Food Justice Voices

Neighbors Together on Hunger, Health and Housing in New York City

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In partnership with the Staff and Members of Neighbors Together
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A group of nuns and local residents founded our organization, Neighbors Together, with the intent to feed people in need. The intent was seen as a temporary solution to what everyone hoped would be a temporary problem: hunger. Thirty-five years later, the problem has not only remained, but has now become compounded by the affordable housing crisis in New York City. Now, Neighbors Together not only aims to feed people, but aims to confront the root causes of hunger and poverty to end the need for emergency food services altogether.

Neighbors Together is comprised of three programs: our Community Café, Empowerment Program, and Community Action Program. One of the unique advantages of Neighbors Together’s three program model is that it allows us to serve and interact with hundreds of people each day and over 10,000 individuals annually.

Thirty-five years ago, the community of central Brooklyn saw a steep decline in quality of life for its residents. Lack of jobs, a cut to social resources, and a swell of drugs hit the area—and fast. Residents began to see their neighborhood changing rapidly, and those who wanted to see their community thrive took action.
Members may come for a meal, but are then able to access stabilizing services through our Empowerment Program, such as assistance with public benefits, housing searches, legal clinics, on-site psychiatry, and beyond. As they are accessing these services or simply enjoying a meal, they can speak with one of our Community Action Program organizers and learn about opportunities to get involved in legislative and policy advocacy to create change on the issues that affect them most. This daily contact with our members allows us to hear directly about the issues they’re working to overcome, which in turn allows us to tailor our direct services and organizing efforts to the issues that are most pressing in our community.

In our community of central Brooklyn, residents are still facing the same issues they faced thirty-five years ago—lack of housing, lack of access to employment opportunities, lack of access to proper healthcare, and minimal options for nutrient rich foods.

With the tidal wave of gentrification flooding Brooklyn, our community is continuing to change rapidly. Members who come to Neighbors Together are taking action to grow their power and the power of our community.

Throughout this piece, we will speak to both the staff and members at Neighbors Together to showcase the intersection of hunger, housing, and health in our community.

We sat down with Amy Blumsack, our Director of Organizing and Policy, Nathalie Smythe our Director of Programs and HR, and four of our members, Rollie Hernandez, Annette Johnson, Lisa Jones, and Deanna Lewin to talk more about housing, hunger, and health in Central Brooklyn.

**Housing Instability in New York City**

Affordable housing isn’t something that comes to mind when one thinks of New York City with its multitude of shiny skyscrapers. Yet, the lack of affordable housing for very low income New Yorkers is one of the most pressing issues facing members at Neighbors Together. "We have heard from our members through member surveys, focus groups, one on one meetings with our Member Advocates, and conversations during our meal service that affordable housing, homelessness and housing instability are of major concern,” said Amy Blumsack, Director of Organizing and Policy at Neighbors Together. "As the cost of market rate housing continues to rise, many of our members, who are either working or on fixed incomes, have fewer and fewer housing options."
Lisa Jones has been coming to Neighbors Together for over eight years. She is currently looking for a new place to live, and is concerned about the lack of affordable housing options in her community.

As for our members who are housed, they are now facing their own struggles with gentrification. Many landlords are trying to push out long time tenants to make way for higher paying tenants. Landlords wage campaigns of harassment or neglect to try to make conditions bad enough so that tenants are compelled to leave. Tenants find themselves without heat and hot water in the middle of winter, or living in buildings that are in serious disrepair. Despite being housed, this type of harassment can have serious effects on tenants’ health and wellbeing.

Member Annette Johnson lives in a supportive housing unit. She was placed on a waiting list for ten years before obtaining a supportive housing unit. Annette continues to experience problems with her current place of residence.

Source of Income Discrimination

Another major facet of affordable housing in New York City are housing vouchers. Some examples of vouchers are: LINC (Living in Communities), Section 8, SEPS (Special Exit and Prevention), and HASA (HIV/AIDS Services). These housing vouchers are incredibly challenging to obtain. Theoretically, having a housing voucher should result in direct access to a safe, permanent, and affordable place to live. However, due to rampant source of income discrimination, when landlords illegally refuse to rent to people because their income is from a housing voucher or another legal source, members who have vouchers are still languishing in the shelter system or unsafe housing.

Neighbors Together is responding with a campaign directly targeted at source of income discrimination. We have developed a website explaining what source of income discrimination is, voucher holders’ rights under New York City law, and a tool for members to track the instances of discrimination they encounter when searching for housing. Additionally, we are holding regular source of income discrimination sessions to educate our community on the ways in which they might face discrimination with a housing voucher and what they can do.

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- Amy Blumsack, Neighbors Together
housing crisis, the members at Neighbors Together are finding that their options for housing with a voucher are limited. Even with their housing voucher, they are unable to afford living in their own neighborhoods and instead are having to move farther out of their communities. "This disconnects people from their families, their jobs, their social networks, their children’s school, their own school, their health care, and familiar environments. The cost of carfare to get back and forth is expensive and can limit people’s ability to continue accessing their old support systems," said Blumsack.

"Illegal evictions are a big part of the model. If a tenant looks at a house operator the wrong way, you could be thrown out on the street at the drop of a hat. It’s a major issue."

Member Deanna Lewis currently lives in an abandoned building, and is looking for housing. She is living with a disability, and is struggling to find an affordable housing unit. Deanna is the head of her household as she is her brother’s caretaker.

Three-Quarter Housing

Rising rent costs drive people across New York City into the shelter system, or three-quarter houses. Three-quarter houses are homes in which private landlords rent beds to single adults, and hold themselves out as rehabilitation programs- despite being unlicensed and unregulated by any government body.

