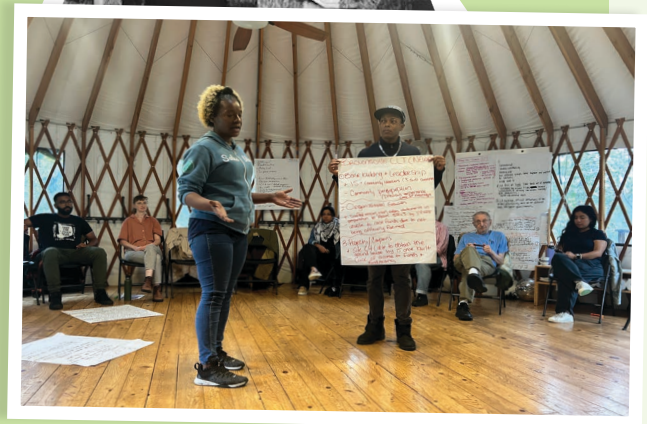


## From the Ground Up

How Investment in Grassroots  
Organizations Supports Family Well-Being



# About

**Report written by Naashia B., Halimah Washington and Mary Holiman, Rise Organizing Team; and Rashida Abuwala, New Tomorrow; and edited by Nora McCarthy, NYC Family Policy Project.**

Founded in 2005 and led by parents directly impacted by the family policing system, Rise is rooted in the belief that parents hold the solutions for their families and communities. Our mission is to empower parents as leaders and to foster communities that invest in families through collective care, healing and support.

Rise remains steadfast in our vision of a future where communities are free from injustice and family separation—a society that embraces new approaches to preventing and addressing harm. We envision a radical commitment to ensuring that all families have the resources and support they need to move beyond survival and truly thrive.

Through safe and affirming spaces, we support impacted parents in reflecting on their experiences, connecting with peers and deepening their understanding of the family policing system's history and policies. We equip parents with skills in writing, public speaking, and advocacy, empowering them to mobilize their communities and drive meaningful change.

This report was co-authored by Rashida Abuwala, Principal of [New Tomorrow](#), a research and advisory firm that works with foundations, policy, movement-building and direct service organizations to support participatory, community-powered research and change that amplify marginalized voices, build community power and end harmful systems.

It was edited by Nora McCarthy, Director of [NYC Family Policy Project](#), which explores and builds evidence – through original research, data and policy analysis – for the policy visions of parents and young people impacted by the child welfare system in New York City.

**Our mission is to empower parents as leaders and to foster communities that invest in families through collective care, healing and support.**



Photos courtesy of Rise





# Introduction

**During the holiday season of 2022, I took my 15-year-old and 7-year-old twins to a Holiday Soiree hosted by The Black Feminist Project at the Alice Fields Community Center, a safe space for respite, retreat and wellness. This space supports the Black Joy Farm and Community Food program, and is a drop-in space to receive free food, clothing and other supplies.**

That night it was filled with the sounds of people talking, children laughing and Afrobeats pumped out of the large speakers strategically placed at the entrance. The air smelled of cinnamon, spice and the holiday nice. I noticed a Reproductive Justice Timeline posted on the wall and a kitchen area where a chef was preparing healthy foods. The place was bustling with organizers hanging up last-minute decorations, children playing in the free childcare corner and people like me instructed to make ourselves at home.

The Soiree had me wishing that there were more organizations that could offer these types of joyful programs all year round to families in their communities. In my neighborhood, Hunts Point, community leaders are developing these kinds of family support projects all the time but often struggle to access funding and resources.

Strong, well-resourced communities create the conditions for children and families to thrive. Communities impacted by carceral systems are calling for compassionate, strengths-based and culturally responsive resources that can authentically meet their needs and are not linked to punitive systems, like the criminal legal or family policing system.



Photo courtesy of Rise



Photo courtesy of Sisters in Purple

## Meaningful Investment in Community-Based Organizations and Groups

In this report, we highlight some of the grassroots community groups that parents in communities highly impacted by family policing rely on for community care—and call on New York City and State and the philanthropic community to invest deeply, holistically and sustainably in community-based organizations and grassroots groups that have long served and built trust with their communities.

Community-based organizations, many of which are smaller and run by Black and brown leaders with community roots, are uniquely positioned to build trust with families and better serve their communities. Yet large social service organizations with weak community ties and minimal community accountability are able to dominate the service space without having the roots within communities that are needed to effect meaningful change.



