



PUBLIC ADVOCATE FOR THE CITY OF NEW YORK

Jumaane D. Williams

**TESTIMONY OF PUBLIC ADVOCATE JUMAANE D. WILLIAMS
TO THE NEW YORK CITY COUNCIL COMMITTEE ON WOMEN AND GENDER
EQUITY AND COMMITTEE ON YOUTH SERVICES
NOVEMBER 18, 2020**

Good morning,

My name is Jumaane D. Williams, I am the Public Advocate for the City of New York. I would like to thank Chairs Rosenthal and Rose, and the members of the Committee on Women and Gender Equity and the Committee on Youth Services, for holding this very important hearing on the Department of Youth and Community Development's Learning Labs.

In July, the Mayor announced the creation of the "Learning Lab" child care program. He promised that this program would provide 100,000 child care spots in the Fall for families with young children and students who are enrolled in blended learning. The participants would receive full supervision by City staffers at locations such as libraries, community centers, and that of cultural organizations. The objective of the program was to provide child care for children enrolled in the hybrid model on their remote days. Programming would include activities like arts and crafts, recreation, tutoring, local field trips where possible, and social and emotional support. The City assured us that families would be able to access this program regardless of income level. The Administration explained that this program would be feasible by expanding its contracted early childhood portfolio, community programs, and after-school providers that are under contract with the Department of Youth and Community Development.

While this program is a responsible move on the part of the Administration, it does not go far enough. How could the City have created a program for only 100,000 students, when there are 1.1 million students enrolled in our public school system? Yes, Administration officials stated that the goal was to expand the program as more space was identified. However, DYCD's Discover website currently says that there are Learning Labs for 50,000 school-aged children in grades K-8, operating Mondays through Fridays from 8 AM to 3 PM. What is worse is that it was reported yesterday that only 18,000 Learning Lab seats have been filled. Both of these numbers are less than the amount that the Mayor promised this program would be able to accommodate four months ago. So rather than expand the program, the City failed to even meet its intended threshold. Given this information, it is essential that DYCD provide an accurate number of how many students are enrolled in its Learning Labs program, as well as explain its strategy for not only reaching the original goal of 100,000 students, but reaching all of our City's students who opted into the hybrid model. It is also important for us to know how many of our

3K students have been able to access this program, and in which neighborhoods the Learning Labs are located. We need to make sure that every family with a public school student, regardless of zip code, has the ability to access this child care program. Lastly, I recommend that any unused spots in the Learning Labs that remain unfilled for a certain period of time should be made available to families who have elected remote learning only, because this would make it easier for more working families to go back to work. We know that Black, Latin, and Asian parents are selecting remote learning at higher rates due to legitimate health and safety concerns about the City and the DOE's ability to accommodate students in the first place, let alone maintain them now. This is as much a working families issue as it is a racial justice issue.

The Coronavirus pandemic has drastically changed the way in which our 3-K-8 students are learning. Many of them are attending classes remotely, and many are spending part of the week in a school building for in-person instruction and the other part of the week in a different setting for remote classes. One thing is for certain though – our public school system does not only serve as our students' primary form of education; it also serves as child care for their families, many of whom have returned to work and do not have the ability to work from home to watch their children on remote days. Our City should have considered these working parents when creating this program, as well as evaluated DYCD's capacity to reach as many 3-K-8 students as possible. I look forward to hearing what steps DYCD has taken towards this objective. Thank you.



Testimony of Lena Bilik, Policy Analyst, Children's Aid

Submitted Testimony – Youth Services Hearing 11/18/20

DYCD Learning Labs

My name is Lena Bilik, Policy Analyst at Children's Aid. I would like to thank Chair Debi Rose and the members of the Youth Services Committee for the opportunity to submit testimony on the DYCD Learning Labs program during the COVID-19 pandemic. During the COVID-19 crisis, it has been clearer than ever that the city's youth services CBOs offer essential services to children and families, and now we have stepped up to provide support through the Learning Labs initiative.

For nearly 167 years, Children's Aid has been committed to ensuring that there are no boundaries to the aspirations of young people, and no limits to their potential. We are leading a comprehensive counterattack on the obstacles that threaten kids' achievements in school and in life. We have also constructed a continuum of services, positioned every step of the way throughout childhood that builds well-being and prepares young people to succeed at every level of education and every milestone of life. Today over 2,000 full and part time staff members empower nearly 50,000 children, youth and their families through our network of 40 locations including early childhood education centers, public schools, community centers and community health clinics in four New York City neighborhoods – Harlem, Washington Heights, the South Bronx, and the north shore of Staten Island. Children's Aid is a member of the Campaign for Children, the New York State Network for Youth Success, the New York State Community Schools Network, and the New York City Coalition for Community School Excellence, and as a member of these networks and alliances we are in support of their policy agendas. Together, we are on a mission to connect children with what they need to learn, grow, and lead successful, independent lives.

For over 25 years, Children's Aid has operated community schools in partnership with the New York City Department of Education. We believe the community schools strategy effectively removes the barriers to learning that get in the way of youth success – both academically and socially—and we believe this strategy is more relevant than ever right now. At our community schools, we integrate expanded learning programs, comprehensive health services (physical, mental health, dental, and vision), and family engagement strategies into each school building so that school staff can focus on teaching and children can focus on learning. Currently, Children's Aid partners with 21 community schools in New York City. Children's Aid community schools provide programs and services across four domains: academic, social-emotional, health and wellness, and family and home.

During this crisis, Children's Aid has continued this work, and has filled in many of the gaps in services that are causing real challenges for NYC students and families. Our staff has conducted 1:1 calls, emails, and zooms to check in with families on how remote learning/access were going, whether food was available, and general inquiry about needs and/or provision of community resources. Our centers also pivoted and collaborated with our Go Healthy program and other support services to provide grab and go meals, food boxes and bags, guitars, coloring books, crayons, and face masks to families. Because of the connection we have as a Founding Member of the Boys and Girls Club of America, we have been



able to leverage additional food to serve thousands of meals as well as PPE for staff, youth, and families. In addition to food, we have tried to pick up the slack to support the DOE and gave out tablets and laptops to children who had no devices to work during this hybrid model. Our staff has also been providing remote mental health, counseling, teletherapy, and social emotional support sessions for both students and parents. Our mental health support has been crucial; many of our students and families are facing real loss, fear, anxiety about the future, and depression.

Children's Aid, like many of our CBO partners, are now offering Learning Labs in addition to our other supports and programs, where children from age 3 through 8th grade can receive in-person child care during the days when they are participating in remote learning. These programs are run by CBOs and were launched in a matter of weeks. Children's Aid is operating 4 learning labs at Goodhue, Frederick Douglass, and Dunlevy Milbank Centers and PS 72.

We are honored to help serve as a critical part of the continuum supporting the city's children and families during these difficult times. These programs so far have brought both positive developments and challenges to our staff. One issue has been that CBOs have received conflicting guidance between city and state agencies and the Mayor's mandates, and the guidance received lacks standardization, which makes implementation, staffing, and budgeting very challenging. Some of the guidance makes all the more evident that the Administration repeatedly fails to include CBOs in the planning process – to ensure support for students and families continues as schools reopen and close, and as families juggle with ever-changing schedules and remote and in-person instructional needs. These providers serve many of the same communities that have been hit hardest by the pandemic, and their programs have always been vital to the academic, social-emotional, and physical well-being of youth. Service providers must be intimately involved in planning, development and delivery of services like Learning Labs during this school year, to ensure the entire educational system and its wraparound programs are safe, effective, and supportive. In order to continue providing in-person, blended, and full remote services, the City and State must figure out how to work together and commit to agile funding models to support nonprofit providers, who are and who have been the City's safety net throughout the pandemic.

Some of the positive aspects of running our Learning Labs have been:

- It has opened up our working relationships to new schools, letting more families know about the services Children's Aid offers.
- Our staff has appreciated the flexibility in activities we can offer students at the Learning Labs. This has allowed them to effectively respond to the students' needs during this difficult time when so many young people are struggling, and provide more social-emotional learning and creative activities to support them alongside the support of remote learning.
- Staff have expressed the positive aspect of being able to open our doors to young people and families who need support right now, and give those students who cannot effectively learn or do youth development activities at home a space to do so.

Some of the challenges facing Children's Aid staff running our Learning Labs:

Program issues:

- Schedules seem to change frequently, and there are multiple schedules depending on the feeder schools and classes. Staff express a need for a better system for the feeder school to



communicate directly with us in real time so we can make sure the children are on their computers and logged in when needed. Early on in the process, some school officials were not aware that we were their designated Learning Lab partner, so many parents did not know either. Even recently some parents were surprised to hear it from us when we called. We are working with parents and schools to establish this, but this is a big lift and support from the city would be helpful.

- Children have been assigned to Learning Labs with I.E.P.s that require extra supports or a paraprofessional, and this is not being implemented in Learning Labs, putting these students at a disadvantage and hindering their learning needs from being met.
- DOE assigning schools to the sites, without CBO input, has led to a vast majority of Children's Aid community members not being able to take part in the Learning Labs. As a result, for the first time in recent history, Children's Aid centers could not help families who have been with us for three to four generations, leaving our families confused and disappointed.
- Children who attend charter schools were not allowed into our Learning Labs - this is a large population of children that live in the communities where our Frederick Douglass and Milbank centers are located that we could not serve. There are still some parents in our communities who opted for blended learning but are not able to receive support for scheduled remote learning days because they were not able to register their child to a Learning Lab. Our staff learned that some of those parents had to quit their jobs.
- Although parents on Staten Island expressed appreciation that we were offering the Learning Lab service there, many live miles away from our location.

