

UNION SETTLEMENT

CHRONICLE
SUMMER 2020



Responding in East Harlem
How Union Settlement is meeting
the needs of our community during
this challenging time.



UNION SETTLEMENT CHRONICLE

Contents

- FRONT COVER** **Protecting Our Community:** Manhattan Borough President Gale Brewer and Deputy Borough President Matthew Washington dropping off PPE masks for Union Settlement to distribute to East Harlem residents and organizations.
- 3** **Executive Director's Message:** Union Settlement is prepared to serve East Harlem as we face economic and health crises, as well as racial injustice.
- 4** **Special Initiative:** Our Business Development Center stepped in to serve healthcare workers and support local small businesses.
- 5** **Services Spotlight:** Find out how we're responding to a growing hunger crisis.
- 5** **Staff Spotlight:** Meet Phil Gill, one of our Meals on Wheels employees, who fought his own battle with COVID-19.
- 6** **Funder Profile:** We are proud to partner with Blackstone Charitable Foundation and share some insights into their funding priorities.
- 7** **How We're Adapting:** The pandemic takes a toll on mental health. Find out how we have shifted to best serve our clients.

Union Settlement is an on-the-ground resource for East Harlem residents of all ages, and a passionate advocate for the needs of underserved communities. Since opening our doors in 1895, we have brought **education, wellness** and **community-building** programs to our neighborhood, empowering New Yorkers with opportunities to better their lives. With a staff of over 450 and services that impact **10,000** people, Union Settlement is building the vitality and success of East Harlem.

Executive Director
David Nocenti

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A MESSAGE FROM THE EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR



David Nocenti
Executive Director

 @davidnocenti

“Union Settlement serves as a lifeline for those suffering from the adverse impacts of centuries of racism.”

Systemic racism is a public health crisis – here in East Harlem, in New York City, and throughout the country.

We see this in the devastating impact the COVID-19 pandemic has had on low-income communities of color. We see it in the worsening economic crisis, with massive job losses for so many black and brown low-wage workers who are struggling to survive.

And we see it most directly in the deaths of George Floyd, Ahmaud Arbery, Breonna Taylor, Rayshard Brooks and countless other people of color who have been senselessly murdered, many at the hands of the very individuals who were supposed to protect them.

Union Settlement is not just a social service agency; we are a social justice agency as well. We are a strong and vocal advocate for dismantling the structures of racism that we see every day – underfunded schools, inadequate health care, unaffordable housing, inequitable pay, oppressive police practices, and so much more.

Simultaneously, we continue to provide the vital programs that low-income residents of East Harlem need to survive – services that are particularly important at this time.

Following the COVID-19 outbreak, some of our programs (like our Meals on Wheels deliveries) continued as before, while others had to quickly transition to remote modalities. In addition, thanks to the generous support of our donors, **we have also started providing emergency in-kind and cash assistance** to many individuals who otherwise would not be able to

support their families. (You can read more about our COVID-19 response efforts throughout this newsletter.)

Through our programs and advocacy, Union Settlement serves as a lifeline for those suffering from the adverse impacts of centuries of racism in this country.

We wish it were otherwise. Indeed, in a perfect world, Union Settlement would not need to exist.

But **recent events have laid bare any pretense that we live in an equal society**, and so our tireless efforts to fight against those inequities is needed now more than ever.

Yet despite the current turmoil, hardship and uncertainty, I cannot help but be optimistic. I am inspired by the strength and passion of the protestors, and by the harmony of so many voices rising to challenge the inequities that exist. If we take away anything from this moment, I hope it is these two truths: **that the failure to uphold the rights of any individual is the failure to uphold the rights of all, and that the tides of change are best driven by the collective will of the people.**

Union Settlement is here to fight for those rights and to help achieve those systemic changes, and I am confident in our ability to do so, side-by-side with our East Harlem neighbors, just as we have for the past 125 years.

—David Nocenti



Serving our healthcare heroes while supporting our small businesses.



In the height of the pandemic, we coordinated with 24 local East Harlem restaurants to prepare more than 5,700 meals over five weeks, which were delivered to Metropolitan Hospital's frontline workers.

