

Lenox Hill Neighborhood House Serving East Side's Forgotten Needy

by Fred Scaglione

In 1894, when Lenox Hill Neighborhood House first opened, the Upper East Side was a very different place. Poor immigrant families from Ireland, Germany and Eastern Europe filled the rows of brownstones stretching eastward from Lexington Avenue to the river. Today, the Upper East Side is one of the wealthiest communities in the world and simple studio apartments in those same four-story walk-ups rent for thousands of dollars each month. Newer luxury cooperatives and condominiums, crowding out other affordable housing, sell for millions. Yet, behind this glittering façade, significant numbers of extremely poor New Yorkers continue to live and work in one of the richest neighborhoods on earth. Lenox Hill Neighborhood House is there to help them meet a broad range of human service needs. "Twenty thousand people, ranging from infants to people over the age of 100, depend on the services we provide," says Warren Scharf, who has led Lenox Hill as Executive Director since 2003.

"We were founded here as a free kindergarten for immigrant children," says Scharf. "We are still running that kindergarten." Today, Lenox Hill's Early Childhood Center primarily serves the children of low-income workers who may live in Harlem, the Bronx or Brooklyn but come to work everyday on the Upper East Side.

"They are the doormen, the housekeepers and the people behind the counter in Subways," says Scharf. "They bring their children with them and use our early childhood programs because our Center is open from 8:00 a.m. to 6:00 p.m. A program in their own neighborhood doesn't always work for them." Despite the wealthy surroundings, Lenox Hill has no problem filling its 148 early childhood capacity with children whose families are income eligible for Head Start and city-funded day care.

The need and the logic of providing services where families work, rather than where they live, isn't always obvious to grantmakers or government funders, explains Scharf. Lenox Hill lost funding for its center-based after-school programs when the city transitioned to the Out of School Time program model and targeted funding based on community demographics. (The agency did get a small school-based OST program in Wagner Middle School.) However, many children of the Upper East Side's low income workforce attend public schools there, rather than back in their home communities. "Parents look here for good schools. They often prefer them to schools in their own neighborhood," says Scharf. Lenox Hill's after-school programs which pick up youngsters from school and escort them back to the center for activities until 6:00 are vital. "Without us, these kids have nowhere to go. The parents are stuck," says Scharf.



Warren B. Scharf, Executive Director

These low income workers and their families need a broad range of other services offered by Lenox Hill as well, ranging from English as a Second Language courses, other adult education classes and legal assistance.

Serving Poor Seniors

Lenox Hill also continues to serve large numbers of poor seniors still living in the Upper East Side, many of them from the same immigrant families the agency first cared for during the early years of the last century. "Community Districts 6 and 8 on the East Side have more seniors than anywhere in the city," explains Scharf.

"Our typical client is on a low level of social security or SSI," says Scharf. "They are living in this neighborhood because they are in a project or in a rent controlled apartment. Their rent might be frozen at \$581 and they are getting \$662 and living on \$80 a month. Everyone thinks they are rich but they are eating breakfast and lunch at one of our senior centers to get by."

Lenox Hill operates two senior centers with a total membership of over 7,000. One is located in a Housing Authority building at 70th and 1st Avenue, nearly adjacent to the agency's



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main location. The other is housed at St. Peter's Church in the CitiCorp Building at 54th Street and Lexington Avenue. Together, they serve meals to an average of 250 seniors daily. "Our center on 70th Street is the only one in Manhattan to be open seven days," says Scharf. The St. Peter's program is open on Monday through Saturdays, except Tuesdays.

The centers offer more than just meals. A range of classes and activities offer seniors an opportunity to socialize and exercise their bodies, minds and spirits. Music, art, dance, trips, computer classes are all available. Not all the senior center clients come in because they are poor and hungry. "People from the neighborhood come in, not because they need the meal, but because they are widowed and want to take Tai Chi or Bridge," says Scharf. "We have two generations in our senior centers. We have a 65 year old daughter and her 92 year old mom."

Lenox Hill also operates a series of Adult Day Programs for seniors with more significant needs. The CARE Program (Center for Alzheimer's Respite Care for the Elderly) serves adults with memory loss resulting from Alzheimer's disease or other dementia disorders. CARE offers small group programs designed to provide a warm and welcoming environment.

The Health Enhancement Partnership (HEP) is a full-time day care program serving older adults who are physically or mentally frail, many of whom would otherwise be homebound.

Project SCOPE (Senior Community Outreach Program to the Elderly) sends social workers and case managers to assess individual needs and coordinate social services for 300 elderly homebound neighborhood residents.