Rosters and Enrollment:

- The rosters constantly change, which makes attendance and enrollment tracking very difficult.
- There continue to be a number of families that are not responding to our multiple outreach efforts for enrollment (for example, at our Learning Lab at Frederick Douglass Community Center, 47 families out of 165 - 28% - have not responded).
- There have been a number of families that have declined services because the process of DOE connecting them to a site took too long. We have also received feedback from families that the application on DiscoverDYCD has been difficult for parents to maneuver. Accessibility is crucial to ensure that these programs actually reach the families who need them.
- DYCD and DOE are expecting that sites will have contracted numbers in attendance daily. This means that CBOs need to overenroll by at least 50% to make this happen- which is a logistical challenge based on school schedules varying.

The sector learned last week that in the event of a system-wide school closure, the Learning Labs will shift to being the emergency child care for the city. In that instance, it will be even more critical that nonprofit providers are involved in the planning. To do so without us will only cause challenges to getting these programs up and running to effectively serve the city.

Recommendations for Learning Labs in case of School Closure:

- Provide CBOs with contract flexibility, including around scheduling ("afterschool" services can happen at all hours); dosage (manage expectations around required number of hours for participants to attend activities); and attendance.
- Allow Learning Labs to provide afterschool to all participants **at the site** rather than have students go home at 3pm to log on to remote afterschool. Requiring students to leave at 3pm



to go home for remote programming will not help working parents' child care needs, when ostensibly these programs will be aiming to do just that.

- Allow providers to enroll outside of their feeder sites; there is a great need for the families that we have always served as well as in our feeder sites, which will likely only grow in the event of school closure.
- Provide additional resources needed to bring on more staff in Learning Labs that will be able to expand the number of students per day. It is important to note that Learning Labs were awarded a number of slots that were to be filled on a hybrid model. For instance, if you received 40 slots you would have 20 students on day A, and 20 students on day B. If, when schools close, all 40 students will be served by one site on both A and B days, then resources must be increased to serve students under the guidelines set forth (i.e. ratio of students to staff allowed in a pod).
- Restore the flexibility provided during the spring around background clearances to ensure that we will be able to staff up fast enough to provide emergency child care for all who need it.
- Provide a timeline for the school closure duration for Learning Labs providers, even if it is in stages or estimates. This has implications for our plans and staffing, and it will be invaluable to be kept in the loop.

We will continue to support children, youth, and families through this difficult time, and we stand ready to serve as emergency child care in the event of schools closing. Because of our organizations' uniquely trusted role and longstanding presence in the communities the Learning Labs seek to serve, we must be at the table for these kinds of initiatives. This is why we are joining our partners in calling on the city to prioritize youth, their families, and the workforce that provides vital youth and social services in the recovery process. The youth services sector is essential partner to the city, and a crucial key to getting families back to work. If the city does not prioritize it, the youth development sector will become destabilized, creating unnecessary setbacks to our work of critical youth development and child care support that could last years, if not decades, affecting the ability of the City to fully recover from this pandemic. The nonprofit sector at large must be adequately resourced to ensure that we can continue to provide these essential services that our city needs to keep children and families safe, healthy, and thriving. The challenges of this time have been exacerbated for the youth services sector by the recently announced \$3M cut to the Community Schools initiative and a \$10 million cut to Learning to Work; cuts that negatively impact the staffing levels, budgets, and capacity of the very same organizations that are running the Learning Labs. These cuts must be restored so that CBOs can continue to provide crucial services to the most vulnerable children in the city, and so that the youth services sector can survive.

The human services sector has the expertise, experience, cultural competency, and community trust to be an invaluable partner during this time. At times it seems that the Mayor's administration is forgetting the integral role that CBOs play in the city's response to the pandemic, from the additional support we've provided with remote learning, to the sector's role in emergency child care in the RECs, to the role we now play in the Learning Labs, to afterschool, remote learning support, food provisions, and mental health support. But none of that support can be sustainably provided unless the City commits to support the financial stability of the sector and sees us as a partner. A failure to do so would significantly harm the city's ability to effectively respond to and recover from this crisis.

As an agency committed to eradicating poverty in the neighborhoods that we serve, we will do all that we can to advocate, protect, and increase funding for the most under-resourced students and families in



NYC. We understand the challenges the City faces to meet the needs of the city's young people, especially given the academic and social-emotional challenges of families that have been exacerbated through this crisis. Children's Aid sincerely thanks the New York City Council for their vigorous support of children, youth, families, and communities in New York City, and we emphasize that we can be your partners to address the immediate needs of students and their families as we look to the months ahead.

Thank you again for the opportunity to submit testimony on this very important issue. Please feel free to contact me at lbilik@childrensaidnyc.org with any questions regarding this testimony.

Part I

Good Afternoon Chair Koo and Members on the Parks Committee; we are thankful that the committee is holding this hearing and allowing us to testify.

The New York City Council last held a hearing on the Historic Houses in 2005. A lot has changed in the last 15 years and we are excited to share those updates with the committee today. This testimony is representative of 14 of the independent nonprofit organizations that fall within the Historic House Trust. Together, we represent nearly 95% of the visitorship of these historic sites which are located on all five boroughs, most in areas less traveled by traditional tourists to New York City. Our institutions are part of New York City's rich cultural fabric and tell the story of the mosaic that makes up this city we all love. We are:

Bartow-Pell Mansion Museum in the Bronx

Hendrick I. Lott House, Old Stone House, and Wyckoff House Museum in Brooklyn

Dyckman Farmhouse, Merchant's House Museum, and Morris-Jumel Mansion Museum in Manhattan

The Bowne House, King Manor Museum, Kingsland Homestead, Lewis Latimer House Museum, and Queens County Farm Museum in Queens

Alice Austen House and Historic Richmond Town in Staten Island

For the ease of facilitating this important hearing, many of us gathered here, at nationally-designated site of LGBTQ history, Alice Austen House on Staten Island.

Part 2

When Historic House Trust was first established, we were a smaller collection of 15 houses – in varying stages of infrastructure, and most with modest budgets and no substantive funding potential. At the time, most of these institutions were run by volunteers and local boards, who were passionate, but lacked the operational, capital and marketing experience -and so despite the best of intentions, they were limited in what they could achieve.

In the past two decades our nonprofits have grown. Our operating budgets are now over a quarter million dollars each, and several of us sustain annual operating budgets much higher than that. Our staffs have evolved, providing the leadership, and expertise in marketing, communications and other areas that allow each of us to reach target audiences and partially control our own destinies. We have also grown in the relevance of our missions and quality of our programming to become vital parts of our immediate communities. We have individually made great strides in terms of accessibility as well, welcoming and serving differently-abled and neuro-diverse audiences. We are not here merely for an unsustainable audience of one-time visits by a minute audience of historical tourists – but have become part of the fabric of our respective local communities and develop customers for life. We invest deeply in our local area, as our neighbors are the repeat visitors for whom we exist – and we inspire multi-borough tourism.

However, fundraising is always a challenge, and as I'm sure you are keenly aware, we are often burdened by the dichotomy of operating and capital funding. Accordingly we seek reciprocal recognition and commensurate support from the City for our investment in our largely underserved communities. Our nonprofits need direct support. Investment in our organizations through capital and operational support is an investment in New York City.

Part 3

Our nonprofit organizations are the stewards of these historic sites which are situated on New York City parkland throughout the five boroughs. Collectively, we manage buildings and properties that represent over 350 years of New York City history. We value our relationship with the Parks Department, and look forward to it evolving to more accurately reflect our status as independent nonprofits that are quite different today than that which existed in 1989. Our nonprofits tell the story of how New York City grew around them; and our core work is to provide impactful educational, cultural and enrichment programs, public events, and volunteer opportunities for our surrounding communities, often in multiple languages for an immigrant audience. Not one of our houses resides on Museum Mile in Manhattan. In fact, most are primarily in geographically remote, residential corners of the city and are recognized in the 2017 Social Impact of the Arts Project (SIAP) as being in areas of low economic well-being. The highly relevant and meaningful resources we provide are essential to these underserved communities which are located very far from the city's large cultural organizations. We meet the needs of audiences who cannot/do not visit large museums for geographic, economic, and cultural reasons, making us true community cornerstones in the areas that need it most.

As several of those who spoke before us iterated, each one of our cultural nonprofits makes a difference by enriching our communities, fostering connections, caring for and managing our facilities, and telling stories that matter to our audiences. We don't sit around playing historical dress-up! We engage youth and vulnerable communities, and give them hope as they see themselves reflected in our work. We are safe places for critical thinking, gathering, and for learning. We enrich the lives of all who come through our doors, across our grounds, and access our online materials.

Part 4

In addition to operating within historic, landmarked buildings owned by the Department of Parks and Recreation, we are also deeply embedded in the cultural sector. In October 2019, NYC Comptroller Scott M. Stringer released the report *The Creative Economy, Art and Culture in New York City*. This report serves as a benchmark for the creative sector and cultural community and gives a detailed analysis of what this sector looks like at its strongest. While the report mentions DCLA, the Mayor's Office of Media and Entertainment, Economic Development Corporation, and NYC & Co. as agencies that support the creative sector, the Historic House Trust and the NYC Parks Dept are conspicuous in their absence.

