



September 22, 2016

Commissioner Bill Chong
Department of Youth and Community Development
2 Lafayette Street, 20th Floor
New York, New York 10038

Cressida Wasserman
Department of Youth and Community Development
2 Lafayette Street, 20th Floor
New York, New York 10038

Dear Commissioner Chong and Ms. Wasserman:

Thank you so much for the opportunity to submit comments with regard to the concept paper for Beacon Community Centers. As you know, Citizens' Committee for Children (CCC) is a 73-year old, independent, multi-issue child advocacy organization whose mission is to ensure every New York child is healthy, housed, educated and safe. As such, we are extremely grateful to the Administration, to you, and to the staff at DYCD for your commitment to both increasing funding and strengthening the Beacon Community Center model in New York City.

Since 1991, Beacon Community Centers have played a vital role in supporting and strengthening communities by creating multi-service safe havens where children, youth, and families can find meaningful opportunities to thrive. We are grateful for the concept paper's stated commitment to continue empowering Beacon Community Centers as the catalyst for "making schools one of our City's most valuable community resources" and the thoughtful way that the concept paper outlines a plan to further strengthen the Beacon model to be community centers.

There are a number of key components that CCC is especially pleased to see, which we want to highlight:

- We are very pleased to see that the concept paper continues to envision 80 Beacon Community Centers in the same schools where they currently exist and serve their communities.

- We generally believe that that the three new requirements (resource coordination as a key program function, longer evening hours during the summer, and hiring an outreach coordinator) will help strengthen Beacons as community hubs.
- We appreciate the intergenerational emphasis, including the explicit inclusion of senior citizens, which will help strengthen Beacons as vibrant community centers for the entire community. Intergenerational programs have demonstrated benefits to children and adults of all ages as they foster relationships and strengthen communities.
- Given the successful expansion of middle school after-school programs (SONYC), we support the concept paper’s intent to shift from a model focused on middle school students to one focused on serving children of all ages.
- We are grateful to see that the vision for the Beacon Community Centers includes a clear recognition of the value of summer programming for children and youth.
- As community hubs, we support the plan to shift the Beacon Community Centers with ACS preventive services to primarily serve families who have not had prior interaction with the child welfare system. Shifting the preventive services within this community center model to be more of a primary prevention model that adopts a more “community and family-engagement focused approach” has the potential to truly prevent child abuse and neglect, more easily engage families without the stigma of ACS-involvement, and better support families in the community who need these services to keep their children safe.

We respectfully offer the following questions and recommendations that we hope to see in the upcoming Beacon Community Center RFP:

- **Increase the Funding**

We appreciate DYCD and the de Blasio administration’s significant increase in funding for the Beacon Community Centers; however, with the increased requirements, \$550,000 will not be sufficient to cover all program costs.

As has long been recognized, Beacons have been underfunded for many years, with no increase since they began in 1991. Under the current system, many Beacon Community Centers have been forced to operate on a deficit and/or eliminate valuable service options. This does indeed make the proposed funding level of \$550,000 a significant improvement over the current level of \$320,000-\$350,000 per Beacon.

Providers estimate that the increased funding level will largely be absorbed by new requirements, such as hiring an outreach coordinator and extending summer hours. Thus, the funding increase will not be able to cover the full costs of operating a high-quality Beacon Community Center.

We urge DYCD to increase the funding level to at least \$650,000 to enable Beacon Community Centers to more adequately fulfill their missions and the mandated requirements. Furthermore, we urge DYCD to consider building increases in funding

over time into the Beacon contracts to keep up with increasing costs that incur over time.

- **Reassess the Plan for Summer Evening Hours**

We very much appreciate the goals and vision behind extending Beacon Community Center summer evening hours until 11 PM, both during the week and on the weekends and understand this makes the model similar to the NYCHA Cornerstone Community Centers. We support the idea of ensuring children and youth have a safe place to be in the evenings.