Photo courtesy of  
The Point CDC

## INTRODUCTION

Increased funding, resources and infrastructure support would help grow the impact of community groups and their ability to transform how family-centered care can be provided. These groups must be resourced in ways that allow them to build the capacity to serve the thousands of families currently ensnared by the city's Administration for Children's Services (ACS).

**Research shows that relationships help buffer the chronic stress families experience because of racism and poverty, and that highly networked communities are more able to make use of existing resources.**

We recommend that the philanthropic community, City and State:

- Provide multi-year general operating funding for security and sustainability;
- Facilitate fiscal sponsorships and mentorships by experienced nonprofit leaders as needed;
- Support needs like grant writing or other technical needs;
- Support the formation of worker cooperatives owned, controlled and run by and for their members to realize their common economic, social and cultural needs and aspirations.

At the State level, a new Child and Family Wellbeing Fund should be included in the FY2026 state budget that our elected leaders are negotiating in Albany right now. The Child and Family Wellbeing Fund is an innovative, first-of-its-kind, anti-racist approach to resourcing communities to support healthy children and families.



Photo courtesy of Mekong NYC

Advanced by Assembly Member Hevesi and Senator Brisport, the Child and Family Wellbeing Fund would support children's growth and development by investing resources to build up community groups in neighborhoods that have been historically disenfranchised. It would especially reach communities now targeted for government intervention through the child welfare system.

### **Making a Corrective Shift So That Families Don't Live in 'Survival Mode'**

New York State's "family policy guidelines" prioritize government support for families that promote "safe, nurturing environments which support the healthy growth of all family members." But New York State under-invests in community well-being and then over-spends on crisis intervention.

At [Rise](#), a parent advocacy organization, I see that every day in the \$300 million spent annually on ACS investigations in New York City that prosecute families for "neglect" allegations that could be prevented by less costly upfront investments in neighborhood health. The majority of reports to the state child abuse hotline are made not for abuse, but for symptoms of poverty. Many families who live in communities that have been disenfranchised and targeted by child protective services are in survival mode, with limited trusted options for support.

City and State investment in grassroots community organizations will make a corrective shift to ensure that all New York children live within neighborhoods that are set up to support their well-being.

Leaving the Holiday Soiree that night, I listened to my children reflecting on how much fun they had and I saw the looks of pure joy on all of my babies' faces. I want my children to feel like that every day.

### Holistic Family Programming That Lifts Stress and Builds Community Must Become a Priority

The City, State and philanthropic community must recognize that family support is an under-funded category of support. While youth development broadly supports positive investments in young people, most programs and services for adults are focused only on narrow categories of crisis, such as criminal legal system involvement or domestic violence. Organizations seeking to holistically serve their communities must cobble together funding, much of it narrowly and negatively focused.

Holistic family support organizations that help parents access the fundamentals of family life and provide programming that lifts stress and builds community must become a priority area of investment.

Ensuring that more organizations like the Black Feminist Project and Alice Fields Community Center have the opportunity to thrive and provide more programs to communities impacted by child welfare can put our families and children on a different path.

### Not On My Watch (NOMW): Building Resilience from Within

Not On My Watch (NOMW) identified the need to evolve from an organization focused on girls at-risk for human trafficking to one that provides wrap-around supports that service young girls as early as prevention. They empower young girls and women through prevention, community training and awareness initiatives focused on human trafficking, sexual assault and violence prevention.

Founded in 2013, NOMW provides supports to young women that help build self-esteem and avoid poor consequences that can lead to unhealthy relationships. Through initiatives like the Women's Empowerment (WE) program, NOMW

helps young women find community as they develop their sense of self and identity.

Executive Director of NOMW Pamela Damon shares "silence is not golden" when supporting young girls who have experienced violence. NOMW believes it is imperative to position communities to advocate for their needs, become educated on their rights, and be in community through coalition-building and resource sharing.



# What Parents Want in Communities Impacted by Surveillance and Separation

**Surveillance and family separation by the family policing system impact predominantly Black and brown, low-income families living in communities marked by societal neglect. Involvement with ACS often lasts for years and for generations, and, for families in these communities, can be unavoidable.**



Photo courtesy of Chances for Children

In 2020-21, Rise led a [Participatory Action Research](#) project to document the harm of the family policing system and outline how parents impacted by the system believe families can receive care and support without the surveillance, control, trauma and loss inflicted by the current system.