Two recommendations outlined in the report, which seem particularly apt for our nonprofits, are 1) to improve the capital funding process for cultural nonprofits and 2) to deepen our connections to local communities.

The report also urges that to “fortify and grow the creative sector and expand access to New Yorkers of all incomes and ethnicities, the City must first and foremost treat the sector as the economic engine and resource center that it is.”

The creative sector accounts for fully 13% of the City's total economic output. The collective economic impact of our nonprofits is significant, and the ability of our individual 501c3s to welcome -and be relevant to- diverse communities as mentioned in the Comptroller's report is undeniable.

As our city fights back from the Covid-19 public health crisis and fewer people travel to or even within the City, local communities will be the driving force behind the City's economic recovery.

We each continually rise to meet the needs of our neighborhoods. As small nonprofits, stewards of parkland, and fixtures within our individual communities, we pivoted quickly to adapt our operations to the ensuing health crisis. While our museum doors were closed, our nonprofits actively addressed the needs of our city's citizens from at-home education, to food access to health and wellness initiatives, including distributing PPE. Our virtual programming garnered nearly one million impressions.

Part 5

For so many of us, our most urgent need is the autonomy to grow and the City's support so that we can sustainably (and equitably) serve our communities as they too, grow and diversify. The need to be nimble has been further amplified during COVID-19. Fresh eyes on the operational structure of Historic House Trust seems necessary so that we, the nonprofits that manage these historic sites, can effectively respond to the needs of our audiences. Moreover, this mission-critical work is not possible without ensuring the stability and maintenance of the historic structures that house our nonprofits.

We are professional organizations, each with a mission statement that guides how we activate our sites. Each of us devotes countless hours of strategic planning, management, fundraising, and creativity to strengthen our organizations. We are collaborative, agile, and resourceful. We hire staff to support our organization's mission and growth. We work with local vendors and collaborate with partners that support this growth.

Since the last hearing fifteen years ago, we have each grown tremendously. One of the few silver linings of this pandemic is the way it shed light on our nonprofits' ability to respond nimbly to crisis and that our flexibility is key to our ability to be similarly responsive going forward.

Although we are historic sites, we are NOT stuck in the past! We are continually reinventing ourselves as relevant cultural institutions to serve our diverse communities.

Fresh eyes on this process will hopefully eliminate redundancies and create transparent and streamlined pathways for us going forward.

Thank you so much for the opportunity to share this testimony. We are happy to answer any questions the committee has either as a group or as individual sites.

Signed by the Executive Directors and/or Boards of the following House nonprofits:

Bartow-Pell Mansion Museum, Bronx

Hendrick I. Lott House, Brooklyn

Old Stone House, Brooklyn

Wyckoff House Museum, Brooklyn

Dyckman Farmhouse, Manhattan

Merchant's House Museum, Manhattan

Morris-Jumel Mansion Museum, Manhattan

The Bowne House, Queens

King Manor Museum, Queens

Kingsland Homestead, Queens

Lewis Latimer House Museum, Queens

Queens County Farm Museum, Queens

Alice Austen House, Staten Island

Historic Richmond Town, Staten Island

**Submitted Testimony of Good Shepherd Services
Before the New York City Council Committee on Youth Services and the Committee on
Women and Gender Equity**

Oversight – DYCD Learning Labs

**Submitted by
Faith Thomas, Government Contracts and Implementation Manager
Good Shepherd Services**

November 18, 2020

Thank you Chair Rose, Chair Rosenthal and the Council Members of the Committee on Youth Services and Women and Gender Equity for the opportunity to submit testimony on the New York City Department of Youth and Community Development’s (NYC DYCD) Learning Labs.

Guided by social and racial justice, Good Shepherd Services (GSS) partners and grows with communities so that all NYC children, youth, and families succeed and thrive. We provide quality, effective services that deepen connections between family members, within schools, and among neighbors. We work closely with community leaders to advocate, both locally and nationally, on behalf of our participants to make New York City a better place to live and work.

Today, we operate 20 afterschool programs, 7 Community Schools, 10 Young Adult Borough Centers (YABCs) and 4 Partnerships Schools, with our 14 YABCs and Partnership Schools supported through the Learning to Work (LTW) Program. Currently, we also operate 5 Learning Labs (LLs), 2 at our Cornerstone Community Centers located in NYC Housing Authority Community Centers; 1 at our Prince Joshua Avitto Community Center; 1 in partnership with a DOE Public School; and we are currently finalizing Learning Lab programming logistics at a Brooklyn library. Annually, our educational programs serve over 10,000 students.

This testimony focuses on the significant challenges Good Shepherd has experienced with the startup of the LLs and its implementation to date.

Learning Lab Access

Until a few weeks ago, LLs feeder school assignments were assigned without CBOs/families’ ability to request changes. Initially, CBOs were asked to complete a survey (by DYCD) noting their preference of 5 “feeder schools,” representing schools with CBOs’ strongest collaboration among school leadership, families and other community stakeholders for decades. These relationships remained essential, particularly last school year, as CBOs provided essential services to families during school closures to include wellness calls, supply distribution, enriching academic and social emotional learning services. From the five feeder sites that Good Shepherd selected, only one was matched which meant that, families from the other 4 sites, could not elect to attend the GSS' LLs. The assigned LLs was the family's only LL option. Good Shepherd’s Learning Labs received numerous calls from frustrated families unable to enroll their children at our sites. The lack of coordination between DYCD and DOE to provide families with

LLs choice created many challenges for families as they navigated coordinating transportation to unfamiliar feeder sites/neighborhoods. For example, the partnership Good Shepherd has had at the Beacon at P.S. 15 for over 40 years, was greatly disserved as families could not attend the Miccio Cornerstone Learning Lab, a site that is a 10-minute walk from the school and a known location. Good Shepherd's inability to support local families was a missed opportunity to provide the stability of a familiar location and staff at this unprecedented time.

While CBOs LLs feeder sites have been expanded, challenges remain for families seeking true choice in their LLs selection. Some families have finally been placed in their ideal LLs' location but the enrollment process can take weeks depending on the child's placement on the LLs roster. CBOs must enroll students in the roster's order and must provide adequate follow up with the parents before moving down the roster list. Families would have benefited from having had the expansion of feeder sites earlier in the school year to allow them to enroll at their preferred LLs environments efficiently. Unlike the LLs feeder sites expansion, the LLs family criteria has remained unchanged. Charter School participants are still unable to enrolled at LLs, with few alternatives for families to secure affordable, safe enriching childcare for their children when they are scheduled for remote days.

Technology disparities among DOE students continues this school year and remains a challenge for families and LLs CBOs. New students are still waiting for their technology equipment and are unable to complete their remote assignments. Students that share devices with their siblings also suffer during LLs if their siblings are matched to other sites. There are also participants with broken devices who are unable to connect to the LLs internet. The school year continues and the participants' lack of equipment hinders their learning ability and educational engagement.

Learning Lab Safety

With the expansion of LLs' feeder sites, CBOs are experiencing challenges in maintaining safe cohorts to decrease both participant and staff exposure to COVID-19. The DYCD guidance on cohort structures includes creating cohorts by school cohorts, grades, and same schools among other criteria. However, as the LLs pool of participants has increased, cohorts are also being forced to increase and unlike DOE staff, CBOs' staff are exposed to different student cohorts daily and have limited classrooms availability. Additionally, CBOs do not have the staff to accommodate more groups and our cohorts will become blended with different schools. Providers need clear, direct guidance in building new cohorts given these circumstances and staff limitations. The guidance must be provided in a timely matter for providers to ensure the safety of staff and participants at the LLs.

It is essential that CBOs be included in all planning discussions around our education system's health and safety policies and procedures going forward. CBOs still lack regular on-site nurses; this month DYCD announced nurses will begin visiting sites at least once every 4 – 6 weeks. If issues arise on days without the on-site nurse, CBOs may utilize the tele-nurse hotline. Additionally, CBOs are oftentimes the last to know of school closures. For example, this week DYCD notified us of a school closure due to a DOHMH COVID-19 investigation. CBOs must be notified at the same time that DYCD and DOE are aware of COVID-19 investigations to notify our staff of exposure risks and to coordinate immediate cleaning, specifically for our

community center-based LLs that regulate their own cleaning. Community Center-based LLs service with multiple feeder schools must contact parents immediately to notify them of exposure risks and potential LLs closures. Failure to inform CBOs of COVID-19 cases is dangerous and a disservice to the larger educational community.

As you know, LLs are expected to remain open should the City reach the 3% threshold but more guidance is needed to help CBOs and families plan during school closures. CBOs depend on collaboration between City agencies to share information. Currently, there is no guidance on LLs addressing the growing community needs during school closures. Many of our LLs participants are enrolled in our afterschool programs and are in LLs buildings from 8 am – 6 pm. During school closures, LLs parents are forced to arrange safe, quality afternoon childcare for their students without adequate notification and planning time.