The restaurant scene in East Harlem is part of what makes this neighborhood one of the most vibrant and diverse areas of New York City. Unfortunately, the restaurant industry has been hit extremely hard by the pandemic. **Within the first 22 days of the health crisis, the NYC restaurant industry lost over \$2 billion in revenue**, and only 43% of restaurants in New York City are confident they will fully reopen when permitted to do so.

In early April, Union Settlement learned that Metropolitan Hospital wanted help feeding their employees, who were working long hours due to the pandemic. Thanks to a grant from L+M Development and Jonathan Rose Companies, our Small Business Development team worked quickly to enlist 24 local East Harlem restaurants to prepare meals for Metropolitan Hospital's healthcare heroes. In total, the selected restaurants prepared more than 5,700 meals over five weeks. Not only did the program feed some of Metropolitan Hospital's essential workers, but it also helped to keep East Harlem's thriving restaurant scene alive during the very worst of the outbreak.

"Thank you to Union Settlement! This program was a great way to keep profits and supply chains local, while also keeping employees at the restaurant," said Lou Gonzalez, whose East Harlem restaurant, **Bistro Casa Azul**, participated in the program. Over the course of the five-week period, **Bistro Casa Azul** prepared and distributed 540 meals for essential healthcare workers — something they may not have been able to achieve otherwise. Gonzalez also noted that the initiative has since brought many

of the participating small East Harlem restaurants together, and the cohort is now discussing collaborating on additional initiatives.

In addition to our partnership with Metropolitan Hospital, Union Settlement's Business Development Center has supported East Harlem's small businesses in many other ways, including connecting businesses to financial aid, and providing instruction and support regarding best practices for virtual marketing and fundraising. Through our Buy Local Initiative, our Business Development Center has facilitated virtual pop-up events and "cash mobs" in support of several small businesses. We have also coordinated with Uptown Grand Central to develop a Delivery Guide of East Harlem's currently operating restaurants, which is updated regularly.

Union Settlement will continue to prioritize supporting East Harlem's small businesses throughout the pandemic and beyond, empowering restaurants like **Bistro Casa Azul** and encouraging participation in our neighborhood's economy.



Feeding East Harlem

We continue to nourish the community by finding new ways to reach more people.

New York City is seeing hunger rates soar as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic. In fact, **the number of food insecure residents in New York City has doubled from one to two million since March, meaning one in four New Yorkers now faces food insecurity.** And as Union Settlement has done for the past 125 years, we've adapted to meet this incredible community need, this time by helping to feed East Harlem.

To help the residents of East Harlem, Union Settlement increased its Meals on Wheels program and established its first-ever "General Store."

The Meals on Wheels team normally feeds over 500 homebound seniors each week, but this number has increased by almost 15% since the start of the pandemic. We were able to accomplish this while also keeping our employees and seniors safe with new safety measures, such as temperature checks before entering the building, reducing employee on-site days, and obtaining PPE. All of this was done without ever pausing services.

This would not have been possible without our team's selflessness and dedication to their job. **"I'm in a high-risk category for coronavirus, so I have some anxiety from being out on the frontlines,"** says one of our Meals on Wheels deliverers, Terrence Greenridge, **"but out of my love for my clients, I put those anxieties aside. I need to make sure they are fed each day."**

In addition, Union Settlement began addressing food insecurity by distributing care packages full of shelf-stable food and other necessities. This initiative eventually led to the establishment of the Union Settlement General Store, which serves over 100 people each week. **In addition to providing our participants with free food and other staples, the General Store empowers**

them to select the resources they require in any given week. This allows our participants to advocate for their changing needs, and also provides them with an opportunity to return to a sense of normalcy by going shopping.

Union Settlement also provided participants with other items such as Brita pitchers, face masks, hand sanitizers, gift cards for Father's Day, and so much more. **Union Settlement is committed to ensuring we are meeting our participants' evolving needs and will continue to adapt as necessary.**

STAFF SPOTLIGHT



Phil Gill

Meals on Wheels Employee

In early March, Phil Gill's wife asked him to stay home from work for a couple of weeks, but he said to her, **"If I don't bring the meals to my seniors, who will? They need me."**

Gill, one of our Meals on Wheels deliverers, continued to make deliveries to our homebound seniors even as the threat of the pandemic continued to grow. He cares deeply for his clients and couldn't imagine relinquishing his duties.