Many of our research findings were unsurprising to parents who have experienced the system, yet the devastation to children, parents, extended family networks and communities is not broadly understood and was therefore essential to document and amplify. Key findings included:

- ACS is an unavoidable system in Black and brown communities
- ACS fails to help parents. Even when connections to services were helpful to families, they came at the cost of negative experiences with the system.
- ACS intervention inflicts lasting and layered trauma, including harming children physically and emotionally and actively harming families instead of helping them.
- ACS does not respect parents' cultural practices and values, and violates norms of privacy and autonomy for parents and children.
- ACS involvement damages the relationships which parents and families need to thrive.
- Parents lose their jobs—and identities—and live in fear.

**Intentionally supporting relationships that cultivate trust, love and joy can be a powerful change mechanism for strengthening communities.**





### Investments in Networks of Community Care

Secondly, our research asked parents to envision new approaches to providing care. Key findings included:

- Parents call for well-resourced communities, including childcare, jobs, housing, community centers and supports such as therapy.
- Parents want financial investment in families, access to information about their rights, non-judgmental and compassionate care, and care from people with similar experiences and backgrounds.
- Community care networks—the constellation of people and places that care for parents in difficult times and help them achieve their goals—are deeply important and multifaceted.



Photo courtesy of Chances for Children

Participants wanted:

- Non-judgmental and compassionate care
- Strength-based and trauma-informed services
- Holistic community centers that provide after-school programs, camps, community services, peer mentoring and more in a single accessible place
- LGBTQ-competent services
- Accessible resources and support provided by people with shared experience and background
- Peer support networks for parents in crisis and peer mental health support
- Respite and community-based drop-off childcare

- Culturally relevant individual therapy, family therapy, grief support and trauma services that are freely accessible and offered in non-stigmatizing, non-coercive settings that invite families in to explore how to resolve conflicts within their family and community
- Community-based supports for trauma recovery, especially healing from sexual and intimate partner violence, that recognize the historical and current vulnerability of Black and brown women
- Family mediation programs using restorative justice
- Programs centering the needs of families with LGBTQ+ children
- Community groups that focus on restorative justice, family care and healing for survivors of intimate partner violence

### Care Outside the System

Research participants, like parents involved with Rise more broadly, could not have been clearer that they wanted support and resources to come from people, networks and organizations outside of ACS, an agency they don't trust to provide family support. Of survey respondents, 88% said they did not trust the child welfare system had their family's best interest in mind.

### Surveillance Isn't Safety

Many of the resources that are available to low-income families are purposefully limited, difficult to access and entwined with family policing systems, adding stress to already challenging situations. Families can often be prioritized for basic needs like housing and childcare only through system involvement.

Underlying these public policies are racist and biased assumptions that poor people and people of color can't be trusted to care for their children and require monitoring. Rooted in histories of slavery and genocide, these racist tropes have been used throughout U.S. history to justify intentional withholding of every form of economic and civic opportunity in Black and Native American communities. Then they are used to justify punishment—including family and community separation through family policing and incarceration—when families can't meet their basic needs.

Parents want investment in trusted organizations and institutions with a track record of responsive care in their communities. We want investment in what already works, so it can grow. Too often, community-led organizations

that operate with real trust and strong networks struggle for opportunities to expand what they do well. Peer care networks should be nurtured where caring, healing relationships are already growing.

### Community Care Networks Are Deeply Important

The PAR Team defined “community care networks” as the set of people and places in your life that help you to achieve your goals and care for you during difficult times. Your community care network might include people like neighbors, friends, family, faith leaders and many others. Your community care network may also include places like faith-based groups, community centers, clubs, building associations, coworker hangouts and so on. It may even include online resources like Facebook groups, chat rooms and group texts.

Community conversation participants described how community care networks provide valuable support.



Photo courtesy  
of Chances for  
Children

**“Having a strong community support network is overwhelmingly important. If I had just the parent advocacy portion of my network when ACS knocked on my door, oh my God, that case would have been closed in a week.” –Focus Group Participant 11**

**“I think it’s important to have a network, because through that network you get assistance, collect information and you feel supported and loved.” –Focus Group Participant 2**

**“I feel like the importance of having a community care network is that when you have people behind you, when you have support, it helps in so many ways. Like, you can avoid so many accidents being around people who are there to vouch for you, who are going to pick you up, let me say. ... It’s support, it’s knowledge, it’s education, it’s everything.” –Focus Group Participant 10**

**The family policing system’s impact is intergenerational, and parents with childhood histories in the foster system often face increased isolation, surveillance and risk of having their own children removed.**



**Relationship-building that respects, values and supports families getting what they need without shame, blame and coercion can better support family safety.**

## **The Birthing Place: Nurturing Healthy Beginnings**



The Birthing Place (TBP) empowers communities with culturally responsive reproductive, perinatal and family wellness education resources. They contribute to wellness events with the Womb Bus, a mobile wellness hub. TBP hosts community programs at Maryam Reproductive Health + Wellness, partnering with providers to support breastfeeding, mental health and the next generation of BIPOC birth professionals.