Learning Lab Services to Student Populations with Additional Needs

Unlike a typical school day, LLs do not have access to support services, particularly for younger students. There is no guidance on how CBOs can secure assistance and resources for LLs participants in need of resources such as Paras, participants with additional special needs, or English Language Learners participants. There must be a step-by-step process for LLs to request these services from experienced, trained staff. This process is crucial as LLs feeder sites continue to grow and more participants are assigned to LLs.

Administrative Implementation & Organization

The current everchanging COVID-19 landscape continues to evolve LLs practices, resulting in multiple DYCD communication to CBOs throughout a given week. CBOs have to continuously navigate numerous emails and survey requests from multiple DYCD teams. While DYCD has updated their 20-21 School Year Operation Guide to include LLs, additional updates to the guide are needed to reference major practices updates and guidance.

Community members are also finding it difficult to navigate the multiple agencies overseeing LLs, particularly with the overall LLs enrollment and application process. The process includes a multi-step, multi-agency system from an initial DOE LLs survey, to the discoverDYCD/DYCD CONNECT portal, to additional enrollment paperwork. This process may also include families reaching out to the Learning Bridges' general email/DYCD's IT Team if their application is not received by the CBO, which additionally prolongs the LLs enrollment process. A clear enrollment process is needed with timely responses from DOE and DYCD support teams to shorten the enrollment process and allow families' access to LLs services as quickly as possible.

Learning Lab Staffing Training and Clearances

CBOs are currently recovering from organizational changes that included furloughing/laying off record number of staff this past summer due to DYCD cuts to summer programming. As DYCD confirmed summer restoration, CBOs quickly pivoted to rehiring former staff as well as finding and hiring new staff. These staff transitions have left gaps in staff trainings such as the LLs-

required Food Handlers Certification. While required, no training dates have been established as assured by DYCD as we continue to move further into the school year.

Learning Lab programs follow DOHMH School Age Child Care (SACC) regulations and licenses, joining a system currently backlogged in staffing clearances and SACC renewals. The current staffing clearance system started in September 2019 and has resulted in staff waiting months for required clearance letters. The wait time has only increased as DOHMH's staff navigate working from home and gaining access to their internal systems. As mentioned previously, CBOs are still recovering from unprecedented massive layoffs and rehiring. New staff that are cleared through the DOHMH State Central Register of Child Abuse and Maltreatment can work while their other clearances are processed but must always be supervised by cleared staff. LLs oftentimes do not have pre-cleared staff who can provide the supervision. DOHMH must clear the backlog to ensure all DYCD-funded CBO staff, including LLs staff, be fully utilized and able to fully perform their job duties. This backlog extends to SACC renewals, a process largely based on physical copies of paper hand delivered to DOHMH offices. Currently GSS has 12 programs still in their renewal process, with many submissions dating back since this spring.

Obtaining a new SACC license in a backlogged system is not efficient and prevents CBOs from expanding their LLs services. Currently, LLs not operating in current CBOs SACC programs can only operate as single service programs until their SACC license is approved. As LLs continue to expand to more schools and non-traditional location (i.e. libraries), DOHMH and DYCD must prioritize these sites receiving their approved School Age Child Care (SACC) Licenses in a timely manner.

Cornerstone-based Learning Labs

GSS operates LLs in both of our Cornerstones, DYCD-funded NYCHA Community Centers. Both Cornerstones operate in older buildings, resulting in multiple facilities tickets that can take months or even years to properly service. Each year, Good Shepherd is forced to modify programs because of facility issues such as extreme temperatures, leaks and broken fixtures. The unaddressed NYCHA facility tickets continues to accumulate, increasing the likelihood that LLs programming can be negatively impacted or potentially canceled. More coordination is needed between DYCD and NYCHA to ensure facility repairs are addressed in a timely fashion. Last school year, Good Shepherd was forced to close Cornerstone programs due to ongoing repairs. Families cannot afford building closures during the pandemic.

Recommendations

In order to support the CBOs who play an integral role in ensuring the success of LLs, GSS strongly supports the United Neighborhood Houses (UNH) LLs recommendations shared in their testimony.

Have clear, consistent communication with LLs providers if New York City faces a system-wide school building shutdown.

DOHMH in partnership with DYCD, should email providers each day with that day's citywide COVID-19 testing rate, so that everyone is receiving the same information and is up to speed on whether school buildings might close. This will ensure that providers are ready for school building closures, should the school reach that point.

Maintain consistent funding for LLs regardless of enrollment or attendance.

Learning Labs are an emergency child care system. They are needed by the essential workers who depend on them and are valuable to the children who participate. The LLs must be maintained for those families that do need them, when they need them. Therefore, LLs budgets should remain consistent regardless of enrollment and attendance.

• **Allow greater flexibility in contracts around scheduling.** CBOs receive a roster of students from the DOE, but that roster does not include when those students have remote or in-person days in their schools. CBOs need the ability to manage their own schedules to maintain socially distanced small group sizes, ensure adequate staff at all times and that students are present, and maintain a pod model consistent with the children's schools.

Learning Labs operate as an emergency child care system. LLs should not be penalized for meeting the needs of families who need partial day coverage and should have the flexibility to schedule students for shorter periods than the full school day.

Provide additional resources needed to bring on more staff in LLs that will be able to expand the number of students per day.

Learning Labs were awarded with a number of slots that were to be filled on a hybrid model. If schools are shut down, Learning Labs will be expected to provide services for the same children. A LL slot was designed to serve more than one child. But that model does not work if students have no in-person school days. For instance, if a LL received 40 slots. It will serve 20 students on day A, and 20 students on day B. If schools close, and all 40 students will be served by one site on both A and B days, then resources and funding levels must be increased to serve students under the health and safety guidelines.

Provide incentive pay to the staff working in LLs in the event of school building closures. School building closures indicate that COVID-19 transmission levels are so high, that it is not safe to continue in-person schooling. However, the City has indicated that CBO staff will still be expected to operate LLs in-person. These staff must receive incentive pay to recognize the health and safety risks they are taking.

Clear the Backlog of staff awaiting Comprehensive Background Checks.

Many LLs operate on the restrictive single use license because they cannot get their staff cleared through for the School Aged Child Care License which would permit a greater amount of activity.

Begin planning for long-term school building closures.

At the moment, New York City faces a second wave of COVID-19, and thus potential long-term closures of New York City school buildings like in spring 2020. While our city must do

everything in its power to avoid that level of disruption to students' education, the city must also begin planning for the possibility of long-term school building closures. If LLs will continue as the main form of emergency child care in that instance, they will need more resources and space (as referenced above).

Thank you for the opportunity to submit our testimony. I am happy to answer any questions and can be contacted for more information at Faith_Thomas@GoodShepherds.org.



Testimony of UJA-Federation of New York

**New York City Council Committees on Youth Services and Women and Gender Equity
Oversight Hearing-DYCD Learning Labs**

**Submitted by:
Faith Behum, UJA-Federation of New York**

November 18, 2020

Thank you to Chairpersons Rose and Rosenthal for the opportunity to submit testimony on the Department of Youth and Community Development (DYCD) Learning Labs. My name is Faith Behum and I am an advocacy and policy advisor at UJA-Federation of New York.

Established more than 100 years ago, UJA-Federation of New York is one of the nation's largest local philanthropies. Central to UJA's mission is to care for those in need-- identifying and meeting the needs of New Yorkers of all backgrounds and Jews everywhere. UJA connects people to their communities, responds to crises in New York, Israel and around the world, and supports nearly 100 nonprofit organizations serving those that are most vulnerable and in need of programs and services.

Ten of UJA's nonprofit partners oversee Learning Labs, providing services and supports to children and youth in all five New York City boroughs. Below are issues UJA's nonprofit partners have experienced overseeing the Learning Labs as well as recommendations on how to strengthen the program.

Comprehensive Background Checks

Since September 2019, the New York State Office of Children and Family Services (OCFS) has required new extensive background checks for staff and volunteers in youth and early childhood education programs. The background checks are required by rules in the Federal Childcare and Community Development Block Grant that was reauthorized and revised in 2014. As the local regulator, the background check process is managed in New York City by the Department of Health and Mental Hygiene (DOHMH). Throughout the pandemic, DOHMH has continued to struggle to complete the background checks in a timely manner causing delays in the hiring process for staff members in Learning Labs. Programs have reported having to wait a minimum of *two months* to get staff fully cleared. OCFS allows prospective staff to work in programs if they are supervised by fully cleared staff. However, this only works when there are enough cleared staff to oversee the prospective staff awaiting their clearances. Learning Labs are struggling to fill their staffing quotas due to pending background checks at the DOHMH. The delays in completing background checks are unacceptable at a time when parents and guardians ability to return to work hinges on the availability of reliable childcare options.

UJA urges DYCD to assist DOHMH in expediting the comprehensive background check process, ultimately making DOHMH commit to a two-week maximum timeframe to complete checks. DYCD must hold providers harmless from any penalties for under-enrollment until processes have been established to clear staff. Providers support rigorous background checks for all staff and need their partners in government to process background checks quickly and efficiently so providers can operate programs in this constantly changing environment.