Many three-quarter houses mandate attendance at a specific outpatient substance abuse treatment program as a condition of maintaining a bed in the house. In recent years, a number of those outpatient treatment programs have been indicted for fraudulent Medicaid kickback schemes between the outpatient program and the three-quarter house operators.

Three-quarter house tenants are often subject to abuses like severe overcrowding, harassment, and vermin infestations. Landlords often use illegal evictions as a model to maximize their profit. For example, a landlord might illegally evict a tenant when they stand up for their rights. "Illegal evictions are a big part of the model. If a tenant looks at a house operator the wrong way, you could be thrown out on the street at the drop of a hat. It’s a major issue," says Blumsack.
Amy Blumsack, Director of Organizing and Policy at Neighbors Together

Neighbors Together is one of the only groups in New York City that organizes three-quarter house tenants, and helped found the **Three-Quarter House Tenant Organizing Project (TOP)** in 2010. TOP is a tenants’ union that fights for justice for people living in three-quarter houses and for safer affordable housing options. Our Community Action Program partnered with **Mobilization for Justice** in 2009 to bring a three-quarter house legal clinic on site, because many of our members were struggling with abuses like illegal evictions, harassment, and bad physical conditions.

The legal clinic was so well attended, and the issues tenants were facing were so pervasive, that it seemed necessary to organize tenants to create systemic change. In April 2010, our Community Action Program hosted the first three-quarter house tenant forum, and from that meeting, the Three-Quarter House Tenant Organizing Project was born. TOP has been successfully fighting for three-quarter house tenants ever since.

Since its inception, TOP has had several victories for three-quarter house tenants, which have led to clear systematic change. In 2014, TOP worked with the NYPD to ensure that law enforcement did not enforce illegal evictions, and that tenants’ rights were protected when the police were called to a site in which an illegal eviction was taking place. That same year, TOP worked with a New York Times reporter for over nine months to help publish an **exposé** on the three-quarter house industry in May of 2015. After the exposé was published, Mayor Bill de Blasio created the Emergency Taskforce on Three-Quarter Housing, an intra-agency body that inspects three-quarter houses, alleviates severe overcrowding and dangerous physical conditions, and assists tenants with relocation services. In February 2017, TOP won another huge victory. TOP Members worked with the New York City Council to successfully pass **five laws** that protect three-quarter house tenants.
Our Members and Our Mission

Members who participate in Neighbors Together’s programs are a diverse group. "We see members who are new to organizing and policy advocacy who might only feel comfortable dipping their toe in the water by signing a petition that we’re circulating during our meals. We also see members who have been organizing for years and are comfortable taking on leadership roles during our Albany lobby day trips and our Leadership Development Series," says Blumsack. "Our members are working, retired, or on fixed incomes. They are young, older, and in between; some have been coming to Neighbors Together for years, and others are newer to our organization."

Rollie Hernandez has been coming to Neighbors Together for years. He has been able to transform his life through his access to housing and healthcare. Rollie regularly visits Neighbors Together to not only enjoy meals, but to inspire others and involve himself in the Community Action Program.

Neighbors Together was not founded with the intention of remaining in the community of central Brooklyn for 35 years, yet here we are. Our founders had the intention of providing temporary aid and relief, and they never imagined that hunger, homelessness, and poverty would continue to intensify.

At the core of Neighbors Together’s mission is the belief that directly affected people should be leading efforts to change the practices and policies that affect their daily lives. Our three programs work to address and end hunger and poverty by combating their root causes. Neighbors Together’s goal is to meet members wherever they are in their lives at this moment, and create opportunities for everyone to be involved in our programs. We work with members to hone and amplify their skills, knowledge, and expertise to create personal and collective change in their lives and communities.

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Special thanks to Lisa Jones, Annette Johnson, Deanna Lewis and Rollie Hernandez for sharing their stories and experience.
Neighbors Together

Neighbors Together is a dynamic soup kitchen located in Ocean Hill Brooklyn dedicated to ending hunger and poverty in some of the lowest income areas of New York City. For over 35 years, Neighbors Together has focused on serving the communities of Ocean Hill, Bedford Stuyvesant, and Brownsville in central Brooklyn. Neighbors Together is composed of three core programs: the Community Café, Empowerment Program, and Community Action Program. The Community Café at Neighbors Together serves meals to over 10,000 community members annually. Through the Café, members are exposed to delicious and healthy meals at no cost, and a safe space to eat and interact with their neighbors. The Empowerment Program is Neighbors Together’s social services program where members can speak to staff about housing options, social benefits, and be directed to numerous resources. The Community Action Program aims to address the root causes of poverty and hunger through organizing members to use their voices to help impact legislation and public policy in their communities. Neighbors Together truly believes that it cannot end hunger and poverty without looking at the root causes of why hunger and poverty exist. Its founding philosophy is based on the belief that those who access programs are the ones who provide programs—thus creating better volunteer structures, organizing opportunities, and participation in governance by their members.

For more resources on Neighbors Together, the housing crisis in New York City, and our work with the Three-Quarter Tenant Organizing Project, please refer to these links below.

Neighbors Together
Source of Income Discrimination
Three-Quarter House Tenant Organizing Project
The New York Times’ first expose on three-quarter housing
The New York Times’ follow up to the five bills passed to protect the rights of three-quarter house tenants

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WhyHunger is a leader in building the movement to end hunger and poverty by connecting people to nutritious, affordable food and by supporting grassroots solutions that inspire self-reliance and community empowerment.

WhyHunger brings its unique assets and history to building a broad-based social movement to end hunger. Our set of core values rests on the understanding that solutions and innovation are often found in the grassroots. WhyHunger’s programs work to support these community-based organizations as they grow and develop, and bring new ideas and practices to creating a just food system that provides universal access to nutritious and affordable food.

Learn more at whyhunger.org
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