Despite their crucial work, The Birthing Place faces significant funding challenges as they aspire to expand services. Beyond the comprehensive

care now being provided at Maryam, The Birthing Place seeks to sustain existing programs and open their long-intended, Bronx-based midwifery birth center. TBP's network seeks to empower people through their reproductive and post-reproductive years with culturally-responsive, multi-lingual, and person-centered care for Bronx and NYC families.

**The Birthing Place seeks to sustain existing programs and open their long-intended, Bronx-based midwifery birth center.**



# How Grassroots Groups Strengthen Family and Community Well-Being

**In neighborhoods heavily monitored by family policing, grassroots community groups and organizations provide material support and connections to vital resources, and strengthen social connections for children and families. Community leaders working to build assets are pillars of strength and support in their communities. Despite their essential role, these groups often struggle to survive, facing restrictive criteria and complex processes that block access to funding from government and philanthropy.**



Photo courtesy of Chances for Children

Research shows that when grassroots community organizations thrive, the neighborhoods they support are more likely to thrive.

While it is recognized that grassroots groups often lack resources, the broader impact on communities is less understood. This brief helps to shed light on this, exploring grassroots organization's unique impact, their challenges in supporting communities, their dreams and visions for their communities, and the support they need to realize their vision.

## Grassroots Organizations are Driven by Community Trust

Building, holding and maintaining the community's trust is at the core of a grassroots approach. Unlike large non-profit and government-contracted organizations, grassroots groups are typically smaller, more localized, and driven by the immediate needs and concerns of the communities they serve. They are unique in their bottom-up approach, often founded and led by community members who are impacted by the very issues they address. Defined by deep community engagement and trust, grassroots leaders carry an ability to understand, respond and activate other community members in the face of pressing needs, often resulting in supports that are more effective.

To build trust organizations often have to first repair broken trust caused by large agencies. Ruth Horry at United for Brownsville shares that, when the group began to focus on Early Intervention, families' past experiences with government intervention affected their work. "It took two years to build trust with the community...ACS [put] families in the direction that they do not need," she said.

United for Brownsville's family-driven peer support approach has been effective in building that trust, and it has contributed to doubling the rate of families engaging with Early Intervention supports in just three years. They support families holistically, not only assisting with the completion of registration paperwork for early childhood services but also extending their support to include home repairs.

A Bronx hub that helps many families who are navigating the complexities of the child welfare system, The Point CDC's Barbara Alicea describes a non-judgmental and welcoming approach: "The community wants to know that the person they come to when they're struggling... or when they're going through all the symptoms of what poverty brings, is someone they feel they can trust and that we're going to help them...So if I have a parent say, Hey, listen, I'm struggling, because I have no patience for my kid, he's a teenager going out in the streets. I wouldn't want to create a space where a Mom feels "unfit." I want to have a brave and safe space where she

<sup>1</sup> Reported by United for Brownsville using Department of Health Data showing a 60% engagement rate in 2022 up from a 30% engagement rate in 2019.

can come in and be like, listen, I'm having a moment...I need some help... So it's very vital for us here at The Point and the way that we do it is to really get to know our families."

Grassroots organizations are uniquely positioned to have staff that are representative of the community that they work in. Bronx-based Mekong NYC supports the Cambodian and Vietnamese refugee and immigrant community, providing direct services, arts and culture programs, and campaigns and community organizing. They serve as a vital support, addressing diverse needs through dedicated cultural and linguistic services. Thida Virak describes how understanding the cultural con-

text of communities is central in their ability to engage members: "We work with two different communities, Cambodian and Vietnamese, and they do have history back in our own country, but over here, we're all South-east Asian, and we can't think that we are able to bring them together and build that connection all over again without having any issue, without having to look back at history." She goes to describe how staff from their communities are central in building trust: "We have also seen a lot of members who come to our organization for services if they trust the staff enough to provide all the basic information to them, if they trust the staff enough to share all the hardships that they're going through in their daily living."

### The Point CDC: Advocating for Trust and Resources



At The Point CDC, a hub for many families who are navigating the complexities of the child welfare system, building trust with the community is the main priority. The Point advocates for community transparency and supports families by providing them with the tools they need to thrive. The challenges they face, however, are often systemic and difficult to overcome. Families are constantly uprooted, and The Point's capacity to provide consistent, meaningful support is stretched thin.



