



UNION SETTLEMENT CHRONICLE WINTER 2021

Keeping East Harlem Warm
Our winter coat drive helped
distribute over 2,500 coats.

Page 7



UNION SETTLEMENT CHRONICLE

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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

Union Settlement
 237 East 104th Street
 New York, NY 10029
www.unionsettlement.org

A MESSAGE FROM THE EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR



David Nocenti
Executive Director

 @davidnocenti

“As we close out what unquestionably has been one of the most difficult 12-month periods in memory, I have one singular message: **Hope.**”

A deadly virus. An economic shutdown. Massive job losses. Racial injustice. A bitterly contested election. Presidential impeachment redux. Over 500,000 American deaths during the pandemic, and almost 2.5 million worldwide.

“Unprecedented” does not begin to describe the events of the past year, which for many has felt like a voyage through completely uncharted waters.

For many others, however, these events, while clearly outsized, were depressingly familiar.

Here in East Harlem, as in most other low-income communities of color, there is nothing novel about the disproportionate impacts of disease, job loss, racism, political turmoil or government neglect.

Even today, with Black and Brown communities having suffered the brunt of the illnesses, hospitalizations and deaths caused by the COVID-19, we see vaccines being distributed through an unfair system that consciously benefits white people over people of color.

Yes, there is greater fear and skepticism regarding the virus in communities of color – but given the multitude of intersecting traumas of 2020, and our country’s centuries-long history of systemic and calculated oppression, that mistrust is both understandable and unsurprising.

Despite all of the challenges mentioned, there is a path forward. And as always, Union Settlement is leading the way.

We are engaged in a broad educational campaign – utilizing our connections with the NYC Department of Health, Mt. Sinai Hospital and others – to provide information about the COVID-19 vaccines, both to our own employees and to local community members, in an effort to overcome the fear and skepticism they have about the vaccine.

Many of our program participants – particularly those who are elderly – lack the technology or skills to wend their way through the challenging vaccine sign-up process, so **we are spending hundreds of hours on the phone and online helping them to get appointments.**

We have already opened up our facilities three times as **temporary vaccine distribution sites**, and will continue to do so in the future.

These are just a few recent examples of ways that Union Settlement has expanded and modified our services to fit the ever-changing needs of our East Harlem neighbors during this deadly pandemic.

So, even as we close out what unquestionably has been one of the most difficult 12-month periods in memory, I have one singular message:

Hope.

Vaccine administration is increasing. COVID-19 cases are falling. The impeachment process is over. Businesses are reopening. Laid-off workers are being rehired. Racial justice is being prioritized.

Here at Union Settlement, we have hope for the future. And no matter what comes, Union Settlement will continue to stand firmly beside our resilient East Harlem neighbors – just as we have for the past 125 years, and will continue to do for the next 125 as well.

- David Nocenti



Registration at a COVID-19 vaccine distribution site, inside a Union Settlement facility in February.

STAFF SPOTLIGHT

Our essential workers begin to receive their vaccinations.



Phillip Gill

Meals on Wheels Employee

In our Summer 2020 newsletter, we highlighted one of our Meals on Wheels deliverers, Phillip Gill (who goes by Gill). At that time, Gill had just returned to work after a hard-fought battle with COVID-19. Both he and his wife contracted the virus in April, and Gill was hospitalized for over a week. Gill's wife helped him recover at home for several more weeks.

When Gill returned to work, his colleagues and clients were thrilled to see him, and he received a standing ovation!

Since then, Gill has continued to deliver meals to homebound seniors in East Harlem, and is reminding them to stay safe. **We followed up with Gill, who recently received his second dose of the COVID-19 vaccine.**

What has changed now that you are vaccinated?

In terms of precautions at work, nothing has changed at all. I still wear my mask every minute of every day that I'm out of the home. It's not only the safe thing to do, but it has become like a way of life. But, I do feel a huge sense of relief - like I can breathe a little easier. Once you've experienced firsthand what this virus can do to you, you want nothing more than to be protected, and to be helping to protect others from getting it. Having COVID was the worst feeling in my life. I don't wish for anyone to have to go through that.

What was the experience of scheduling and getting vaccinated like for you?

I'm 71, so when it was my time, I made the arrangements right away. Union Settlement actually gave us all some helpful information by holding a virtual info session with some doctors. But, I really was staying on top of the news surrounding the vaccine, and was ready to go. We're still trying to secure an appointment for my wife. But, I think soon enough it will become easier and easier for everyone - at least that's the hope. As for the actual shot, it was nothing. Hardly felt a thing, and I had no side effects.

What are your hopes now for your coworkers and the seniors you serve in the community?

Well, I'm hoping for everyone around me to get vaccinated. Some of my coworkers and seniors I deliver meals to have been vaccinated, and some have asked me about my own experience.

