

## The Historical Perspective

# Settlement Houses: The Original Community-based Family Resource Centers

by Ethan G. Sribnick

In cities throughout the United States places with names like “neighborhood house,” “community center,” and “settlement”—examples include Hull House, Henry Street Settlement, Goddard Riverside Community Center, Elizabeth Peabody House, and Lenox Hill Neighborhood House—are among the most active community-based social service providers serving children, families, and the elderly. These organizations, many of which are more than 100 years old, are settlement houses built by middle-class reformers at the turn of the twentieth century in response to the flood of poor immigrants crowding into the nation’s cities.

Settlement houses were established to serve those in need, but also to reform American society—a mission that continues, in part, today. Nancy Wackstein, the head of United Neighborhood Houses, a coalition of New York City settlement houses, invokes this history to characterize the mission of contemporary settlements. “Being a settlement house means you’re not

just a service-delivery organization,” she asserts, “you’re also a social-change organization.”

In 1884, British university students opened the first settlement house, Toynbee Hall, in London’s impoverished East End with the goal of promoting cross-class understanding. By moving into the house, middle-class settlement residents hoped to teach the poor about art, music, and culture, while the working-class residents of the neighborhood would expose the settlement workers to the problems of an urban, industrial society.

This concept was attractive to many Americans who visited Toynbee Hall, and settlements soon began to appear in American cities. Stanton Coit opened Neighborhood Guild, later University Settlement, on New York’s Lower East Side in 1886 after spending three months at Toynbee. In 1889, graduates of the nation’s elite colleges for women opened College Settlement, also on the Lower East Side. In that same year,

Ellen Gates Starr and Jane Addams founded Hull House on Chicago’s West Side. In 1893, Lillian Wald laid the foundations for the Henry Street Settlement on the Lower East Side. From these first few organizations, settlement houses quickly multiplied. By 1910, there were more than 400 settlements across the country.

All these settlement houses shared a few defining features. First, they provided a place for middle-class residents to live among the poor, allowing for greater interaction and



*Boys in the Lenox Hill Neighborhood Orchestra practice violin. Settlements encouraged cultural enrichment by offering free art, theater, and music programs. Photo courtesy Library of Congress, Bain Collection, Prints and Photographs Division.*

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the possibility of mutual understanding. The belief behind this, as Addams explained, was “that the dependence of classes on each other is reciprocal.” Settlements also provided neighborhood-based services. To better understand residents’ needs, settlement workers undertook thorough social-scientific studies of the neighborhoods in which they lived. Finally, settlement houses shared a common vision of social justice that went beyond simply providing services to residents of their respective neighborhoods. They saw the entire overcrowded urban environment as a cause of the social, sanitary, and economic problems from which many residents suffered. Settlement workers were active, therefore, in campaigns to end child labor, provide meaningful housing reform, and build playgrounds as safe places for children to play. All of these projects and others were part of a mission to create social change that would improve the lives of poor families.

Ideally, settlement programming was highly responsive to the evolving needs of neighborhood residents. In most cases this meant that settlements provided diverse services and events. In the morning, young children arrived for day care and kindergarten programs. During the day, families in need were referred to charitable organizations for relief or medical assistance. In the afternoon, school-age children took part in organized recreation, craft classes, or training in music and the arts. In the evening, neighborhood residents met at the house in various clubs and together developed their own solutions to the community’s problems. Some nights, the settlement staged dances, festivals, or concerts, providing an alternative to other sites of leisure, like the dance hall or the neighborhood saloon.

Both men and women lived and worked in settlement houses, but women thrived in this professional environment. Finding greater opportunities than were available in other fields, women led the movement as heads of the most important settlements across the country. Many were members of the first generation of college-educated women. Having earned their degrees, they wanted to do more than manage a house or do clerical work; they wanted work with a purpose. They also wanted an opportunity to move beyond theories and work directly on the social problems of their day. For some, settlement work became a vocation; most residents, however, only stayed for about three years before moving on to other careers.

