



# Case Study: Queens Community House

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## Organizational Profile/Quick Facts

<b>EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR</b>	Irma E. Rodriguez
<b>ADDRESS</b>	108-25 62 <sup>nd</sup> Drive, Forest Hills, NY 11375
<b>SERVICE AREA</b>	Queens
<b>MISSION STATEMENT</b>	<p>Queens Community House is committed to the personal growth of the diverse people it serves and to the creation of self-reliant, open, responsible communities.</p> <p>Established in the settlement house tradition, it embodies the core belief that all persons can and want to grow and that all can contribute. Through broad-based, innovative leadership, it offers programs and services which help all people improve their lives and work together to strengthen their communities.</p> <p>Queens Community House, located in Queens, is more than a social service provider: it is a welcoming, extended family for both new and long-time residents.</p>
<b>YEAR BEGAN</b>	1975
<b>PROGRAM AREAS</b>	Multi-Service
<b>CURRENT SOCIAL ACTION ISSUE AREAS</b>	Affordable Housing, Immigrant Rights, LGBT issues
<b>NUMBER OF STAFF</b>	164 full time (489 total)
<b>FY 08 BUDGET</b>	\$13,000,000
<b>FUNDING</b>	Public: 80%; Private: 10%; Individual: 10%

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### Introduction

Hundreds of thousands of immigrants and advocates took to the streets of many U.S. cities on May 1, 2006, to demand immigration reform laws and to protest a widespread crackdown against undocumented immigrants. These protests propelled many immigrant-based social service organizations into action. Perhaps the most diverse protest took

place in Queens, New York where an estimated 10,000 people drawing from the neighborhood's 70 nationalities formed human chains in response to the call for a national boycott and strike for immigrant rights. The local action spanned ten blocks directly in front of the Jackson Heights Center of the nonprofit Queens Community House.

Students of the English as a Second Language (ESL) program of Queens Community House built on this movement moment to strengthen their newly formed Community Action Group. Through their work, Queens Community House was able to activate its multiple community networks in support of immigration reform, play an important role in area immigrant rights coalitions, and purposefully engage the energy and activity of the mass protests around longer-term neighborhood organizing goals.

Organizing for immigrant rights is just one of several social action efforts that have taken root at Queens Community House with the participation of community residents from the organization's service programs. The group's services, organized under the program areas of Community, Older Adult, and Youth programs, range from pre-K to senior day services, from housing counseling to teen programs.

"We see services as a means, not just as an end," says Irma Rodriguez, Queens Community House's executive director. Rodriguez explains that the organization initiated the Jackson Heights Center's grassroots Community Action Group after considering how to keep up its history of integrating social services and social change despite increasing community fragmentation. Amid the realities of the organization's growing size, a conservative political climate, budget cuts, and burdensome funder stipulations in service delivery contracts, Rodriguez asked a critical question: "How do we build a sense of community?"

It was ten years earlier and through the organization's membership in the United Neighborhood Houses (UNH) settlement house network that Rodriguez first reflected on how to fuse social services and social justice more strategically within the changing organization. The organizing work in Jackson Heights represents the result of years of subsequent groundwork by the organization to examine its values and reconfigure staff roles so that staff identify as both service providers and community builders. This case study gives an account of that process, beginning with a short history of the founding of Queens Community House and the challenging context that led to the organization's resurgence of social action.



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— IRMA RODRIGUEZ

## Building Community Through Organization's Founding

In the early 20<sup>th</sup> Century, settlement houses played an important role in the development of New York City through social reform and service. Queens Community House, founded in 1975, came late to the settlement house movement. It began when New York City attempted to bring "scattered site" public housing to the fairly stable, middle-class neighborhood of Forest Hills, Queens. Vocal resident opposition to the public housing plan grew into a community controversy. Ultimately, the future New York State governor, Mario Cuomo, successfully mediated a compromise between the city and neighborhood residents. The compromise allowed the city to build the first low-income public housing cooperative in the country by including a community center that would be open to the entire neighborhood. It was from this community center (first called the Forest Hills Community House) that Queens Community House began.