Issues with Kosher Food in Learning Labs

In order to meet the food requirement for the Learning Lab program, providers are required to pick up meals from DOE Grab&Go sites throughout the city. Because many of UJA's nonprofit partners require kosher meals, a staff member must travel to the closest kosher meal site, which is not always close to the Learning Lab program site. In many cases, providers must invest a significant amount of staff time – due to distance as well as traffic—to travel to pick up these meals. Furthermore, UJA agencies have reported experiencing issues with the Grab&Go program, including with the meal quality-many report a lack of variety and unappealing cold meals; food being inappropriate to meet the nutritional needs of the children and youth; and an insufficient number of meals available for participants in their programs. UJA agencies have reported having to throw out food received through this program due to spoilage, poor quality or dietary standards not being met resulting in a significant waste of food and city funding.

UJA urges the DOE to resolve these issues at the Grab&Go sites so that providers that require kosher food have easier access to nutritious, fresh food for their participants. Additionally, UJA urges DYCD to explore ways in which providers can use their own kosher caterers and be reimbursed for providing meals which would eliminate the travel requirement as well as ensure that the meals are of high quality and nutritionally adequate.

Lack of Consistent Guidance on School Closures, COVID hotspots, and COVID exposures in schools

Eight of UJA's nonprofit partners oversee services in the recently established yellow, orange or red COVID zones. In early October, the closure of schools in red and orange zones, disrupted how services could be provided to children and youth in Learning Labs. Learning Lab providers received inconsistent messaging, specifically from DYCD, on the status of their programs when the Cluster Action Initiative was announced by Governor Cuomo. It is incumbent upon New York City to consistently implement and communicate program changes to providers as we experience a second wave of COVID-19 and directives come down from the State.

Learning Lab providers also receive little information regarding school closures from the schools their programs are matched with. Individual schools with staff and/or students who tested positive for COVID and must close do not relay this information to Learning Labs who serve children from these schools. Learning Lab providers have urged principals and other school staff to contact them when their schools must close. Unfortunately, Learning Lab providers are often the last to know when a school must shut down. On November 13th, DYCD notified Learning Lab providers that if **all** public schools transitioned to remote learning that, "Learning Labs will remain open to provide childcare to those families who need it most." DYCD has not provided any guidance to Learning Lab programs if they are required to continue to serve children and youth from individual schools that have been shut down.

On Monday, November 16th, Mayor de Blasio announced that the Learning Labs will remain open, regardless of whether the City exceeds the three percent threshold, to provide childcare for the children of essential workers or any other families that are determined by the City to need childcare. The Learning Labs do not have the capacity to serve the children of all essential workers or other families that are determined by the City to need childcare. The Learning Labs are not Regional Enrichment Centers (RECs) which were operated between March and September by the DOE and community-based organizations, to provide childcare for New York City's essential workers. The RECs had the capacity to serve more children and youth. The Learning Labs will require additional staff, space and funding for items such as PPE in order for these programs to safely serve more children and youth and match the capacity of the RECs.

Since the Learning Lab initiative was introduced, DYCD has been unclear what is expected of programs if and when schools are required to go remote. The guidance provided is reactionary and often leaves Learning Lab providers with more questions than answers. **UJA urges DYCD to be proactive in developing guidance for their programs especially in instances when increased COVID infection rates will impact their ability to provide in-person services and more children and youth will require childcare options.**

Schools assigned to Learning Lab Programs

Learning Lab providers are matched to schools and can only serve children in their programs who attend these schools. On October 23rd, DYCD notified Learning Lab providers that their number of matched schools would be increased, allowing additional students to participate in their Learning Lab programs. In some cases, this resulted in Learning Lab programs being matched to too many schools. One of UJA's nonprofit partners is matched to eleven schools resulting in a scheduling nightmare for this particular program. Providers have no say in how many schools they are matched with-causing these programs to be overwhelmed by the various school schedules they need to build Learning Lab services around. **UJA urges DYCD to work with providers to make sure they are matched with the appropriate number of schools for their Learning Lab program and site.**

Reimbursement

Enrollment in Learning Lab programs often exceeds the number of children/youth who actually attend the programs daily, and the cost of running Learning Lab programs remains constant regardless of how many children or youth attend the program. Providers are still unsure if they will be compensated the full amount of their contract, and few providers have yet to be reimbursed for overseeing Learning Labs. **UJA urges DYCD to compensate Learning Lab providers for the full amount of their contract regardless of daily attendance at their program and to compensate Learning Labs promptly.**

Barriers to Participating in Learning Labs for Children and Youth with Disabilities

UJA's network of nonprofit partners oversees a variety of services (including after-school and summer programs) for individuals with disabilities. Each nonprofit provides these services in an inclusive environment, providing the staff and additional supports that individuals with disabilities need to benefit from the programs. Many of the individuals have attended programming at UJA's community-based organizations for multiple years and have familiarized themselves with the staff and the environment the programs are delivered in. These individuals feel comfortable attending programs at UJA's agencies, viewing them largely as a home away from home.

UJA agencies saw the Learning Lab initiative as an opportunity to support children and youth (including those with disabilities) as they navigate remote learning and provide a safe place for families to leave their children as they returned to work. When Learning Labs were first announced, students with disabilities were one of the groups indicated as being prioritized to benefit from the program. Unfortunately, due to the manner in which children and youth are placed in Learning Labs few students with disabilities have benefitted from this program at UJA agencies.

To apply for the Learning Labs, parents or guardians must complete an application through the DOE. The DOE reviews the application, indicates if the applicant should be prioritized for a spot in a program and then uses their school's location to place the individual in a Learning Lab. Parents or guardians have no say in which Learning Lab program their child will attend. Learning Lab providers can only accept the children or youth into their program who have been assigned to their program by the DOE.

There are a few issues with this. In general, a number of children and youth (including those without disabilities) have not been matched with the Learning Lab program that is closest to their school or home. Transportation is not provided for Learning Lab participants. Parents or guardians are responsible for dropping their children off at the programs. Many families have decided not to participate in the program because of the amount of time the commute takes for them to drop-off and pick-up their children.

Many individuals with disabilities were not matched with the Learning Labs at UJA nonprofits where they already attend programs. These individuals were placed in programs and with staff they are not familiar with-a huge oversight on the part of the DOE who match children with Learning Lab programs. It is incredibly challenging for individuals with disabilities to adapt to a new program and staff after largely being at home with their families for more than eight months. Parents or guardians have approached UJA's partners and requested their child be allowed to attend a Learning Lab program at their agencies. UJA's partners have stated they have space in their programs for these children but unfortunately cannot serve them due to the DOE and DYCD policy that providers can only offer services to the children who were assigned to their Learning Lab rosters. Some of these children are actually enrolled in a UJA agency afterschool program but were assigned to a Learning Lab outside the agency. These children could benefit from a full day program, but because their Learning Lab is located in a different location than their afterschool program, it is difficult for them to get to the afterschool program.

Because families are offered no choice in which Learning Lab program their children will attend, many are choosing not to send their children with disabilities either due to distance or lack of familiarity with the provider. This results in children and youth with disabilities relying on their parents or guardians to support them on the days they are enrolled in remote learning, making it impossible for parents or guardians to go back to work.

Support on remote learning days outside the Learning Lab programs is lacking for children and youth with disabilities. Even those who are fortunate to receive community services, like respite through the Medicaid waiver program, cannot utilize these supports during school hours

when they are being instructed either remotely or in-person. If a child or youth with disabilities cannot attend a Learning Lab program, there are limited support options available to them. UJA understands the need for Learning Lab assignments to be carefully monitored by the DOE in order to ensure children and youth are maintaining stagnant cohorts. Unfortunately, the process that DOE used to connect students to Learning Labs has proven faulty, resulting in children being assigned to Learning Labs that are either too far away from their home or placed with providers they are not familiar with. **UJA urges the DOE and DYCD to allow providers to host children and youth with disabilities who were not included in their initial roster in their Learning Lab programs in order for these individuals to have a better chance to benefit from this program.**

Programs that do have individuals with disabilities in their Learning Labs are finding it incredibly difficult to support these participants appropriately. Many of these individuals require one-on-one supports when they attend school and also require this when they are engaging in remote learning. Learning Lab contracts offer no additional financial assistance for programs to provide these supports. **UJA urges DYCD to increase the per participant rate for Learning Lab providers who have students with disabilities enrolled in their program in order for these individuals to get the supports they need to engage in remote learning.**

Conclusion

Thank you for the opportunity to submit testimony. UJA looks forward to working closely with the Council and the Administration in order to continue to provide the services and supports children and their families need in their communities during this unprecedented time. Please contact Faith Behum behumf@ujafedny.org or 212-836-1338 with any questions.



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**Testimony of United Neighborhood Houses
Before the New York City Council Committee on Youth
Honorable Debi Rose, Chair
And the New York City Council Committee on Gender Equity
Honorable Helen Rosenthal, Chair**

**Oversight – DYCD Learning Labs
Presented by Gregory Brender, Director of Children and Youth Services**

November 18, 2020

Thank you Chair Rose and Chair Rosenthal and members of the Committee on Youth and the Committee on Gender Equity for the opportunity to testify about Learning Labs. United Neighborhood Houses (UNH) is a policy and social change organization representing 44 neighborhood settlement houses that reach 765,000 New Yorkers from all walks of life.

A progressive leader for more than 100 years, UNH is stewarding a new era for New York’s settlement house movement. We mobilize our members and their communities to advocate for good public policies and promote strong organizations and practices that keep neighborhoods resilient and thriving for all New Yorkers. UNH leads advocacy and partners with our members on a range of issues including civic and community engagement, neighborhood affordability, healthy aging, early childhood education, adult literacy, and youth development. We also provide professional development and peer learning to build the skills and leadership capabilities of settlement house staff at all levels.

