greenmarket to benefit the local community

In addition to DYCD driven COMPASS volunteer initiatives, DYCD providers also initiate projects at their program site, such as:

- The Pathways Prep Center Youth Council in St. Alban's Queens, held a coat drive during the month of December and collected over 30 coats. The coats were donated to the South Hollis branch of the Queens Library, to help with their city-wide coat drive.
- Manhattan Youth's Community Action Team at the Yorkville East Middle School organizes weekly meetings to discuss the basics of community service, including philanthropy, advocacy, development and community organizing. These meetings inform the design of service projects that positively impact their school and community. Highlights from the Fall semester include filming a public service announcement on the importance of getting involved in your community, volunteering at a bowling event for Special Olympics athletes, and collecting books and pajamas for the Pajama Program, which donates items to children in homeless shelters and high-needs neighborhoods -- 118 books were collected.

Volunteer and service opportunities are also available in DYCD's youth employment programs. In DYCD's federally funded Workforce Innovation and Opportunity Act (WIOA) In-School Youth (ISY) programs, there is a required program element in leadership, which allows for community service and service learning projects. This gives in school youth program participants the chance to engage in structured learning, service projects, and reflection. At least one community service opportunity and one service learning project are offered to participants each program year, and developed in partnership with the program participants. Examples of community service opportunities and projects include working in a soup kitchen;

distributing turkeys at Thanksgiving; a book collection drive for West Africa; organizing a community health fair; and environmental conservation.

In DYCD's Summer Youth Employment Program (SYEP), jobs for younger youth, ages 14-15 have community service and service learning components. When we developed the last SYEP Request for Proposals in 2013, we considered feedback from providers and worksites who all felt that younger youth aged 14 and 15 first entering the world of work need additional support. For some, a supportive work experience with additional educational hours would suffice. However, others would benefit much more from spending their first summer job in community service or service learning projects that gradually expose SYEP's youngest participants to the world of work.

In 2015, younger youth SYEP participants were engaged in community service and service learning projects covering topics such as health and wellness, college and career readiness, civic participation/social justice, nutrition, sexual and reproductive health, and environmental issues. One example of service learning jobs for younger youth was LaGuardia Community College's SYEP program. Three cohorts of young people conducted projects focusing on the importance of food banks, financial planning for healthy meals, and the role of multimedia in relaying the findings of the previous projects. The first cohort worked with a local food bank to distribute food to needy families. They also purchased canned goods to deliver to a local food pantry. Another cohort created a survey to determine spending habits of community members. The data was used to help families spend their dollars more wisely on healthier food. A third cohort produced a video documenting the projects of the first two cohorts. A culminating event showed the video and allowed all participants to share their projects, discuss what they learned, and reflect on their summer experience.

Starting this year, DYCD will begin recruiting youth members for the Neighborhood Advisory Boards (NAB), which along with the citywide Community Action Board and DYCD, governs the Neighborhood Development Areas (NDAs). Recently, the minimum age for NAB membership was lowered to 16 from 18, so that younger members can join. All NAB members serve in a volunteer capacity.

Through the city's 42 NDAs, \$15 million in federal "community action" Community Services Block Grant funding supports a range of programs and services for low-income residents, such as housing assistance, senior programs, adult literacy, healthy families, immigrant services, educational support for high school students, and a work readiness and internship program for out of school youth. Each NDA's Neighborhood Advisory Board helps DYCD identify program priorities and make recommendations on which programs are the most effective and responsive to meeting community needs. As such, it is important to better incorporate the voices of New York City's youth on the Neighborhood Advisory Boards. NAB members are expected to help conduct periodic needs assessments which include surveys and public hearings, and to meet at least quarterly to discuss local issues and service needs. Members also participate in annual events such as DYCD's Building Bridges workshop on basic fundraising for local community-based organizations, "Meet and Greet" community events with local service providers, and the annual National Night Out Against Crime. DYCD's NDA high school youth and seniors programs also promote youth volunteerism, such as high school aged youth in a "Reading Buddies" program to help younger youth strengthen their literacy skills; intergenerational programs where youth meet with seniors to do recreational activities together; and another program where they build and install planter boxes at the homes of seniors, to practice their gardening skills.

We have worked diligently over the years to embed volunteer, service and leadership opportunities for young people in many of DYCD's programs. For New York City youth who are not connected to our programs, but who seek volunteer opportunities, a good resource is NYC Service, which was created to connect New Yorkers to volunteer projects. Their website lists many age appropriate volunteer opportunities. Young people who want to volunteer can sign up by applying through the NYC Service website, which will submit their names to the organization sponsoring the volunteer activity.

Thank you again for the chance to testify today. We look forward to continuing to partner with the City Council on the best ways to connect youth to volunteer opportunities. We are happy to answer any questions.



January 20, 2016

**Isaac Scott at New York City Council Hearing**

RE: Connecting Young People to Volunteer Opportunities

I am the Arts and Communications Specialist at the Center for Justice at Columbia University. Some of my work there includes

- Providing research, writing and advisory services related to the experiences of incarceration,
- Administering the programming at Rikers for the Justice-in-Education Initiative

In addition to my work at the university, I am also the Co-Founder of Opportunities and Change, which is a newly founded solution driven non-profit organization. Our mission is to create and facilitate coinciding programs that will use the arts to address issues, beginning with reentry all the way to the social emotional well being of women and children.

One of the programs that we've created, **T.E.A.M. Arts** is a program that aims to serve children and youth categorized as "At-Risk" in East Harlem and surrounding communities by using the arts to provide alternatives to destructive behavior by introducing children and youth to different forms of creative expressions through the arts. In addition the program will provide volunteer opportunities for the youth to become more involved in the program by mentoring their younger peers in the program and becoming more involved in community development. Especially in the areas they reside.

We were able to identify some of the strengths of connecting young people to volunteer opportunities. They include:

- Volunteers have an enormous impact on the health and well being of communities worldwide.
- Volunteers discover hidden talents that may change their view of their self worth.
- Through working with local non-profit agencies and small businesses, volunteers learn about the functions and operation of our government as well as business management
- Volunteers gain knowledge of local resources available to solve community needs.
- Volunteering provides physical and mental rewards.
  1. **Reduces stress:** Experts report that when you focus on someone other than yourself, it interrupts usual tension-producing patterns.
  2. **Makes you healthier:** Moods and emotions, like optimism, joy, and control over one's fate, strengthen the immune system.

Equally important is the accessibility to these opportunities. These volunteer opportunities hold little value if the young people who need them cannot not access them, or even locate them. Flexibility within the eligibility process is paramount, as is the location of these services to young people who are stagnated by travel cost and commute.

To learn more about Opportunities and Change please visit our website at:

**[www.opportunitiesandchange.org](http://www.opportunitiesandchange.org)**



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I represent: DYCD

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I represent: Dept. of Youth.

Address: 2 Lafayette St.

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I represent: Center for Justice, Columbia/opp's change

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