The Caring Neighbor (TCN), Lenox Hill's Home Health Care affiliate, provides Medicaid funded home care to homebound elderly and disabled individuals. TCN serves nearly 400 clients from various sections of Manhattan, including the Upper East Side and East Harlem.

A Settlement House

Lenox Hill was founded in the settlement house tradition, offering a smorgasbord of services to meet the varying needs of neighborhood residents. "We were formed

The Community Law Office

When seniors are being threatened with eviction, where can they go for help? If they are at a Lenox Hill Neighborhood House Senior Center, they don't have to go anywhere. A lawyer from the agency's Legal Advocacy Department will come right to them.

"There are very few free legal services anywhere in the country," says Warren Scharf, Executive Director of Lenox Hill Neighborhood House. He knows. Most of Scharf's career was spent with the Legal Aid Society where he ultimately headed up their Brooklyn Neighborhood Office. When he arrived at Lenox Hill, he quickly realized that many of the agency's diverse group of clients – seniors, caregivers, low income workers and their families, immigrants, individuals with substance abuse or mental health problems – had legal problems for which they could not find or afford an attorney.

Scharf's experience and expertise has enabled Lenox Hill to build its own legal services program which is available to assist all of its clients with problems they may be facing. The Legal Advocacy & Organizing Department now features a staff of eight – four attorneys and four non-attorney advocates – and a budget of over \$500,000.

"We have about 350 open cases in the department at various stages of action," says Carolyn Silver, Esq., Director of the Department. "Each person has 40-70 open cases and we probably get 20-30 new cases a week."

The department staff are regulars at Lenox Hill's various programs. They have regular hours at the senior centers and give workshops on legal and entitlement issues for parents in the Early Childhood Center, residents of the Women's Shelter and Casa Mutua, as well as for neighborhood residents.

Silver estimates that close to two-thirds of cases come from seniors facing housing issues or problems with Medicare/Medicaid. A number of grants have supported the creation of specialized legal services. The New York Community Trust, FJC and the Harry and Jeanette Weinberg Foundation helped to establish the Caregiver Legal Support Center which assists caregivers with their own very specific issues. Other recent support from the Skadden Fellowship Foundation added an attorney to deal with legal issues on behalf of low-wage workers in the community. "This will allow us to do unemployment hearings, wage and hour complaints and discrimination cases," says Silver. "We had never done that before."

Broader funding comes from a variety of sources including the IOLA Fund of the State of New York, the funds created from interest on escrow accounts; and individual donors and other foundations.

Silver relishes the ability to practice law on behalf of Lenox Hill's clients. "It is unique to be a lawyer and work in this kind of environment," she says. "Most lawyers don't get to see children running around all day or dance with senior citizens in the afternoon."



to provide community-based services for a lot of different people in need," says Scharf. "We are not an issue-centered agency. We don't just do children's issues or homeless issues."

In addition to the senior services already mentioned, the agency's menu of programs includes the Early Childhood Center serving 148 children aged 3-6, an after-school program for 120 youngsters from nearby elementary and middle schools and a summer camp for several hundred children.

Adult education programs include English for Speakers of Other Languages (ESOL) and the Elizabeth Rohatyn Computer Education Center. The agency also features a fully equipped fitness center, gymnasium and swimming pool which are available to clients and neighborhood residents.

Lenox Hill is a key provider of homelessness services. It operates the 100-bed Women's Shelter at the Park Avenue Armory. Social workers from its Street Outreach Program contact more than 1,500 homeless men and women annually, helping many to transition to shelters and eventual permanent housing. Lenox Hill even operates its own supportive housing program, Casa Mutua, providing permanent homes with appropriate counseling and case management for 54 formerly homeless adults, many of whom suffer with mental illness.

The Management Challenge

Managing this broad range of services offers its own challenges. "We have 30 different government contracts, all with different regulations and different

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rules," says Joseph Girven, Deputy Executive Director and CFO. "If we just did one thing it would be relatively easy."

Lenox Hill's goal is to put these various programmatic pieces together in ways that strengthen all of them. "There is an advantage to running a little conglomerate," says Scharf. "If we run child care and arts and legal services, we can make the child care better. We can make them all better than if they ran separately."

"A lot of organizations with city contracts treat each contract separately," says Girven. "We blend all of our services. If one of our senior centers doesn't have art in its budget, we will find a way to get arts in its budget."