The main obstacles the organization faces are caused by restrictive state regulations and funding limitations. The Point tries to not depend on government funding, as it comes with many "strings attached" and may limit their ability to respond to the more immediate needs of the community.

More resources would allow them to provide direct services, such as childcare and mental health support, ensuring families can remain in their communities. Increased funding would allow The Point to hire additional staff, create more robust programs and engage community members as advocates for change. The Point envisions more centers of healing, education and empowerment— where families can gather, share their experiences and receive the support they need.



**Informal support—neighborly support or mutual aid—is often the best, fastest and least intrusive form of support.**



Photo courtesy of Sisters in Purple

### **What Parents Say: Reasons We Chose to Go to a Particular Person or Group for Support**

- We trust them and they are loyal. They never gave us a reason to not trust them.
- They know the struggle—they have been there.
- They are for the betterment of the community and are there because they are passionate about it.
- We choose to help each other—it's a give and take and it involves accountability on both of our parts. It is not about being mandated.
- There is no judgment or shame.
- They communicate and listen with respect. They respect boundaries.
- They have a relationship with us and with our family. They care about us and see us as people—not as a number or file.
- They have wisdom and experience that we can relate to and they know what they are talking about—not someone who is inexperienced and/or never had kids telling us how to raise kids.

### **Investments to Build Relationships**

ACS involvement damages the relationships which parents and families need to thrive.

Relationships are central to our lives—bringing us care, joy, belonging and companionship. Relationships are also critically important for families to navigate times of crisis. Relationships minimize isolation, help parents access resources and reduce stress.

Reparative investment would strengthen community organizations that help build community networks of care and social ties.

**68%**  
More than two thirds of parents reported that child welfare had a negative impact on their romantic relationships (68%).

**60%**  
More than half of parents said that child welfare had a negative impact on their familial and platonic relationships (60%).

**83%**  
83% of parents reported that they felt ashamed by their involvement with child welfare. That shame can cause isolation.

## Chances for Children: Healing Through Connection



Chances for Children (CFC) addresses the critical need for early care and support for families, particularly those dealing with trauma and violence. The organization offers parent-child therapy for children 0-5 years old and their parents. Through a strengths-based approach that upholds con-



fidentiality and is built on trust, CFC prioritizes connection over intervention to create a supportive environment for parents and children.

Aware of the mistrust often stemming from systemic trauma, CFC provides a space where parents can seek support for themselves and their children without fear of invasive and surveillant questioning.

Despite providing impactful services, CFC faces challenges in recruiting skilled therapists and expanding their reach. More funding would enable them to increase their staff, enhance their services and provide greater support to families in need.

## Grassroots Organizations Show-up For Communities in Unique Ways

Grassroots organizations are flexible in how they support communities, often pushing beyond the traditional programmatic boundaries of larger non-profit organizations. Community Connections for Youth (CCFY) disrupts the school to prison pipeline not just through providing high-quality youth development, parent support and youth justice programming and coaching, but by being a reliable neighbor and a friend. Belinda Ramos describes how they “take on a very whole family approach and a community-based approach. You know, while we’re focused on what’s going on in court, we’re

doing everything. We’re being supportive like neighbors, friends, family. We help them where we can help them. We show up wherever they need us to show up.”

Barbara Alicea from The Point CDC describes how they help families access supports beyond what they offer: “There are some gray areas...We do a lot of environmental justice work here, but with that come other injustices. If families are coming in a lot, and we see like, ok, there’s a need for food, it’s like, ‘How can I get a pantry in here? Who can I link up with?’ Who can we work with? Who can be like, ‘Hey, I can give you some fresh fruits and vegetables on a Tuesday.’ It’s being there, and it’s not talking about it, it is being about it.”