Settlement houses were fairly radical institutions in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Their mission to provide services and craft reforms based on the needs voiced by the members of the local community put them at odds with an earlier tradition of charity. “We had seen the charitable approach to social problems and found it wanting,” recalled Mary Kingsbury Simkhovitch, the founder of Greenwich House in New York. “If social improvements are to be undertaken by one class on behalf of another, no permanent changes are likely to be effected. The participation of all concerned is necessary for sound improvements.” In a period before significant public assistance for the poor, settlements were often major service providers to poor families in their communities.

The creation of a social safety net state in the 1930s incorporated many of the reforms long advocated by settlement workers, but it also made the work of settlement houses seem less relevant. At the same time, the professionalization of social work provided new training for settlement workers but also restrained some of the reformist zeal of the first generation of settlement volunteers. By the 1960s, public grants provided a new funding stream to support the work of settlement houses. The grants also limited the types of activities a settlement house could undertake.

Over time, the combination of government grants and professionalized social workers made settlement houses similar to other urban social service providers. “The front door has become much more narrowly defined because of government funding,” explains Wackstein. “The guidelines for who you can serve, who you can’t serve—it’s kind of antithetical to the original settlement house notion of welcoming all comers and helping anybody who came in

*Today, Henry Street Settlement offers health-care services, job placement assistance, transitional housing, and youth programs from its headquarters on the Lower East Side. Photo courtesy of Henry Street Settlement.*



whether they were having a problem with their apartment or their kid or mother.” New sources of public funding also created new private service providers with more specialized missions, Wackstein continues. “The settlement houses were generalists. Now there’s specialization; there’s now a separate agency for domestic violence, and there’s a separate agency for homeless runaway youths.” As settlement houses became providers of social services through government contracts, they lost the political activism that characterized the founders. When you are an “implementer of government social policy” with a multimillion dollar budget and hundreds of employees, asks Stephan Russo, executive director of Goddard Riverside Community House, “how radical can you be?”

In spite of the limitations created by government funding and a crowded social services sector, settlements remain some of the most innovative organizations in urban social policy. “There’s still a real commitment among many [settlement houses] to try to make some systemic change rather than just trying to help fix the people that have been the victims of the system,” emphasizes Wackstein. Just as Addams and other founders hoped, many settlements remain “laboratories of ideas and services,” Russo says. Today, settlement houses need to be “flexible, responsive, and innovative,” Russo continues. The best settlements are “saying, ‘Let’s look at neighborhoods and communities and see what the needs are there.’”

In confronting homelessness, for example, settlements certainly played an innovative role. When homeless individuals began showing up on the streets of Goddard Riverside’s Upper West Side neighborhood in the 1970s, the center created a homeless outreach program that has grown to one of the largest in New York. When family homelessness emerged as problem in the same period, Henry Street Settlement established the Urban Family Center, one of the first transitional housing facilities in the nation, providing private accommodations and services to help return families to permanent housing. From their founding



*Many settlement houses offered classes designed to develop domestic or professional skills. Here, girls learn to sew at Sprague Settlement in Rhode Island. Photo courtesy of Library of Congress, Prints and Photographs Division.*

to today, settlement houses have developed fitting responses to local community needs.

When Addams first arrived on the west side of Chicago and Wald first moved to the Lower East Side of New York in the late 1800s, both discovered poor immigrants struggling to survive, families living in crowded and largely unregulated housing, and children working as street peddlers or playing in the streets. Because of the work of these women and other settlement workers across the country, conditions for poor families were greatly improved. Today, a variety of laws, regulations, and social programs help support families and children and keep them safe from the conditions that existed in the early twentieth century. The changing social context has, in some ways, altered the mission of settlement houses. But thanks to a revived interest in community-based social services, settlement houses stand out as longstanding examples of neighborhood-based service providers and catalysts for innovation. ■

*Back cover: Settlement workers frequently conducted research to support their reform agenda. Hull House workers collected demographic information on Chicago’s Near West Side neighborhood and published their findings in 1895. Wage Map no. 1, from Hull-House Maps and Papers (New York: Crowell, 1895). HV4196C4H761895\_c5\_01, University of Illinois at Chicago Library, CARLI Digital Collections.*