Most everyone is eager to get vaccinated. There are some hesitations with some people, especially from people of color, in light of some of the atrocities in our country's history with vaccines and Black and Brown people. That is understandable, but it's important to realize that we've come a long way, and that these vaccines are safe.

A few of them say they wanted to "wait and see" after others got their vaccine. I say to them, "well, now you've waited and seen me get the vaccine, and I feel great. Stop the waiting and make the appointment."

What are you looking forward to the most as we begin a return to normalcy?

First of all, I can't wait for all of the Union Settlement seniors to be back together in person again at the senior centers. Some of them have been very isolated, and I look forward to coming into work and seeing them dancing, playing games and socializing again. For me, I just look forward to the day that it is safe to go to the movies again!

To learn more about the vaccine process in NYC, talk to your health care provider, call 311, or visit nyc.gov/covidvaccine.

Visit nyc.gov/vaccinefinder to find out where you can get vaccinated in the City. You must make an appointment in advance.

You can also call 877-VAX-4NYC (877-829-4692) to make an appointment at NYC sites.



PROGRAM SPOTLIGHT

Early Childhood Education

“Physical distancing rather than social distancing” is a common mantra for our teachers.

For many decades, Union Settlement has been a trusted provider of high-quality early childhood education (ECE), enabling families to work, seek employment or care for loved ones. Our six ECE centers and Family Child Care Network foster the cognitive, social, emotional, creative and physical development of the children in our care.

The outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic created unprecedented challenges as we closed our centers and quickly transitioned to providing services remotely. **Our energies in the early days of the pandemic were focused on establishing robust communication channels with parents, meeting the emergency needs of our families, and ensuring that our families and staff members had the technological resources and know-how to engage in remote learning and socialization.**



Thanks to the generous support of numerous foundations—including **Atlantic Philanthropies, Atran Foundation, Blackstone Charitable Foundation, Church of the Heavenly Rest, New York Community Trust, Robin Hood** and others—Union Settlement has given and loaned more than 100 internet-enabled tablets to our families so their children can participate in remote activities, and provided food, toiletries, diapers, formula and gift cards to families in need.

The transition to distance learning was a multifaceted process. Parents received materials, tip sheets and coaching to set up dedicated “cozy corners” in their homes for children to engage in remote programming. Parents also received support and hands-on assistance to navigate and make use of online platforms, such as Zoom.

Our program staff created an online curriculum with a particular emphasis on social emotional learning. Everyone in the Early Childhood Education program felt that the children’s emotional needs had to be prioritized. **The families we serve have suffered extreme stress and losses, including illness, unemployment, economic hardships and bereavement, and many of our children have been traumatized by these events.**

According to **Karen Ayala, our Director of Education and Disability Services**, the online curriculum is less prescriptive than the curriculum that was used prior to the COVID-19 outbreak, and teachers have had greater leeway to give expression to their talents, which has been an unanticipated benefit.

Many of our staff members have suffered the loss of a family member, friend or neighbor, and have experienced secondary trauma as they support children and parents through uncertainty, hardship and loss.

A host of policies, including hazard pay, paid time off (Wellness Fridays), additional bereavement and personal leave time, and individual accommodations for remote work, have been instituted to support our early childhood workforce during these challenging times.

Nusrat Mahmood, the Deputy Director of Early Childhood Education, has been gratified by the widespread emotional and practical support that has been extended to parents, teachers, support staff and center directors individually and collectively. She particularly appreciates that she has a strong team to lean on.



Our centers reopened on October 5 following months of planning, preparation and training. We are currently offering in-person, remote and blended learning programs to our children. **Leticia Dorsainvil, the Family and Community Engagement Director**, oversees ongoing recruitment and enrollment as we strive to fully meet the needs in our community.

Parents have the opportunity to participate in bi-weekly workshops that include a wide range of invited speakers.

Most of our teachers are back on site and are happy to once again see their colleagues and, most especially, the children. A common mantra is that our teachers are practicing *physical* rather than *social* distancing with the children. **To compensate for the missing hugs and visible smiles and facial expressions, our teachers rely more on body language (gestures) and tone of voice to show affection toward the children, and remind them how special they are.**

The unflagging efforts of our teachers, support staff and administrators have been matched by the adaptability and resilience of our parents and children, who have adjusted admirably to the new protocols. We are privileged and honored to continue serving the families in East Harlem who have been especially hard hit by COVID-19.

SUPPORTER PROFILE

Church of the Heavenly Rest

A vital partner throughout the pandemic.

The Church of the Heavenly Rest (CHR) was founded before the Civil War and has been at its current location on the corner of Fifth Avenue and East 90th Street for over 90 years. Since its founding, CHR has been a place of service and reconciliation for New York City.

The church has provided a variety of ministries to support its members and the community, including prison reentry programs, support for homeless people, and funding for school supplies.