This testimony focuses on the significant challenges that the City’s community-based organizations who support children and youth have faced during COVID-19, the City’s new Learning Labs/Learning Bridges Program, and makes recommendations for strengthened support and partnership with this sector—which will be crucial to ensure the success of this academic year. (Note: for this testimony, we will refer to this program as “Learning Labs”).

Increased Role of CBOs in the Response to COVID-19

Community-based organizations (CBOs) are an indispensable part of the City’s education system, playing a leading role in several aspects of children and youth support and development. Learning Labs are just one of the key examples of how settlement houses and other community-based organizations have dramatically changed and increased services for children and youth in response to the new demands of COVID-19. Other examples include:

- **Remote Programming:** In March, early childhood education, youth employment and after-school programs rapidly transitioned to virtual programming which kept children connected to their peers and to adults focused on their support and educational enrichment.
- **Regional Enrichment Centers (RECs):** CBOs operated early childhood Regional Enrichment Centers, providing in-person child care and education to young children of essential workers. CBO staff also played key roles in operating the school-age RECs that

were located in public school buildings. CBO staff brought their expertise in Youth Development to design socially distant activities that were engaging and supportive for participants.

- **Five Day Per Week Early Childhood Programs:** With the public school's transition to a hybrid model, CBOs are the only place that offer free or low-cost early childhood education five days per week at the same location with the same staff and teachers. As was stated last week by Mayor de Blasio and by the Department of Education (DOE), in the case of a school building closure due to COVID-19 transmission, public school 3-K and Pre-K programs would close, yet CBO-based 3-K and Pre-K programs would be expected to continue operations.

CBO staff have gone to significant lengths to provide essential services during this time of significant stress and upheaval for the City's children and youth. However, the City has not adequately supported CBOs, making it difficult for them to carry out programming and focus on working with children and youth. CBO programs depend on successful high-level collaboration between City agencies. Unfortunately, this has often been lacking throughout the COVID-19 pandemic and CBOs have been left to make sense of missing or conflicting guidance from Department of Education (DOE), Department of Health and Mental Hygiene (DOHMH), and Department of Youth and Community Development (DYCD).

This led to issues such as:

- After-school programs not having clarity as to what space they are able to use in school buildings, or receiving exorbitant permit fees;
- Lack of communication to CBOs operating in schools about school health issues and decisions from the situation room; and
- Learning Bridges programs facing the expectation of ramping up in a matter of weeks with many unanswered questions.

Learning Labs

When the Learning Lab RFI was released, there were significant open questions about health and safety, program operations and budget. The list of questions that UNH developed through convening providers is attached to this testimony. Though some have been answered, this document frames the initial challenges with starting Learning Lab programs and underscores the difficulties providers faced in determining whether to open a Learning Lab in the first place.

To date, Learning Labs have not seen the levels of enrollment that were initially anticipated by the City. The DOE shared in mid-October that approximately 30,000 students were enrolled in Learning Lab/Learning Bridges programs (inclusive of 3-k through grade 8 students) at 300 sites, with 19,000 families receiving a placement offer. This falls far short of the City's projection of serving 100,000 students at the start of the school year. Providers have reported lower attendance at Learning Labs, though there are some with higher or full enrollment. It is important for the DYCD and DOE to explore this and understand why enrollment is low, and what steps must be taken to ensure that any student who needs to attend a Learning Lab is connected to one. For example, DYCD and DOE should examine the extensive enrollment process and understand whether that has acted as a barrier to families and contributed to low Learning Lab attendance.

Currently, New York City is approaching the 3% COVID-19 testing rate that would require school buildings to close and all students to transition to full-time remote learning for at least two weeks. It is crucial that if New York City abides by this 3% testing threshold moving forward, that Learning Lab

providers receive consistent, up-to-date information about testing rates so that they can prepare for school building closures.

We also must recognize that keeping Learning Labs open during any school shutdowns requires those staff to risk their own health and safety to keep providing emergency child care for New York City families. Everyone recognizes that child care is essential, and that programs need to continue operations in order to help working families who rely on these services. But we cannot expect staff at these community-based organizations, who are largely paid less than staff and teachers in public schools, to simply continue working in-person if COVID-19 transmission rates continue to rise. They must be offered incentive pay to compensate for the health and safety risk they are taking on as they continue to operate in-person programming.

Recommendations

UNH makes the following recommendations to ensure the success of Learning Labs:

- **Have clear, consistent communication with Learning Lab providers if New York City faces a system-wide school building shutdown.** DYCD should email providers each day with that day's citywide COVID-19 testing rate, so that everyone is receiving the same information and is up to speed on whether school buildings might close. This simple act could dispel some of the communication challenges and ensure that providers are ready for school building closures, should we reach that point.
- **Maintain consistent funding for Learning Labs regardless of enrollment or attendance.** Learning Labs are an emergency child care system. They are needed by the essential workers who depend on them and are valuable to the children who participate. However, unlike other programs in the Youth Development field, CBOs should not be focusing on recruitment or retention of program participants. The Learning Labs must be maintained for those families that do need them, when they need them. Therefore, Learning Lab budgets should remain consistent regardless of enrollment and attendance.
- **Allow greater flexibility in contracts around scheduling.** CBOs receive a roster of students from the DOE, but that roster does not include when those students have remote or in-person days in their schools. CBOs need the ability to manage their own schedules to maintain socially distanced small group sizes, ensure adequate staff time at all times that students are present, and maintain a pod model consistent with the children's schools.

As mentioned in the previous recommendation, Learning Labs operate as an emergency child care system. Learning Labs should not be penalized for meeting the needs of families who need partial day coverage and should have the flexibility to schedule students for shorter periods than the full school day.

- **Allow Learning Labs to provide after-school to all participants at the site rather than have students go home at 3pm to log on to remote after-school.** Most Learning Labs are run by CBOs who are also after-school providers. Many of these organizations are partnered with the schools with whom they already have relationships through providing services such as after-school programs or community schools. Requiring students to leave at 3pm to go home for remote programming will not help working parents' child care needs, when ostensibly these programs will be aiming to do just that.

- **Provide additional resources needed to bring on more staff in Learning Labs that will be able to expand the number of students per day.** Learning Labs were awarded with a number of slots that were to be filled on a hybrid model. If schools are shut down, Learning Labs will be expected to provide services for the same children

A Learning Lab slot was designed to serve more than one child. But that model does not work if students have no in-person school days. For instance, if a Learning Lab received 40 slots, it will serve 20 students on day A, and 20 students on day B. If schools close, and all 40 students will be served by one site on both A and B days, then resources must be increased to serve students under the health and safety guidelines.

- **Provide incentive pay to the staff working in Learning Labs in the event of school building closures.** School building closures indicate that COVID-19 transmission levels are so high, that it is not safe to continue in-person schooling. However, the City has indicated that CBO staff will still be expected to operate Learning Labs in-person. These staff must receive incentive pay to recognize the health and safety risks they are taking.
- **Clear the Backlog of staff awaiting Comprehensive Background Checks.** Many Learning Labs operate on the restrictive single use license because they cannot get their staff cleared through for the School Aged Child Care License which would permit a greater amount of activity.
- **Begin planning for long-term school building closures.** At the moment, New York City faces a second wave of COVID-19, and thus potential long-term closures of New York City school buildings like in spring 2020. While our city must do everything in its power to avoid that level of disruption to students' education, we also must begin planning for the possibility of long-term school building closures. If Learning Labs will continue as the main form of emergency child care in that instance, they will need more resources and space (as referenced above) to do that.

Thank you for the opportunity to testify. I am happy to answer any questions and can be reached for more information at gbrender@unhny.org.



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United Neighborhood Houses Comments on the Learning Bridges RFI

August 27, 2020

COVID-19 has highlighted and exacerbated significant disparities in New York City, including access to high-quality, reliable, and affordable child care. UNH and settlement houses have been long-time advocates for access to child care and after-school programming, and have significant experience providing these programs. Since COVID-19 began in March 2020, settlement houses have stepped up and provided both in-person child care in Regional Enrichment Centers (RECs) and remote activities and support for New York City's youth. We appreciate the City's efforts to provide child care for working families when public schools return to a blended instruction model in the fall. However, the City must ensure that this program model both provides necessary child care and addresses the risks of spreading COVID-19.

The City's current proposed model for Learning Bridges Programs to provide child care for children in 3-K and Pre-K programs and grades K-8 on remote learning days must be structured to that it does not risk increasing community spread of COVID-19. The proposal as it stands does not state whether students participating in the Learning Bridges Programs would be from the same classroom or even the same school. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) guidance urges school districts to adopt a cohort or pod model wherein students stay in static groups with the same classmates and teachers all day.^{1,2} If students in the Learning Bridges Programs were coming from different classrooms or even schools, the City would be creating a risk for the transmission to students and staff members in multiple community-based organizations and schools. We urge the City to consider this crucial aspect of the Learning Bridges Program and to implement a safe cohort model for this program. Otherwise, the task of contact tracing and isolating Learning Bridges staff and participants will become that much more complicated when a student or staff member contracts COVID-19.