Things became more difficult in early April when both Gill and his wife contracted COVID-19. When his symptoms did not abate after a week, his family pleaded with him to go to the hospital. But like many others, Gill resisted going to the hospital at first. He had no underlying conditions

or previous health concerns and New York's hospitals seemed to be getting more chaotic each day. Ultimately, with his family in mind, he decided to check in to the hospital and, within 24 hours of being there, Gill's kidneys were failing. The medical team worked hard to stabilize him, and fortunately, after a little over a week of treatment, Gill was cleared to go home.

When he returned home, Gill remained weak and had lost a lot of weight. Over the next few weeks he and his wife worked hard at getting him back to 100%. Finally, he was fully recovered and feeling back to normal. **"When it was time to get back to work, I was excited to see my clients and coworkers. After being in quarantine for so long, it was also exciting just to get out of the house!"**

Gill has an incredibly strong bond with his clients, and while he was sick and recovering, the seniors he cares for were constantly checking in with him via phone.

Now, meals are left outside the seniors' apartment doors. Although this removes the vital human interaction component of our Meals on Wheels program, it is necessary in order to keep our drivers and clients safe. **"It can be hard not to be able to share a smile with my clients, especially knowing I was often the only person they would see all day,"** Gill says.

While he misses seeing his clients' faces, he also knows firsthand the importance of taking proper medical precautions—so for now, they'll continue to keep in touch over the phone.

Gill's coworkers also checked in on him regularly while he was sick and **when he returned to work in late May, he received a standing ovation from his Meals on Wheels teammates.** All of us at Union Settlement are incredibly thankful for his recovery and in awe of his bravery after his harrowing experience. **Thank you, Gill!**

Blackstone Charitable Foundation

Union Settlement's response to COVID-19 would not be possible without the support of our generous supporters, such as the Blackstone Charitable Foundation, which was quick to make a \$100,000 grant to Union Settlement at the start of the pandemic.

We spoke to Amy Stursberg, the Executive Director of the Blackstone Charitable Foundation, about the Foundation's amazing work and response to COVID-19.

When was Blackstone Charitable Foundation founded and what are its main areas of focus?

Our mission is to empower entrepreneurs, generate job growth, and support the communities in which we live and work. We do this through two main programs focused on entrepreneurship and employee engagement. Through our Entrepreneurship Initiative, we support entrepreneurs at all levels – from students to underrepresented communities.

Through BX Connects, the employee engagement arm of the Foundation, we create opportunities for our employees to invest their time, talent and money into uplifting the communities in which we live and work. Since 2010, Blackstone Connects has committed over \$25 million globally to the communities we serve and we are proud to say our employees volunteer and donate twice as much as the national corporate average.

How did Blackstone initially learn about Union Settlement?

Union Settlement's reputation speaks for itself, and we have been impressed with the organization's commitment to serving East Harlem residents. We seek partners that both truly understand the needs and interests of their communities and provide a full spectrum of support to help the community thrive.

When my team visited Union Settlement, they were impressed not only with the depth of its programming, but also with the organization's staff and volunteers. It was clear the team is integral to the neighborhood and completely invested in seeing the community succeed.

How have Blackstone employees engaged with Union Settlement?

We introduced our employees to Union Settlement through a gift-wrapping activity during the holidays last year. With other volunteers, we wrapped thousands of gifts that had been collected for the children in East Harlem. This past winter, our technology team also provided pro bono support to the organization through an IT audit.

How have you shifted your focus or grantmaking process in response to the pandemic?

As the pandemic began to spread across the country – and particularly here in New York – we saw the challenges our nonprofit partners were facing. We moved quickly to help, and accelerated payment of all our 2020 grants to ensure our partners could continue their important work.

As a firm, we've contributed over \$20 million globally in support of COVID relief efforts. Here in New York, we made an additional charitable gift to the New York State COVID-19 First Responders Fund and have also committed over \$5 million to NYC-based organizations that are stepping up to rescue and deliver more food to those in need.