Because the initial struggle to create the public housing and community center required an intensive community-building effort, the values of inclusion and social justice were essential building blocks in the organization's foundation. Many of the organization's initial hires, including the current executive director, Irma Rodriguez, were graduates of NYC's Hunter College School of Social Work, one of the few programs in the country with a dedicated community organizing track. Social workers from this program are trained in the tools of structure and power analysis at the macro level. With such dynamic staff who embodied a commitment to social justice and an understanding of community building, Queens Community House was destined

to offer more than the recreational activities and social services of a typical community center. The organization soon became a hub of neighborhood social action.

Mary Abbate, the Assistant Executive Director of Community Programs at Queens Community House and a Hunter College Social Work program graduate, describes what it was like when she first began at the organization in 1986: "Four programs ran out of one office; we celebrated but also made fun of our few resources. There was passion and humor that came out of a tremendous respect for people. What evolved was that we didn't want to just act upon something, we wanted to be part of something." At the time, the organization focused on supporting residents to form family daycare co-ops, educating homeless families on their rights, and helping tenants organize against co-op conversions throughout the neighborhood. "We asked people to get involved to learn about the systems they were in and to work with an organizer as well as a case manager. We would hold discussions and ask, 'Who owns the wealth? Who's contributing to affordable housing policy?'"

## Facing New Challenges to Social Action

Queens Community House's strong reputation for quality services to children, youth, families, and older adults allowed the organization to win increasingly competitive contracts. The organization now reaches more than 20,000 residents yearly at 21 different sites and employs 450 full- and part-time staff. However, this enormous expansion from the original Forest Hills Community Center also created new

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challenges to fostering a sense of community within the agency and maintaining social justice activities. Moreover, constant budget fights and contract challenges at the city level affected nearly all of the organization's programs, and much of the advocacy work became focused on maintaining funding for the service programs.

By the late 1990s, city funding to the community service program shifted from a focus on building-wide tenant organizing to individual tenant emergency response. Queens Community House became more involved in the crisis-driven and staff-intensive work of eviction prevention. Although the organization's strong sense of community had emerged in part through its intrinsically group-centered organizing work with residents, the individual nature of emergency cases made it difficult to bring people together to solve problems collectively. The community services program's caseloads grew to more than 300 cases per program staff person.

"The settlement house movement had been pushed away from social action and into social services, into [government] contracts and grants that required organizations to do more with less," Rodriguez explains. Decreasing levels of concerted grassroots organizing work by settlement houses and other nonprofits became more apparent as coalitions lost power to affect city policy. "I would go to neighborhood-based organizing coalition meetings and organizers would say, 'The housing movement's dropped dead, everyone is busy providing services.' Then I would go to the settlement house coalition meetings and the executive directors would say, 'We've lost our roots, we've lost our base to organize for children and public health.'"

United Neighborhood Houses, a coalition of 35 settlement houses throughout New York City, provides a forum for groups to advocate together on common issues. Rodriguez initiated the coalition's community-building committee in 1995 as an attempt to reinvigorate the social action mission of settlement members. "Community-building efforts among settlement houses had always waxed and waned with funding, but I say 'You do community building because you want to do it [regardless of funding],'" says Rodriguez.

Representatives from about a dozen settlement organizations participated in the committee discussions, one goal of which was for groups to think more deeply about how to address community building and social action within their own houses. At an annual retreat of settlement executive directors in 1995, one organization presented the dilemma of whether to spend discretionary funding on a fundraising position or an organizer. "Through these conversations," Rodriguez relates, "I realized that Queens Community House needed to hire a community organizer and at the same time turn existing [service] staff into organizers. Sometimes our external partnership work brings us to rethinking our internal work." She turned her attention from the coalition's committee to direct the conversation of community building and social action within the organization.

### **Developing a Strategy of Reciprocity and Hiring a Community Building Director**

In the short term, Rodriguez decided that their community organizer would not be doing the

traditional work of launching community campaigns. She explains, “You can’t organize a community that doesn’t exist. We needed to create a sense of community where organizing could happen.” Instead, in 1996 Queens Community House hired its first Director of Community Building, Dennis Redmond, also a graduate of Hunter College’s Social Work program (Dennis is now Director of Staff Development). Redmond’s challenge was to move staff members who identified with individual programs to identify with the agency as a whole. He also set out to create a common understanding of the term “community building” across programs. Redmond began by looking at how the organization’s clients or participants could be viewed differently by employing the concept of reciprocity (see box).