### **What Parents Say: Types of Support We've Wanted or Needed**

- Babysitting, a break for parents
- Connection to therapy
- Food, chocolate, food to take home, a meal together
- Clothes
- Help finding a job
- Resources for going to school
- Self-care: Toiletries, haircut, laundry
- Someone to talk to with no judgment
- Metrocards, free transportation
- Information and resources, including about what is available in the community—as simple as that there is a sale on eggs
- Whatever that person needs at the time for what they are experiencing (e.g., a cooler if their refrigerator broke) or to reach their goals (e.g., school)
- Diapers, baby-care supplies
- Holidays—turkeys, toys n Gift cards, cash
- Furniture or furniture voucher
- Care for pet
- Activities for kids, opportunities to get involved in technology, opportunities for youth to work and get paid
- Programs that take kids out to the park or other fun activities
- Individual support, mentoring for kids, opportunities to go to different places and have different experiences, hope
- Access to bank accounts without fees/payments/ minimum requirement so we can save
- Understanding what led to things, getting to the root

**Folks need proof that if they show up in their weakest moment, you're not going to turn them in, manage them, or shame them.**



# Investment Can Address Current and Historical Disinvestment That Weakens Communities

**All New York City nonprofits have faced growing resource strain in the face of rising community need since the onset of the pandemic and this will likely grow under the Trump administration. This pain is even more acutely felt by small grassroots organizations. An imbalance of power and access perpetuates the reality that large non-profit and government contract organizations receive the vast majority of public and private grants.**

Grassroots organizations are impacted by resource scarcity, competition, donor fatigue and budget cuts. “There’s a lot of us out here trying to go for what sounds like a lot of money, but when you cut up the pie, almost 8 million people live in New York City,” says Belinda Ramos of CCFY. She and her community feels the inequitable distribution of resources: “Sometimes there’s a general lack of confidence in the small grassroots to do as effective work as like these larger institutions... communities are full of people who can be really, really effective, and you could easily pull them in, but we can’t do it without the money to develop our ideas and do more.”

## Scarcity Harms Community Members

Our most marginalized community members feel the loss of inconsistent and insufficient funding of grassroots organizations. And, organizations face the heavy responsibility of effectively supporting the vast and ever-evolving needs of their communities.

Barbara Alicea of The Point CDC mentions how “in the community that we live in, they’ve been through it all here. They know that, Hey, other people get a grant, they set up shop for two, three years, and they leave and we still here.” While she tries to maintain a continuity of services despite resource constraints, her staff, partner organizations and her community feel

Photo courtesy of  
The Birthing Place



### Fundamental Resources for Families to Thrive

#### Basic Needs

- Housing support and rental assistance
- Food support
- Clothing
- Babies supplies
- Family-friendly public and green spaces

#### Financial and Employment Support

- General cash assistance
- Emergency cash
- Benefits navigation
- Career and employment support

#### Family, Childcare and Recreation

- Parent support
- Baby supplies
- Emergency/drop-in respite childcare
- Early childhood learning/daycare
- General childcare/babysitting

#### Advocacy and Legal

- Peer support
- Legal support
- Advocacy, movement building, political education, organizing

#### Health and Wellness

- Medical care
- Mental health care
- In-patient addiction treatment and substance recovery
- Domestic Violence support

## Sisters In Purple: Empowering Survivors of Trauma



Sisters in Purple is a grassroots survivor-led organization providing healing services for survivors of trauma related to domestic violence, teen dating violence, gender-based violence, and gun violence, committed to breaking cycles of

generational trauma. They provide spaces for solidarity to impacted individuals of gun violence, whether in their lives directly, or through vicarious trauma.

Their grassroots approach involves outreach, assessing needs and connecting victims

and families to resources within their “purple ecosystem” of care. They are passionate about raising awareness to elected officials while also providing immediate assistance to those affected by domestic violence and other forms of trauma.

With increased resources, Sisters in Purple aims to expand their programming to include prevention programs, community-based workshops, survivor empowerment sessions and prenatal care events. They also seek to provide emergency stipends for those in crisis and bolster their lobbying activities. They envision a future where survivors have immediate access to essential resources, fostering a community of hope and inspiration.



over-extended. She says, “I’m trying to service our families as much as possible because the Bronx is overwhelmed. The city right now is overwhelmed with so many of the things happening, those services that were there are barely there now because we’re all at capacity at this point.”

Resources to add more staff capacity and programming space to meet the rising needs of community members is a top priority. Pamela Damon from Not On My Watch describes how “staffing is a problem because we work 24/7 to accommodate everyone. Space is an

issue because even though we’ve just moved into our space, it’s been a year now we’ve outgrown it. And it’s because of the needs that are out there.”