We have shifted all our volunteering to be virtual and are working with our partners to make the transition to a virtual environment seamless. We have supported our partners with everything from piloting remote learning plat-

forms to providing funds to purchase laptops and tablets for participants.

Based on conversations with your nonprofit partners, what have been the greatest areas of need that have been brought on by the pandemic?

Access to PPE was one of the greatest needs at the outset of the pandemic. We were able to purchase much needed PPE on behalf of our partners in the first few weeks of the crisis and have since created a pipeline for partners to leverage our firm's procurement system and purchase PPE at reduced cost. We have also worked with our partners on transitioning to virtual formats and thinking through innovative methods of fundraising in this new environment.



Volunteers from Blackstone wrapping presents, as part of Union Settlement's 2019 holiday gift drive.

Mental Health Services



by Stacie Woodland

Director of Mental Health Services
Union Settlement

For more than 60 years, Union Settlement has provided life-saving mental health services to East Harlem residents, including individual, family, couples and group therapy, crisis intervention, psychiatric evaluation, medication management and case management. Our services are needed more than ever as our clients, all of whom were previously struggling with poverty, isolation, violence and precarity, are experiencing additional trauma and hardship due to the pandemic.

During the onset of COVID-19, the New York State Office of Mental Health modified its guidelines to facilitate the provision of “tele-health” services. Prior to the closure of our counseling center in mid-March, we were experiencing higher rates of cancellations and no-shows than usual as clients became increasingly fearful of being outside. **The transition to providing mental health services via remote modalities (Zoom, Facetime, WhatsApp and telephone) has been seamless**, and service utilization is high as clients are able to access mental health services from the safety and convenience of their homes.

While we are gratified to be able to continue providing vital high-quality mental health services to our clients in the midst of the pandemic, the challenges of doing so are considerable, particularly with regard to privacy and confidentiality. Clients may not be able to readily or easily discuss difficult and sensitive issues if they do not have space in their homes, they are beset by noise or other distractions, or are forced to self-quarantine with a partner or family member who is the cause of an underlying problem. The difficulty of picking up on non-verbal cues without face-to-face interaction can be an additional impediment.

Providing mental health services to high-needs populations in underserved communities, such as East Harlem, is difficult work under the best of circumstances. **Our therapists are contending with elevated levels of trauma and grief amongst their clients** (many of whom have lost loved ones) as they are coping with their own personal challenges and stressors related to the pandemic. They are working long hours and grappling with the increasingly blurred lines between their work and home lives.

As the Director of Mental Health Services, I conduct daily voluntary check-ins and group meetings with staff to give them an opportunity to receive feedback, peer support and a sense of connection. I emphasize the importance for all of us to talk about how we are feeling, as this reduces isolation and anxiety, increases connection and serves to normalize our thoughts and experiences. **The long-term mental health consequences of self-quarantine are unknown**, and we will all be helped by knowing that we are not alone in our struggles and that it will take time to process and understand what we have experienced, both individually and collectively.

Tips on Protecting Your Mental Health in Challenging Times

As human beings, we dislike moments of uncertainty and they make us feel stressed, anxious and scared. It is vital for all of us to take care of our mental health and not be afraid to ask for help. Here are some practices that can help during this time:

It's okay to take breaks.

While it is important to check off our “to do” list, it is also important to take breaks for our mind and body. A break from work, the news and everything else on your list is necessary. Make sure you are eating right, taking vitamins and hydrating.

Refuel your mind and body.

Create a routine for yourself. Make sure that your workspace is organized and ready for you to tackle your day. If possible, take a couple of minutes before you start to gather your thoughts.

Be still, or pick a new hobby.

As we go through this challenging time, it is okay to be still. You don't have to learn something new. We are all just trying to make it through this pandemic.

If you do want to pick a new hobby, think of taking virtual Zumba, yoga or other exercise classes. Maybe it is time to learn how to cook that new dish you always had in mind. Don't be afraid to learn something new.

Stay connected and reach out if you need support.

It is okay to talk to family and friends about what you are feeling. If you are feeling anxious or stressed, reach out to a mental health professional for support. Remember, we are not alone on this journey and it can be comforting to share your experience with those who are trained to assist.

UNION SETTLEMENT

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