“Reciprocity emphasizes that we’re not just here to provide: it’s a two-way street,” explains Rodriguez. That is, Queens Community House staff offered services but they also believed that the recipients had something to offer. Letting program participants know that they had something to give helped

level the playing field between the provider and client. Redmond showcased the concept through a computer-training program in which participants were asked if they would like to give back by becoming voluntary instructors after completing their own classes. He viewed the program as an important success: “There was 80 percent give-back by the participants, and residents created support networks with each other.”

At the same time, Redmond kept his eyes on building community among the organization’s staff. In 1996, he launched an internal Community Building Committee comprised of staff from the organization’s three central departments: Youth Programs, Seniors Programs, and Community Programs. With the committee, Redmond carried out a series of garden parties with community residents and staff, coordinated annual retreats, and began an agency-wide newsletter to keep the multiple sites connected to one another’s work. The committee saw the staff development and retreats along with new staff orientations as critical to developing a sense

## RECIPROCITY

Reciprocity is the practice of giving and receiving for mutual benefit. In the community organization context, reciprocity acknowledges community members’ assets and involves individuals as actors in contributing to the organization. For example, reciprocity may involve the mutual exchange of services: the community member receives a service and in return participates in voluntary work with the organization. Likewise, the community member may share the skills acquired from participating in the organization’s programs with additional community participants. Reciprocity demonstrates mutual dependence between the organization and the community that participates in its services. Bonding and trust develop through transparent, reciprocal relationships. Power relations potentially shift through the process of valuing the contributions of community members and demonstrating mutual reliance.

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of cohesiveness among staff spread across a large borough. These activities also provided opportunities to reinforce organizational philosophy and practice regarding community building.

“We didn’t just want to see community building as an add-on,” says Rodriguez. “It had to again become an integral part of our jobs.” In 2002, the organization added commitment to community building to each staff person’s yearly self-evaluation as one of 15 agency-wide standards. Programs also amended job descriptions to reflect the standard. Staff-orientation packages were updated to include more specific background information regarding community-building expectations.

Orientation packages for new staff emphasize the community-building perspective that, “What matters is not only what we do, but also *how* we do it.” Reflecting the committee’s efforts to form a working definition of community building, the staff handbook lays out the following actions and underlying principles of employee efforts to foster community building:

- Advance local leadership (everyone has something to offer);
- Promote resident participation in programs and civic affairs (people are more than their problems);
- Build social networks (neighbors helping neighbors);
- Develop common ground across different neighborhood constituencies (building understanding across culture, race, religion, and age);

- Strengthen the neighborhood’s institutional infrastructure (collaboration); and
- Connect neighborhood interests to external resources and decision makers (advocacy).

One aim and outcome of explicitly incorporating community building into each job description was for staff to see the value of their work not only in terms of caseloads but also through the quality of their relationships with residents. It also supported the notion that staff time spent at community events and coalition meetings counts as an integral part of their job. As a result, staff began to see themselves as community builders as well as service providers. As anticipated, the various community-building activities led to a stronger sense of collective identity within the agency, and the networks of relationships born out of community building became the foundation for developing targeted social action. After establishing community-building outcomes, the next steps were to further extend and deepen relationships among community residents by spearheading several new constituency-led projects.

### Identifying Areas for New Energy

In 2004, Queens Community House hired Zoe Sullivan, a job developer with experience in community organizing, to work with the Jackson Heights ESL program, which had been recently adopted from another agency. The organization saw the new program as an opportunity to include a focused organizing component. “We found that it was easier to incorporate community building and social action into new initiatives than into long-standing programs,” recalls Rodriguez.



Sullivan brought together graduates from the ESL program who had participated in her hands-on multimedia and interactive job readiness workshops. The group decided to investigate community concerns relating to their economic opportunities. Residents found that the banks in the area were not serving immigrant workers' needs, and they documented their findings with a survey of 1,000 residents. Through partnerships with neighborhood businesses and a Manhattan-based credit union, the group decided to raise funds to start their own branch of the credit union.