Community leaders do the best they can with limited resources, relying on short-term consultants or volunteers. Belinda Ramos from CCFY adds, “We really want a male mentor that’s a credible messenger that can relate. So we’ll do consultant contracts or little contracts to be able to support one or two young people that need it. But we need somebody full time.” Impactful programs that rely on volunteers would be stronger

<sup>2</sup> See: Marwell, N. P., & Gullickson, A. (2013). “Inequality in the Welfare State: Politics, Geography, and Private Organizations.” Social Service Review. Available at: <https://metrolabnetwork.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/12/Marwell-Gullickson-2013-SSR.pdf>; New York City Comptroller’s Office. (2023). “Annual Summary Contracts Report for the City of New York: Fiscal Year 2023.” Available at: <https://comptroller.nyc.gov/reports/annual-contracts-report/>; Inside Philanthropy. (2021). “Why Big Philanthropy Falls Short at Supporting the Grassroots and How It Can Do Better.” Available at: <https://www.insidephilanthropy.com/home/2021-8-31-why-big-philanthropy-falls-short-at-supporting-the-grassroot-sand-how-it-can-do-better>.

**Community care to support strong communities is not only about meeting basic needs and responding to crises. It's also about increasing access to positive experiences for joy and rest to reduce stress and build relationships.**

if they had more permanent staff, Shamara Kelley of The Birthing Place mentions: "Right now, our whole program is operated on volunteers... people who are very expert in facilitating such thoughtful content and curriculum and training... those are things that we don't have support for. But meanwhile, we have testimonials after testimonials about how these programs are impacting folks' lives."

Continued under-investments in grassroots community organizations perpetuates systemic inequities, Barbara

Alicea of CDC The Point points to a dynamic where their community is not set up for success: "We should have access to everything that every child at 86th and Lexington has in Hunts Point. Just having equality, accessibility to everything that everyone else has given them that chance and opportunity. We know the students have potential, but if we're not giving them that foundation to build and scaffold up, we're never going to see that."

## Community Connections for Youth: A Holistic Approach to Disrupting the Prison Pipeline

Community Connections for Youth (CCFY), an organization focused on disrupting the school-to-prison pipeline, calls for an increased focus on accessibility and connection. CCFY frequently engages with young people and parents directly, whether at the courthouse or at schools, with a

localized approach that requires intentional support from the city. CCFY mentions fluctuations of city contracts and a



shifting NYC political climate as primary reasons for organizational funding instability and limited capacity.

Executive Director Belinda Ramos shares, "More funding would allow us to be creative. People on the ground do not lack creativity—the ideas are there." Sufficient funding would grant CCFY the ability to innovate and expand their programs, providing critical mentorship and resources that empower both youth and parents.





## Communities Know the Way Forward

Organizations like The Birthing Place, Community Connections for Youth, Not On My Watch, Mekong NYC, The Point CDC and United for Brownsville have witnessed firsthand the needs of communities impacted by systemic challenges and stand as lifelines, providing essential supports and resources that can help communities thrive.

These organizations are not just responding to immediate needs, they are laying the groundwork for a healthier future. They have powerful visions for building up their communities and dream of a future where families have more than their basic needs met, support one another and realize their power. With increased funding and support, groups like these can collaborate with community to develop sustainable networks of care that break cycles of trauma and empower individuals and families so they can thrive.

## Mekong NYC: Culturally Centered Wrap-Around Support

Mekong NYC serves as a vital support for the Cambodian and Vietnamese community in New York City, addressing diverse needs through dedicated cultural and linguistic services. Many members, who arrived seeking refuge and settled in divested communities living in poverty, face

challenges accessing necessary supports in their language, primarily around housing, immigration and mental health. There is also a strong communal effort to preserve cultural traditions through arts and community events, ensuring that younger generations remain connected to their heritage.

Mekong's role in the community is important, providing dedicated services like wellness checks and mutual aid initiatives for this growing population seeking the power of communal support. Mekong envisions continuing to create accessible, communal spaces where its members can show up for one another and continue to build trust.



## What Parents Say: What It Would Feel Like to Have Strong Community Care

### Parents would not feel alone and would feel safe to ask for support

“It would feel good to have that support and just relief. And I wouldn’t feel the complete fear you would being alone, going through that situation. The importance is so that you could be supported, so if had to go through that experience, you won’t break down ‘cause it could definitely break you, mentally, physically, in every way. Going through that is draining.” —Focus Group Participant 25

“Well, I know that I have support and that I’m not alone. We are humans, we make mistakes. That there are others out there that are caring and understanding of my needs. And that’s gonna help me work through it, supportive. And it means achievement, peace, harmony, you know. To feel secure. The world is big and I’m not on my own because I have support from my community.” —Focus Group Participant 34