“Several years ago, the church shifted its focus and decided that it would form partnerships with nonprofits and other organizations that were already doing an exceptional job at providing vital services to those most in need,” said **Anne Marie Witchger, CHR’s Assistant Rector and Chief of Staff**. As part of its initiative to partner with on-the-ground organizations, the church connected with Union Settlement, and since the initial meeting, Union Settlement has received tremendous support from CHR.

“Early in the pandemic, the church received an unexpected gift of \$25,000 and used the funds to create ‘The Fund for the Not Forgotten’ to address the needs of those who did not receive

support from stimulus check disbursement, unemployment benefits or services,” said **Evan Davis, Church of the Heavenly Rest parishioner**. To ensure that the church could help as many people as possible, CHR created a fundraising campaign, which raised an additional \$150,000, providing substantial support to its partners who were addressing the most critical needs of their participants.

Union Settlement was fortunate to be a recipient of a grant from this Fund at the onset of the pandemic, which **allowed Union Settlement to offer much-needed food, toiletries, and PPE to East Harlem residents through our twice-weekly General Store**.

Throughout the pandemic, CHR was supportive in other key areas, like helping to fund household school supplies for our Early Childhood Education Program. In shifting to remote learning, it was vital to ensure that each child had proper learning materials to coincide with our curriculum.

The Church of the Heavenly Rest also created a new initiative to support minority-owned restaurants in East Harlem that are part of Union Settlement’s Buy Local program. The initiative, Nourishing Neighbors, was started during the holiday season to encourage support of nine restaurants and a bakery in East Harlem. **Parishioner Cheryl Beall** said, “We’re excited that the partnership will provide assistance, as restaurants have been one of the hardest-hit industries throughout the pandemic.”

Based on the success of the program, CHR plans to support several other restaurants through the program on an ongoing basis. **“I think of the partnership as a ‘win-win-win’ because the program supports East Harlem**



restaurants, provides meals for those in need, and encourages Upper East Side residents to discover East Harlem, which is in their backyard,” Ms. Beall added.

“It has been wonderful to work with the Church of the Heavenly Rest. Each of the businesses they have supported so far have seen additional revenue of \$1,800, funds they would have not otherwise received,” said **Jackie Tesman, the Project Manager for our Buy Local East Harlem program**.

“We hope the support we’re providing now will serve as a bridge to build a stronger relationship between the Upper East Side and East Harlem as the city recovers,” said **CHR’s Rector, Matt Heyd**.

For more information about the Church of the Heavenly Rest, visit their website: www.heavenlyrest.org.

HOLIDAYS RECAP

Union Settlement spreads joy throughout the holiday season.



The holidays often cause stress for families who face economic hardships, and this year's stress was compounded by the COVID-19 pandemic. To help alleviate the stress and spread some holiday cheer, **Union Settlement hosted three holiday drives: our Thanksgiving Food Drive, our Holiday Gift Drive, and our inaugural Winter Coat Drive.**

In late November, Union Settlement hosted our annual Thanksgiving Food Drive in our Community Garden. Members from the community, local churches, schools and businesses held their own food drives where they collected items such as canned vegetables, boxed mashed potatoes, and other non-perishable Thanksgiving fixings to support our initiative. In addition, **Driscoll Foods** and **Park Ave Foods** generously donated frozen turkeys.

Because of this generosity, and with the help of many dedicated volunteers, **we were able to pack and distribute 400 complete turkey dinners for our program participants and community members.** We also provided essential items including PPE, household essentials and cleaning supplies. After picking up their meal and supplies, our participants could spend the holiday sharing a meal and relaxing with their families.

Every December, Union Settlement provides gifts for children ages 2-12 in our Early Childhood Education, Youth Services and Mental Health programs. **Almost half of the children in East Harlem live below the poverty line. Our Holiday Gift Drive gives parents the peace of mind that their children will receive a gift during the holidays,** and also ensures that our young participants experience the joy of unwrapping a new present! Volunteers joined us to help sort and wrap the gifts that our donors purchased through our Amazon Wish List. **Thanks to the generosity of our supporters, we were able to distribute over 1,000 toys and books** for the children to bring home and open with their families.

Union Settlement also received Christmas trees and decorations from **Greg's Trees and Council Member Diana Ayala**, which we gave to families in our Early Childhood Education program to make the season even brighter.

Finally, **Union Settlement was invited by New York Cares to be an official partner for their annual Winter Coat Drive.** Volunteers helped sort and distribute coats to program participants and East Harlem residents. We also provided coats to our partner organizations throughout Manhattan. In total, **we provided 2,500 coats for children and adults across the City.** With this winter's many snowstorms, we are happy we were able to help keep New Yorkers warm and dry!



The poster features a large orange hexagon in the center, surrounded by several colorful triangles in shades of orange, teal, green, and purple. The text is arranged vertically within the hexagon.

UNION
SETTLEMENT

SPRING

APRIL 22, 2021

BENEFIT

A VIRTUAL EVENT
EMPOWERING EAST HARLEM
unionsettlement.org/SpringBenefit