We are concerned, however, that the NYCHA model will not be able to replicate well in Beacon programs. As you know, Cornerstones are in NYCHA developments that have security and maintenance, and are located literally where youth live. Beacons, on the other hand, are located in school buildings that may not be that close to where youth live. We would need to understand more how security and maintenance in school buildings would work during these summer evening hours when school buildings are not typically open and do not have this staff. In addition, we are concerned about youth traveling distances to come to and from these programs late in the evening.

We do want to note that we very much appreciate that the concept paper references considering both the feedback received from the concept paper and the “extended summer hours” pilot when finalizing the summer hours in the RFP, as well as the commitment of DYCD to review participation patterns during year 1 of the RFP and then potentially adjust summer evening hour requirements. We believe that this type of collaborative relationship between DYCD and its Beacon Community Centers is invaluable and will help ensure the programs are both high-quality and meeting community needs.

- **Reassess the Participant Requirements for Both School Year and Summer Programs**

As mentioned, CCC appreciates that the concept paper broadens the focus from serving middle school students (as was the case in the prior RFP) to children of all ages, while also infusing an intergenerational approach.

As DYCD knows, every NYC community is different with regard to risks, opportunities and assets. Some Beacon Community Centers are located close to Cornerstones where high school students tend to go, while others are not. Some communities have sufficient elementary and/or middle school programming, while others do not. We suggest that instead of issuing an RFP that sets explicit participant requirements for how many elementary, middle, and high school students need to be served during the school year and the summer, that DYCD allow those who respond to the RFP to propose this as part of their proposal based on the needs of the particular community. This more-flexible approach (while still mandating a minimum number of participants) would enable Beacon services to be more tailored to a community’s unique needs.

- **Strengthen ACS Community-Based Preventive Service Component**

While CCC strongly supports the Administration's commitment to strengthening community-based preventive services and we are very pleased that ACS and DYCD will continue to collaborate to offer preventive services in (or associated with) Beacon Community Centers, we have some questions and concerns about the plans in the concept paper.

First, the current DYCD RFP provided for 16 ACS Preventive/Beacon programs, but this concept paper only envisions, "up to 15." We urge ACS and DYCD to at a minimum ensure there is no reduction in preventive services. That said, we strongly urge the administration to increase the number of Beacon programs with ACS preventive programs.

Second, we are unclear about how the ACS Preventive/DYCD Beacon locations will be selected, but again strongly urge ACS and DYCD to select the sites based on the community needs for prevention. The DYCD concept paper seems to indicate that applicants could choose to apply for any of the 80 Beacon Community Center sites to have the preventive component and then the "up to 15" locations with the highest scores in the RFP process would have preventive services. It is unclear whether ACS will be also issuing an RFP. We hope DYCD can work collaboratively with ACS to assess which of the communities where the 80 Beacon Community Centers are located are most in need of community-based preventive services and to specify these sites in the RFP.

- **Continuity of Service**

There is significant value in continuity of services for children, youth and families. Many of the Beacons have been operating in their communities for over twenty years, and have developed partnerships, relationships, and trust within the community. We encourage DYCD to ensure they take into account an existing program's connection to the community when evaluating proposals. We also respectfully recommend that DYCD have some mechanism to ensure that applicants who apply for multiple Beacon Community Centers are not awarded more locations than they have capacity to serve (as occurred in the Early Learn RFP awards.)

In conclusion, CCC is thrilled to see the robust commitment by the de Blasio administration and DYCD to strengthen Beacon Community Centers as community hubs. We appreciate DYCD's requirement that proposers will be required to attend a DOE school district level presentation to learn about the needs, assets, and opportunities of the community, and that proposals will need to show an understanding of community needs. As you know, CCC collects and maintains a great deal of data about communities in our *Keeping Track* database, and we would be more than happy to be of assistance to DYCD and those submitting proposals. Please feel free to

include a link to our *Keeping Track* online database in the RFP if useful (link available at <http://data.cccnewyork.org>) and reach out if there is any other way CCC can be of assistance. Thank you again for the opportunity to comment. We look forward to continue working together to support the Beacon Community Centers.

Sincerely,



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Executive Director



Stephanie Gendell
Associate Executive Director, Policy and Government Relations



Grant Cowles
Senior Policy Associate, Youth Justice