Based on the performance of this resident-led committee, Queens Community House received funding to hire a community organizer to form the Community Action Group at the Jackson Heights Center. Rodriguez believed the organization could strengthen community building by integrating leadership development and action into its educational programming. Students who completed the ESL program were eager to continue the relationships they made in their classes and to practice their English skills in group settings. "We saw it as a golden opportunity for organizing," says Rodriguez.

By chance, ESL student Uzma Munir met the new community organizer, Hannah Weinstock, at the Jackson Heights Center in 2005. Weinstock recalls, "We met on the elevator on Uzma's way to ESL class. I told her what I did, and Uzma had the biggest smile. She said that was exactly what she had always dreamt of doing in Pakistan, but never had the opportunity there."

Munir became a founding member of the Community Action Group and was one of ten elected steering

committee members who helped to build the group's current membership to more than 50 core grassroots leaders. Although several of the group's strongest leaders emerged from the 2006 immigration protests, the Community Action Group now identifies new leaders through the 600 students, representing more than 70 nationalities, who participate daily (several thousand participate yearly) in the free ESL classes offered by Queens Community House. The core leaders carry out the activities of the Action Group's three work committees, which have expanded from the issue of immigrant rights to include affordable housing and a campaign to improve public parks.

The Action Group's work builds upon the conversations and community-building efforts to strengthen the organization's capacity for social action that began ten years prior. Following the success of these activities, Rodriguez was eager to broaden the conversation of social change with more people from the organization.

### **Reaching Out Through Retreats to Name Values and Build from Current Work**

In 2006, Redmond organized an all-day staff retreat focused on the concept of community building; more than 250 staff persons from all locations of the agency attended. In small groups, staff discussed their relationship to resident participants. Through group exercises and consensus they identified three core agency-wide values: community, diversity, and respect (see box). Participants were encouraged to identify values that reflected their work. To Rodriguez, it helped fortify efforts for program staff to see their

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work not only as service but as intrinsically part of community building.

Queens Community House looked for ways to continue to involve staff in the conversation following the 2006 retreat. Rodriguez convened a cross-departmental and cross-site Building Movement Committee composed of staff involved in social action, direct service providers, and members of the management team. The committee took its name from the Building Movement Project after deciding to follow the framework of the Project's *Social Services and Social Change: A Process Guide*. Introducing the Guide to the committee, Rodriguez said, "It's come closest to helping us create a language to better articulate to our participants, 'This is who we are, this is what we want to do and why we do it.'" This committee revived the organization's earlier Community-Building Committee and brought together a new generation of staff, including

Weinstock, with senior staff members who had a strong sense of the organization's history of social justice work.

The following year, the Building Movement Committee collaborated with Redmond to spearhead another all-day Queens Community House staff gathering. This time the focus was social action. "As with community building, there was no common definition of what was meant by social action," says Redmond. The Building Movement Committee hoped that the staff discussions would help clarify what issues the organization should; they also hoped to situate the organization's social justice work on a continuum of social change, which Redmond describes as "ranging from basic human services to radical social transformation."

Some staff were nervous about the retreat. Redmond explains, "There was some fear that taking on

### CORE VALUES

Organizations often craft their core values and principles through strategic planning processes or retreats involving board, staff, and constituents. Core values reflect ideals and attitudes, such as respect, diversity, and justice. Principles connect core values to action. An example of a principle around the core value of democracy might be, "We are committed to the active participation of our members in the organization's processes of decision making through active consultation, and consensus when possible." Values and principles create a framework or a set of belief statements that can help guide decisions ranging from program development and campaign strategy to staff pay scales. Mission-driven organizations generally have strongly articulated values that are embraced by the people who run the group's day-to-day work. At Queens Community House, the organization held a one-day retreat to identify their three core values. These stated values became a foundation for affirming existing community action. Examples of the exercises used during the Queens Community House staff retreat to frame the values discussion can be found in the Additional Web Resources section of Appendix B.



the discussion of social action would expose our differences, making it harder to move forward; fear of disillusioning understandings; fear that talking specifics could threaten camaraderie.” Rather than avoid the hard questions, however, the staff were moved and engaged by the small group discussion. “Actually,” Redmond relates, “people enjoyed it. There was an electric attitude as people took different stands. It became a freeing process.”