Furthermore, CBO staff must be afforded the same protections as teachers and staff in public schools. This includes:

- Regular, consistent cleaning of all facilities;
- Personal protective equipment (PPE) and other supply needs;
- Ensuring a small and static group of children and adults with whom each staff member comes into contact; and
- Funding for health and safety requirements, including an on-site nurse.

CBOs have been providing socially distant in-person summer camps and CBO staff have designed and executed programs in the City's Regional Enrichment Centers. They have conducted programs safely through extensive social distancing measures including limiting classrooms to 9 children. However,

¹ <https://www.cdc.gov/coronavirus/2019-ncov/community/schools-childcare/schools.html>

² <https://www.cdc.gov/coronavirus/2019-ncov/community/schools-childcare/guidance-for-childcare.html>

the Learning Bridges RFI allows up to 10 children through age 9 and up to 15 children ages 10-12 in a single classroom. It is important that these discrepancies be rectified and clear and consistent guidelines on classroom size be issued. UNH urges the City to come to the table immediately with CBO providers to design a safe, socially distant way to provide child care for New York's families through this crisis and recovery.

Below are more extensive questions and concerns from providers around key aspects of the Learning Bridges Program. We look forward to working with the City to address the following questions in order to ensure a safe and healthy start of the Learning Bridges Program:

Health and Safety Measures

1. Will providers be able to conduct a health screening (i.e., asking about symptoms and checking temperature) for all persons who come into a space used for Learning Bridges? Will providers have access to temperature scanners and other equipment to conduct health screenings? This is particularly important for any Learning Bridges Program that is conducted in a space that where CBO does not have full oversight.
2. Will CBO contractors have control of who enters the sites? Do providers have the authority to eject people if they are exhibiting symptoms or not following social distancing guidelines such as not wearing masks?
3. What support will DYCD, DOHMH and other agencies provide to expedite the issuance of new School-Age Child Care (SACC) licenses? Will the 3-K and Pre-K programs be able to use the emergency child care provisions used in Regional Enrichment Centers to allow the transfer of staff between sites? Given that licenses tend to take a significant amount of lead time, what will the City do to expedite the process of clearing new sites?
4. Will programs need to expand licenses for either early childhood or SACC if they are using space that also hosts an existing early childhood education or youth development program?
5. Will providers be able to clear staff only through the DOE PETS system in sites outside of school buildings? The Comprehensive Background Check System, which was waived temporarily in March 2020, is significantly backlogged and has been unable to clear staff quickly. It also does not allow for transfer of staff between sites, something that would be crucial for assigning staff to the correct Learning Bridges Program site.
6. Will the City guarantee that programs that providers have an adequate amount of time for cleaning between when one group leaves a classroom and another enters if an organization is operating a Learning Bridges program in spaces such as a Cornerstone or center-based after-school programs which provide after-school at a different time than the Learning Bridge?
7. What guidance will the City provide around safe drop-off and pickup protocols?

Impact on Existing Programs

1. Will existing early childhood education and after-school programs in non-school buildings continue to operate fully funded in the school year if they do not participate in the Learning Bridges Program?
2. Will existing early childhood education programs maintain their budgets if their classroom size for 3-year old and 4-year old children is reduced to 15 children per classroom? Costs including rent and staffing are not lower with the mandated changes. If yes, please communicate with providers.
3. If Learning Bridges Programs are placed at sites such as Cornerstone Community Centers that also have an after-school programs, will they be serving some or all of the same children? Will

programs be able to limit participation in Learning Bridges programs to either participants in their own programs, or students in the schools with which CBOs already have a relationship?

4. Is the City planning for continued youth engagement if there is a second wave of COVID-19?

Space

1. What spaces and rooms is the City scouting for Learning Bridges programs? The Mayor mentioned libraries and cultural institutions. What level of authority would CBOs have at these sites to make physical changes or repairs? Who will handle maintenance at these sites?
2. Is the City considering using temporary trailers? If so, what steps will be taken to ensure that social distancing can be maintained in trailer sites?
3. Will ventilation standards and inspections be the same as in public schools?
4. Will all programs have access to outdoor space?
5. Will the City close streets to ensure outdoor space for programs?
6. Will the City allow providers exclusive access to space in playgrounds or parks?

Staffing

1. Will Learning Bridges programs be funded to have:
 - a. Nurses
 - b. Safety Agents
 - c. Cooks
 - d. Licensed teachers in early childhood education programs
2. In order to limit the amount of exposure of any child or adult to multiple groups, guidance from NYC Department of Mental Health and Hygiene (DOHMH) strongly discourages early childhood education providers from using floaters or substitutes in order to maintain ratios. Will providers be funded to have three teachers per classroom so that ratios can be maintained if one teacher is temporarily out of the classroom?
3. Will staff, teachers and directors in early childhood education programs be paid at the levels of the DC 37/ Day Care Council Collective Bargaining Agreement?
4. What will the pay scales be for K-8 programs?
5. Will there be incentive pay for staff?
6. Will existing CBO staff be asked to work their standard afterschool hours while also staffing the Learning Bridges Programs from 8 am – 3 pm? When will providers be notified about these issues?

Program Design / Eligibility / Funding

1. Do students who are in the same classroom when they are in-person at school stay in the same classroom when they are at a Learning Bridges Program? This is important not just for health and safety purposes but also to ensure that activities in the Learning Bridges programs align with the students' curricula.
2. Will Learning Bridges Programs be assisting with remote learning? How much of the day is expected to be remote learning or other activities?
3. When Learning Bridges programs end at 3 pm, will the same students have the option to stay for afterschool programming? What about students in-person at school that day?
4. Will there be separate full-week programming available for the essential workforce, similar to the Regional Enrichment Centers? Will staff working at the Learning Bridges Program have priority for access to child care?

5. Will children enrolled in Head Start programs with direct Federal contracts be eligible for Learning Bridges services?
6. Will parent fees be waived for families in EarlyLearn/ Extended Day Programs? What policies will be in place to ensure that families do not lose access to care?
7. How will supports be designed to support children K-8 with different educational and developmental needs?
8. DOE has committed to provide computers for Learning Bridges programs. Will the City also provide the internet capabilities to ensure that students are engaged online at the same time?
9. Will busing be available for children to and from Learning Bridges programs? How will buses maintain social distancing?
10. When and how will providers be informed of decisions on these issues?

Communication

1. What is the plan for communicating this model and guidance with families?
2. Will programs have the additional support including training and access to support staff from DOE that RECs have?
3. Will DYCD/ DOE provide a calendar of activities that are happening remotely to allow providers to align activities with remote learning?



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**New York City Council
Committee on Youth Service, Honorable Deborah Rose, Chair
Committee on Women and Gender Equity, Honorable Helen Rosenthal, Chair**

**Testimony of YMCA of Greater New York
Presented by Michael Rivadeneyra, Senior Director of Government Relations**

**Oversight Hearing – DYCD Learning Labs
November 18, 2020**

Good day, my name is Michael Rivadeneyra, I'm the Senior Director of Government Relations for the YMCA of Greater New York, and I will be testifying on behalf of the YMCA. Thank you, Chair Rose and Chair Rosenthal, for the opportunity to testify on the state of the City's school age childcare initiative known as Learning Labs.

The YMCA of Greater New York is committed to empowering youth, improving health, and strengthening community. With 24 YMCA physical branches and more than 100 community sites across the city, the Y is among the city's largest providers of human services spanning from infancy to adulthood — and an important anchor, convener, and catalyst for transformational change in underserved communities. One of the primary ways the Y reaches the community is through our youth programs, which help put kids on the path to success by developing skills for life, community, and leadership. Across all of our youth programs, the Y helps young people build the social and emotional skills necessary for success. Prior to the COVID-19 pandemic and Governor's Executive "Pause" Order, the Y After School program empowered nearly 10,000 children and teens each day to develop a ferocious love of learning and an excitement to try new things, and to access information, resources and people that will amplify their potential.

When the City shifted to remote learning on March 16th, that shift disrupted the entire education continuum — public K-12, private school systems, early childhood, community schools, after school, summer camp, and youth workforce development programs. Many of the supportive services on this continuum are provided by community-based organizations (CBOs). With limited guidance from the Administration, which ultimately heavily relied on the youth development sector, the sector quickly pivoted to remote learning and socially distant services. Then the summer and the City's reopening efforts began in the backdrop of a fiscal crisis and the most contentious City budget adoption in decades. The Department of Youth and Community Development (DYCD) was not offered adequate time to develop comprehensive

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guidance for providers regarding remote, in-person and blended program models, and safety protocols corresponding to each program model. The lack of clear and consistent program expectations and contract evaluation matrices over the summer foreshadowed what would become a norm for the Administration for the 2020-2021 school year.

Due to the pandemic, it was expected that the school year planning would be challenging; however, it was not expected that the challenges would be exacerbated due to the Administration's and Department of Education's inadequate, inconsistent and conflicting guidance on school reopening. The Administration, DOE, DYCD, and Department of Health and Mental Health (DOHMH) all presented a forward-facing unified strategy to safely reopen schools. CBOs quickly witnessed that this was not the case. The Mayor's strategy to reopen schools in September was sorely inadequate because it focused on the traditional school day model of 8am to 3pm. The shortcomings of this strategy are evident in the Learning Bridges Initiative, which offers early childhood childcare (Learning Bridges) and remote learning childcare (Learning Lab) for school age children during the hours of 8am to 3pm. Working families, especially our essential workers, need childcare that extends beyond the traditional school day. It's frustrating that CBOs were excluded from the planning of Learning Labs (LLs) because once again during this pandemic the City is heavily leaning and relying on the sector without considering the sector's expertise. It was a gross and reckless omission by the Administration not to engage CBOs in developing consistent health and safety protocols that would account for and address the challenges of maintaining pods static during in-school-time and out-of-school-time programming.