One early example of this innova-

tive approach to funding and program delivery is still on the cutting edge today. In 1996, Lenox Hill began converting its separate Head Start and ACS-funded Day Care programs into a single, blended "collaborative" program model. "Families were coming into the building and receiving separate and different services," says Marian Detelj, Director of Youth and Family Services. "It made no sense to me. They were all children in need. But, because of separate contracts, Head Start families received a comprehensive family services component and families in Day Care didn't."

Detelj responded by restructuring the program to bring all services for all children up to the higher standards re-

quired for Head Start. Now, children are no longer separated and assigned to different programs. "Head Start, Day Care and Universal Pre-K children are all in the same classrooms and nobody knows the difference," says Detelj. "Head Start teachers and Day Care teachers are in the same classroom and nobody knows. They have different unions, different benefits and different salaries, but everybody works for the same goal which is quality services for children and families." (See: The Collaborative Model for Early Childhood Services)

Arts, Food and Facilities

Lenox Hill has taken a similar "blended" approach to everything from arts to food and facilities management.

Early Childhood Center: The Collaborative Model

Lenox Hill Neighborhood House's Collaborative Early Childhood Center combines funding from Head Start, ACS Day Care and Universal Pre-Kindergarten contracts with private philanthropic support to create one seamless program where all children and families receive the same high level of services. In 1996, the approach was radical. Today, it is helping to shape future policies as the city begins to redesign early childhood education.

Raising program standards for all families hasn't been easy or cheap. Combining resources from three separate government funding streams did offer certain advantages. Day care teachers suddenly found themselves with support from the Head Start psychologist and family service workers. In return, the day care contract contributed teacher aide positions to the new staffing mix. "Some teachers got three-person teaching teams instead of two-person teams," says Marian Detelj, Director of Youth and Family Services. "Head Start used to be open only to 3:30. This allowed us to provide service to 6:00."

Family service workers stretched to provide services to all the families in the new Collaborative Early Childhood program model. "They cover two classrooms. They went from 10 families to 30 or more," says Tara Covais, Director of Family Services. "This also allowed us to upgrade the Family Service Workers to also become Special Needs Coordinators. In addition to casework and supportive counseling, they are also responsible to develop programming in their specialty area."

One Family Service Worker specializes in health care. "She supports parents and children in making sure they are healthy, fully immunized and that they have health care," says Covais. "She arranges vision screenings, hearing screenings, dental services. We bus our parents and children to NYU Dental Clinic once a week."

Another focuses on children with special needs. "We run an inclusive program," says Covais. "18% of our kids have special needs. She arranges evaluations and helps parents coordinate services."

A Transition Coordinator works with kids who are coming in or leaving the program. "She has the challenge of helping our families find good schools for kids," says Covais. "She goes on school tours with them, helps them fill out applications and networks with psychologists who do free testing. She just made a partnership with St. Hilda's on the Upper West Side to give one child a year full tuition. She is working her magic all over town."

Detelj knows that the Lenox Hill model is demanding. "Yes, our caseloads are high, but what a wonderful opportunity this is for a social worker. You have to have a love and passion to do this work. We want to create an environment where people can excel. They find this exciting."

In 2003, the Doris Duke Foundation and the Center for the Study of Social Policy in Washington recognized Lenox Hill as one of twenty exemplary programs across the country. "When we received that award, the City started to look at what we were doing. The environment started to change and a movement started to happen," says Detelj who sits on the Administration for Children's Services for the Education of Young Children (NAEYC) advisory committee. Lenox Hill was also one of the first New York City programs to be accredited by the National Association for the Education of Young Children (NAEYC).

During the past year, Lenox Hill has added a new Child Abuse and Maltreatment Prevention Specialist to its mix of Special Needs Coordinators. Funded by the The Frances L. & Edwin L. Cummings Memorial Fund, the Child Abuse Prevention Specialist works with the most at-risk families. "We have found that parents who are likely to be at risk for child abuse and maltreatment also have other risk factors, substance abuse, mental health issues, incarceration," says Covais. "She identifies these families and provides intensive crisis management, casework and supportive counseling so that children can be safer and parents do not have to get involved with ACS."

"Head Start can really do prevention work," Covais continues. "We are a resource where there is already a relationship. She works with ACS workers, prevention workers and law guardians. She recently got a Family Court Judge to change a recommendation. Instead sending a parent to a random anger management group, she will meet with us once a week, a place where she already is connected and feels safe."

Once again, Lenox Hill hopes that their model will ultimately serve as a pilot for a system wide effort throughout Head Start.