At the retreat, different programs reported on their social action work. For example, young people in Queen Community House’s Generation Q, the only drop-in center for LGBT youth in Queens, talked about their leading role in campaigning for the Dignity for All Students Act (DASA), proposed state anti-bullying legislation. The youth department also trains participants from its programs across the borough for annual visits and testimony before the state legislature in support of the NYC Summer Youth Employment Program (SYEP). Although Queens Community House does not receive funding directly from this program, because it employs SYEP participants it has a vested interest in the city maintaining and expanding the program.

The Community Services Program gave an account of its work out of the Jackson Heights Center. Staff reported on the credit union efforts and the Community Action Group’s campaign for publicly funded affordable housing in the borough’s community development plans. The Jackson Heights Center is also home of the Queens branch of Senior Action in a Gay Environment (SAGE). In addition to casework around health services, the SAGE project staff described their work mobilizing hundreds of members in support of gay marriage legislation.

These social action examples made it clear that social action already played a substantive role in the organization’s programs, as participants are seen as contributors with their own skills, networks, and differentiated perspectives, far from the contractual language of cases and service units. The range of activities demonstrates that community action has grown not in spite of Queens Community House’s focus on service but as a direct outcome of *how* services were being developed within different programs. The community-building approach within service programs set the stage for social action.

The 2007 social action retreat demonstrated the community-building perspective at work. In addition to the campaigns they described, many of the service programs reported incorporating the community-building notion of reciprocity and no longer focusing on triage services. Social action efforts did not rely on staff-driven advocacy, and new staff had been hired to help organize residents around issues identified by the participants themselves.

### **Acknowledging Community and Conflicts**

Despite all of this work, and the shared values it implied, it was difficult for the staff to see the social action goals and tactics as part of a coherent organizational strategy rather than solely connected to isolated programs or individual staff initiatives. The retreat also surfaced both new information and points of friction. “There were three or four issues staff were already involved with that other staff didn’t know about, and that even management team members from other departments weren’t

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aware of,” Redmond says. The social action retreat discussions were designed to be participatory, and staff did not shy from debate. Differences surfaced that still have not been resolved. For example, some staff expressed disagreement with SAGE’s gay marriage campaign issue, and were unsure to what extent the retreat as a decision-making forum on the social action issues presented. This kind of decision making, however, was not the intent of the retreat.

To address potential conflicts at the retreat, a member of the Building Movement Committee was assigned as facilitator for each small group discussion and encouraged the staff participants to frame debates within the organization’s core values of diversity, community, and respect. Rodriguez explains, “We discussed how some issues would be worked on by specific resident-led groups, and others would be worked on as an agency through conversations across programs and with board input.” Redmond saw the process as part of an effort for different programs to share their resources and

skills: “It’s not just about agency authorization [for social action]; it’s about agency support.”

### Continuing the Conversation

The staff retreat flagged three concerns that also appeared at subsequent discussions held by the Building Movement Committee: the need for agency-wide information about existing social action within the organization; the need to establish criteria for how decisions are made, or could be made; and the need for more board involvement, as discussed in the Building Movement Project’s *Process Guide*. But the committee found that the *Guide*’s steps required a serious time commitment. Because committee participants were on different levels of developing social action in their programs, and while despite the fact that the overarching premise of developing a coordinated and agency-wide approach to social action remained, the Building Movement Committee did not choose to serve as that vehicle, and eventually it disbanded.

Nonetheless, the work continues via the new Board Social Action Committee. The board plans to build this committee by inviting constituent leaders from Queens Community House’s organizing campaigns to become members and by encouraging interested staff to participate. Rodriguez expects that the board’s responsibility to the entire organization and its bird’s-eye vantage will help address the questions around how to create an agency-wide framework for conducting social action.

Rodriguez would like the board to help establish ground rules around how to approach social action campaigns and coalition work in light of potential repercussions with public officials and funders.