The overall issues that the Y has faced as an LL provider are: starting up the program, enrollment, programming, and health and safety guidelines.

Regarding starting up the program, the Y has been contracted to provide LLs at all 22 Y branches, as well as McCarren Park and NYCHA community centers, with the overall capacity to serve 4,350 youth. Our biggest start up challenge has been the onerous process of securing a School Aged Child Care (SACC) license. The Office of Children and Family Services (OCFS), the State agency that sets the process for SACC comprehensive background check and licensing, changed the process last year for all Department of Health programs in order to bring New York State in line with federal regulations. This process completely slowed down the hiring of staff last year and continues to stymie hiring and the startup of our programs. We agree with the need for thorough background checks to assure a safe learning environment for our youth. However, between the pre-existing background clearance backlog at DOHMH and the rollout of LLs, the approval process is operating at a dangerously slow pace. As of today, DOHMH has completed **zero** background checks of our newly hired LL staff due to the extensive backlog. We have submitted well over 200 of the OCFS-6000 application packets for SACC background clearances to OCFS/DOHMH and only received four back. These application packets have been submitted on a rolling basis starting in early September when we began extending offers to LL employees. This issue of the backlog was raised to DYCD and DOE when the Learning Bridges initiative was announced in August, and at that time DYCD assured providers that they would work with DOHMH to clear up the existing backlog. Unfortunately, the backlog continues to

grow, which increases the risk of exceeding COVID capacity in pods. In order to avoid this risk the Y is serving less participant. In addition to reducing service capacity, the backlog jeopardizes the retention of staff while waiting on full clearance. It is costly and time consuming to recruit, hire, train and struggle to retain staff while their SACC clearance is pending. Regardless of DYCD's commitment to assisting in this process we have received little to no communication from OCFS and DOHMH.

It will be extremely difficult to keep LLs open and expand them if, and when, the Administration and DOE decide to go fully remote again, because of the SACC clearance backlog. Furthermore, it will be misguided and reckless if DYCD compels CBOs to run LLs as single-service programs.

Regarding enrollment, DOE and DYCD created a process that is onerous for families to navigate and restrictive for providers to recruit students. As mentioned before, the Y is contracted to serve 4,350 children; unfortunately, we have enrolled a little over 200 participants. DYCD requires families to submit a request for a LL slot on the agency's Discover DYCD platform. Then DYCD assigns the participant to a provider and notifies the participant to complete the registration process on the Discovery DYCD platform. This process fails to recognize that many of the families in need of a LL slot lack the necessary technology and broadband access to register their child(ren), especially those in temporary housing/shelter. Additionally, families in temporary housing/shelter tend to receive little to no communication from DYCD on the registration process. We are hearing on the ground from families that they are not receiving any support from DOE or DYCD on the registration process. One frustrating story I'd like to share is about a mother who has attempted to register her child three times, but the child still does not appear on the registration roster at her assigned LL site. Our staff go to great lengths to walk families who contact us directly through the register process.

Unlike other DYCD programs, where the providers are allowed to proactively recruit participants, LL providers are discouraged from doing so. The practice of proactively recruiting is driven by the fact that DYCD requires providers to exercise due diligence to satisfy contracted enrollment numbers. In the case of LLs, we are receiving inconsistent guidance whether enrollment is a required deliverable, which is unsettling as a provider due to the uncertainty if the City will fully pay on our contracts if enrollment numbers are not satisfied. As for being discouraged from proactively recruiting, this is rooted in the fact that participants are not assigned to a LL based on provider preference but rather to where their school has been assigned to, and due to the fact that providers have limited access to the registration roster. DOE justified LL designation based on school to mitigate comingling of school pods. However, due to low enrollment numbers DOE and DYCD have authorized providers to enroll students outside of their feeder schools, which causes comingling to happen.

These enrollment defects will frustrate the City's efforts to expand LL capacity if, and when, DOE shifts back to fully remote learning.

Regarding programming, LLs currently have participants attend on a rotating basis of 2-4 days a week based on their school blended model. From the onset we understood that as a provider

that we would assist participants academically and provide enrichment, such as sports and arts, which called for an educational specialist as a contractually required staff line. However, upon the start of our programming DYCD gave guidance to only assist students with logging into their remote classes, assuring that the student attends each of their remote classes, and to provide meals to them. Based on this guidance, we need clarity on the role of the educational specialist, and we need clear communication with schools regarding each of the students' remote schedules. If and when DOE decides to shift back to fully remote, we anticipate that current participants will need 5-day LL service. Naturally this will increase the need to comingling pods and increase the need for more staff to maintain ratio. The increased comingling increases health and safety risks, and increasing the workforce will be challenging due to the background clearance backlog.

As for meals, DOE is currently providing our sites with meals. However, in a couple of cases our staff must travel 20-30 minutes to their linked school to retrieve meals and then return to the schools to drop off their insulated lunch bags later in the day. Not only is this time consuming but costly due to staffing and other logistical limitations; those sites have opted to use car services for these pickups and drop offs.

DOE has assured us that if and when schools pivot to fully remote learning and Learning Labs expand their emergency childcare services, that the agency will have meal hubs where we can continue to receive meals for our participants. However, DOE has not guaranteed that these meal hubs will be our current meal distribution sites or near our Learning Lab sites. There is a likelihood that we'll need to travel a greater distance to new meal hubs, again resulting in us incurring additional costs which are not covered by the contracts.

Regarding health and safety guidelines, DOE correctly takes measures to create and provide a safe and healthy school environment with static pods, nurses on site, stockpile of PPEs, and a COVID situation room to inform whether a classroom or school building should close. Unfortunately, the Administration shifted many of these risks onto the LL providers, even when the program is being provided in a non-DOE City-controlled spaces such as Parks and Recreation Centers or NYCHA Centers. DYCD is only supporting providers with telehealth nurses. In addition, we are now being encouraged to engage in general enrollment, which can undermine the static pods that feeder schools created. DYCD's guidance allows for the comingling of pods due to differentiating blended models from the various feeder schools assigned to the LL site under the following scheme:

1. Schools by grade level;
2. Grade level, regardless of school; or
3. Pods of mixed aged groups, regardless of school.

The City created the COVID situation room to monitor and communicate COVID cases to the school community and the Test & Trace Corp. Unfortunately, communication from the COVID situation room to LLs and other school program providers does not exist. We learn about COVID cases, classroom closure or school building closure from our parents. We understand that the

system is evolving, but it's unacceptable to learn about a potential or positive COVID case through our parents or media before receiving any notification from the situation room. DOE and DYCD should be communicating these incidents to us in a timely manner in order for our staff to properly plan. Furthermore, the Administration was not clear as to whether providers should open our LL and after school programs in the State-designated micro-cluster zones. We need clear and consistent guidance on how to operate in those zones.

As the Administration and DOE have stumbled to reopen schools, the Y and other CBOs are faced with the tremendous challenge of having to rebuild trust and confidence in the public school system. Perfection should not be the enemy of the good, especially with the reality that the pandemic will continue for the foreseeable future. Eight months into the pandemic, it is inexcusable for the Mayor and his administration to continually appear as unprepared and unwilling to develop contingency plans informed by their stakeholders. Our youth, families, educators, and staff at all points on the education continuum need consistency and a reopening strategy that is nimble enough to adjust to the changing landscape of the pandemic. Here are our recommendations to achieve consistency and a nimble strategy:

1. Providers must be involved in the short-term and long-term strategic planning for a safe and successful school reopening plan;
2. DYCD should set up a multilingual hotline or other support service model to assist parents through the Learning Bridges/Learning Labs registration process and assignment designation;
3. DYCD and DOE should offer families in transitional housing/homeless shelters a Discover DYCD liaison to assist them in accessing all DYCD programs, especially Learning Bridges/Learning Labs;
4. The City must invest in providing CBOs with the same health and safety measures offered to schools, including, but not limited to, an in-person nurse and PPE stockpile;
5. DYCD must commit to fully honoring contracts regardless of enrollment and retention of participant numbers;
6. The City must restore funding to the indirect cost rate initiative;
7. DYCD and DOHMH must support in the timely processing of OCFS-6000 packets; one way is by investing in the necessary staffing at DOHMH to clear the backlog and the processing of SACC licenses; and
8. The COVID situation room must update notification protocols to include Learning Labs and other youth development providers as part of the school community to assure all school community members, DOE staff, DOE contract providers, and DYCD contract providers are appropriately notified.

We appreciate your support, leadership, and partnership in helping deliver quality youth services, and helping more youth learn, grow, and thrive. Thank you so much for fighting for children and families across New York City. We look forward to working with you to address these urgent school reopening health and safety concerns.

If you have any questions, please contact Michael Rivadeneyra, Senior Director of Government Relations, at mrivadeneyra@ymcanyc.org or 212-630-9717.