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In 2003, the agency established a Visual and Performing Arts Department, consolidating resources from a variety of funding sources to create a five-member team of professionals to serve the entire agency. "Previously, there was an arts coordinator for Youth and Family Services (YAFS) and other departments hired consultants," says Lynne Mold, Director of the VPA Department. "But these people didn't necessarily integrate our philosophy or give us an opportunity to do collaborative programming."

Now, Mold's staff rotates through each of Lenox Hill's various programs. They are in each Early Childhood Classroom once a week; provide arts, music and creative movement in the senior programs and work with homeless women in the Park Avenue Armory Shelter. The group also coordinates Lenox Hill's "Second Sundays" Performances which present theater, dance and music each month and the agency's Community Theater.

The specialized team of professionals allows Lenox Hill to move beyond simple arts and crafts in working with clients. "We base a lot of our curriculum on literacy components," says Mold. "We take books and adapt them into our program. We do very little cookie cutter stuff. We help the children to compose their own songs and create their own dance pieces and plays."

Food service is another ubiquitous component in Lenox Hill's various programs, from early childhood to senior centers and homeless services. "We serve about 300,000 meals a year and we spend \$750,000 on raw food costs and disposables. That is a lot of money," says Scharf. Until recently, each program was responsible for managing its own food services. "If you were the senior center manager, you had a cook and bought your own food. If the cook was out, you were in trouble."

In May, Scharf upgraded the agency's Head Cook position to create a new Director of Food Services. "His responsibility is organization-wide. He has to know Department for the Aging (DFTA) guidelines and Head Start guidelines. All the cooks report to him. He is looking at purchasing plans and inventory controls. Now we are applying to America's Second Harvest for grants. He is a master

baker and just ran a class for the staff."

Scharf is confident that the new professionalized approach will save a minimum of 5%, or more than \$35,000, on the agency's food bill. Other benefits are just as important. "If the food service runs better, that makes everything run better," he explains. "If you are the senior center director that is one thing you don't have to worry about. You can concentrate on working with seniors."

Lenox Hill also consolidated its facilities management activities under a single organizational structure, attracting talented managers from the private sector and relieving program directors of facilities-related headaches.

New Programming

In recent years, Lenox Hill has launched or expanded several programs designed to meet newly identified needs among the agency's diverse clients.

Late in 2003, shortly after his arrival, Scharf launched Lenox Hill's new Legal Advocacy & Organizing Department. The unit serves seniors facing eviction, caregivers dealing with Medicaid or Medicare, young families seeking public assistance or other entitlements, low income workers involved in wage and hour disputes, and much, much more. (See: Legal Services: The Community Law Office)

The agency has also ramped up Project STAR, which provides Support, Training, Advocacy and Respite for unpaid family members who care for homebound adults over the age of 60. "Over Ninety percent of the care in this country is provided by family members," says Scharf. "All paid home care and institutions only account for 8% of long-term care."

"We serve about 70-80 clients a month through support groups and individual counselling," says Christopher Chin, Program Director for Project STAR. "We work with 200 to 250 individuals a year." One support group is for adult children caring for parents. Another is for spouses. Two groups are geared to long distance caregivers, those who live in New York City but are responsible for a parent or family member living somewhere else. "We found that they have very special needs," says Chin.



The support groups help caregivers deal with physical and emotional stress. A related program, Caregiver Legal Support Center, housed in Lenox Hill's Legal Advocacy & Organizing Department, offers help with Medicaid, Medicare, third party insurers, housing issues and estate planning. The STAR program offers caregivers periods of respite through temporary home care services provided by The Caring Neighbor (TCN), a Lenox Hill affiliate. "They can get out to see a movie or visit a friend," says Chin. The program also offers bereavement counseling for caregivers who ultimately face the loss of a parent or family member.

"This program is important because nobody else is doing it the way we are," says Scharf. "It could be 100 times larger than it is."

Expanding programs or adding new ones requires money and space, however. Lenox Hill is currently renovating its main building at 331 East 70th Street. The six-story, 80,000 sq. ft. structure reportedly was the largest settlement house in the world when it was first constructed in 1926. Now, Lenox Hill is adding an elevator to make it wheel chair accessible and reconfiguring the top floor apartments where staff once lived to create new administrative and program space.

Looking ahead, Scharf's main focus is to ensure that Lenox Hill continues to improve the services it already provides and adds new ones only to meet the real needs of clients. "Bigger isn't better; better is better," he says. Nor is the agency interested in expanding its geographic focus. "We are not interested in having programs in East New York. We have more than enough to do right here."

After 113 years, there are still plenty of people living and working on the East Side who need help.