### Strong community care would feel and be transformative, personally and societally

“I would feel supported if I had a supportive community. I would feel more relieved, I would feel happy, I would feel like somebody understands me. That’s what people need, especially young mothers, when you have people coming into your homes, that’s a very scary thing, very traumatic. People need that support, it’s very important... People need to feel that, not just to snatch my kid with strangers, throw them to wolves, mistreat my child, treat them any kind of way, turn my child

against me. That’s very traumatic for a parent, for a child, they don’t care. I would love that type of support. If I had that type of support, I think I wouldn’t have so much anxiety, I wouldn’t be so depressed.” —Focus Group Participant 28

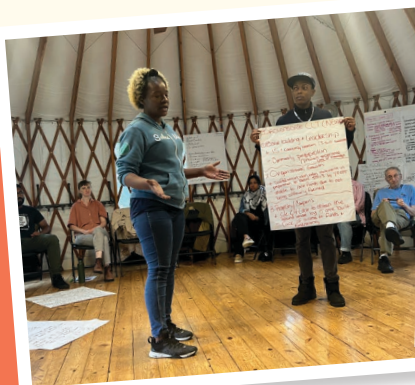
“I would feel like my life doesn’t have so much injustice. I would feel supported, I would feel just right. That everything is going correctly. There’s no cruelty going on. I would feel that I got my justice, or that there was nothing injustice that happened. If my ideal community care network was real, it would feel like my life was close to perfect, that there was nothing wrong in it. It’s important [for] these kinds of things to exist in my ideal community care network to be real because that way, families are not being broken up, strangers are not taking care of your children, and your community care network will also not judge you, your community care network will accept you.” —Focus Group Participant 30

### ACS Cases Would Become Obsolete

“I think the idea of a community support, basically there wouldn’t be so many ACS cases in the air, period. And then not only would parents have the support and stuff that they need, and the resources they need like housing, special care for their kids with special needs and for themselves, daycares, and all the help they need, so ACS would be out of a job, technically. If everybody had that support and stuff, there wouldn’t really be much ACS involvement.” —Focus Group Participant 23

## United for Brownsville: Championing Community Power

United for Brownsville brings the community together to fight systemic injustices in health care, education and housing. Priorities and solutions are set by the Family Advisory Board of community members. Ruth Horry, who leads provider engagement and access, highlights the critical need for equity in funding and resources for underserved communities.



Their work involves early intervention, home repairs, and advocacy for families. Their primary challenge is navigating state regulations and funding constraints, which limit their ability to provide comprehensive services. More resources would allow them to enhance their direct services and increase their staffing capacity.

Their ideal vision involves a community where individuals are empowered to realize their own potential and where every resident has access to the same opportunities and support as those in more affluent areas.

We would like to thank the community champions who generously offered their time and insight for this report. Thank you for taking the time to sit with us and be interviewed for this project: **Pamela Damon**, Executive Director, and **Deborah Johnson** from [Not On My Watch \(NOMW\)](#); **Myla Flores**, Founder and Director of [The Birthing Place](#); **Jazmin Williams** and **Lillian Roundtree**, Co-Executive Directors of [Chances for Children-NY](#); **Belinda Ramos**, Executive Director of [Community Connections for Youth \(CCFY\)](#); **Thida Verok**, Social Services & Advocacy Director from [Mekong-NYC](#); **Barbara Alicea**, Executive Managing Director of [The Point CDC](#); **Shamara Kelley**, Co-Founder of [Sisters In Purple](#); and **Ruth Horry** from [United for Brownsville](#). We are grateful to the Redlich Horwitz Foundation for supporting this research.

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## Learn More: Grassroots Groups Supporting Families in NYC

Ancient Song Doula Services	Brooklyn
Arcturus Community Endeavors	Brooklyn
Black Feminist Project	Bronx
Brujas of Brooklyn	Brooklyn
CDC The Point	Bronx
Center for Community Connections for Youth (CCFY)	Bronx
Centro Corona	Queens
Chances for Children	Bronx
East Brooklyn Mutual Aid	Brooklyn
Fatherhood Training Center	Bronx
FIERCE	Bronx
Girl Vow	Bronx
Hopewell Care Cooperative	Brooklyn
Justice For Families	Bronx
LAALNYC	Bronx
Mekong NYC	Bronx
Mothers on The Move (MOM)	Bronx
Neighborhood Benches	Bronx
Neighbors Together	Brooklyn
Not on my Watch	Bronx
Project Hajra	Queens
Sisters in Purple	NYC
The Birthing Place	Bronx
The Hopeline	Bronx
Tools and Tiaras	Queens
United for Brownsville	Brooklyn
Youth Ministries for Peace and Justice	Bronx



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