NYCHA VILLAGES
Building a Community Vision of Health and Sustainability in New York City Housing Authority’s Dyckman Houses
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WE ACT for Environmental Justice is a 31-year-old Northern Manhattan grassroots organization that builds healthy communities by ensuring that people of color and/or low-income participate meaningfully in the creation of sound and fair environmental health protection policies and practices. WE ACT is a leader in the nationwide movement for environmental justice. Our groundbreaking efforts to shift public policy on issues like climate justice, clean air, and healthy homes have improved the health and well-being of all New Yorkers and provide a blueprint for communities facing similar challenges across the nation.

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New York City Housing Authority (NYCHA) is in crisis, and its more than 400,000 tenants across the city are paying the price. Decades of disinformation, disinvestment, and systematic neglect have caused this crisis, which poses a serious danger to the health and well-being of NYCHA residents. Leaky roofs, failing boilers, broken elevators, and faulty heating systems – along with mold, lead, and pests – have become the norm. As a result, a variety of chronic physical and mental health issues linked to these conditions have become the standard for these New Yorkers, many of whom are people of color and/or low income.

Since 1988, WE ACT for Environmental Justice (WE ACT) has engaged in community-based participatory research and evidence-based campaigns to identify social determinants of health and gain an understanding of how they affect the daily lives and long-term health of low-income communities and communities of color. Over the years, we have come to understand that social, environmental, and economic factors have a powerful effect on health, and that prevention – from both a human and a financial perspective – is quite often more effective than treatment.

Twenty-one percent of WE ACT’s members live in public housing in Northern Manhattan, so we have an urgent interest in addressing the many health issues plaguing NYCHA residents. That is why we embarked on a “Healthy Homes” initiative in NYCHA’s Dyckman Houses. Generously funded by the Kresge Foundation, the project was designed to develop a better understanding of how NYCHA’s policies and practices impact the health and well-being of its tenants.

As part of this initiative, we hoped to create a template – a vision plan – that could be used to help NYCHA residents more effectively advocate for improvements to these conditions. This plan would enable us to build a foundation for advocacy to improve health conditions throughout Dyckman Houses, and serve as a model that can be replicated at all NYCHA developments throughout the city.

**RECOMMENDATIONS**

Based on input from the residents, WE ACT was able to develop a community-driven roadmap for the future of Dyckman Houses. It focuses on three main areas for recommended improvements – environmental, social, and economic – which are detailed in this report. By implementing these recommendations, NYCHA could help build a culture of health at Dyckman Houses, which could be replicated and adapted at other NYCHA developments.

In addition to the community-driven recommendations detailed in this report, WE ACT identified three salient areas of focus for advocacy:

1. Making systemic changes to provide essential upstream interventions that address persistent health issues created by NYCHA policies and conditions;
2. Implementing a language justice initiative to ensure that all residents have a voice and opportunity in shaping the future of their communities; and
3. Increasing and improving the open and green spaces on NYCHA campuses, which contribute to healthier environments for residents.
MOVING FORWARD
Much work remains in order to turn residents’ recommendations into an effective advocacy plan. However, the process of creating a vision for a holistically healthier Dyckman Houses was an important and empowering first step for Dyckman Houses residents, which helped them overcome divisions and realize that they had a critical role to play – individually and collectively – in transforming their homes, neighborhood, and community.

Participants were able to create their own vision for change to improve the quality of life for tenants in Dyckman Houses. Dozens of NYCHA residents gained the knowledge and skills necessary to become effective leaders in a large-scale advocacy campaign necessitated by NYCHA’s system-wide failure to adequately serve its tenants.

In addition to sharing this report with the public, WE ACT is now building a coalition of public housing advocates around the common goal of improving the quality of life of NYCHA residents and achieving healthy homes throughout New York City. Through this NYCHA Coalition, we hope to foster a well-organized, large-scale campaign in which engaged resident groups like our Dyckman Houses participants will play an important role in shaping the future of NYCHA.

Our Organizing Mantra:

**MUTUAL RESPECT:** Establish a working relationship based on trust and respect with the Dyckman Houses Tenant Association and residents.

**EFFECTIVE COMMUNICATION:** Use multiple outreach methods such as door knocking, calls, flyering, emails, and participation in local events.

**TRANSPARENCY:** Fully disclose project goals and objectives, sharing progress and interim findings.

**MEANINGFUL ENGAGEMENT:** Identify six community leaders and co-create workshops and survey. Include residents in other WE ACT programs like Worker Training, Membership meetings and working groups, and advocacy efforts.
INTRODUCTION

Over the past two years, funding from the Kresge Foundation has supported a Healthy Homes Initiative called "NYCHA Villages," designed as a first step toward developing a culture of health in the New York City Housing Authority (NYCHA) system.

WE ACT for Environmental Justice (WE ACT) proposed this project because we knew from our organizing and outreach experience that NYCHA developments in Northern Manhattan are in a state of crisis that poses a danger to the health and well-being of tenants, most of whom are people of color. The series of scandals that have roiled the entire NYCHA system since we launched our work at Dyckman Houses in 2017 demonstrates not only that our understanding of the state of affairs was correct, but also that an intervention of staggering scope will be necessary to fix NYCHA. We foresaw our project being an important step toward a healthier Dyckman Houses and NYCHA, but now our work with these residents has reached new heights by becoming inextricably linked to a citywide effort to resolve the NYCHA crisis.

As this intervention unfolds, the efforts we have engaged in with the residents of Dyckman Houses provides headway for building a strong tenant advocacy presence which can envision solutions and hold agencies and policymakers accountable for creating safe, healthy housing environments for the more than 400,000 residents citywide.

This report captures the process of WE ACT’s work in Dyckman Houses. In addition to providing an overview of the problems and solutions related to the social determinants of health in and around Dyckman Houses, it also outlines some of the benefits of this work for participating residents.

Finally, this report includes the first steps of the advocacy campaign that is necessary for creating a culture of health. Advocacy began during the project and is now coalescing around the NYCHA Coalition, comprised of advocacy groups and residents from several NYCHA developments across New York City including Dyckman Houses.
WE ACT assessed all of NYCHA’s developments in Northern Manhattan and selected Dyckman Houses for our project based on the following predetermined criteria:
1. Strength of the Tenant Association
2. Tenant engagement with building management
3. Existing opportunity for green investments
4. Opportunities for open and green spaces
5. Tenant voter turnout

Additionally, Dyckman Houses offered WE ACT an opportunity to build stronger relationships within New York City Community District 10’s neighborhoods of Inwood and Washington Heights, and helped us fulfill our strategic goal of expanding our Spanish-speaking membership.

We hosted a pre-visioning meeting with community leaders at Dyckman Houses to determine the community’s assets, challenges, and desires. This meeting was imperative in helping us create a community-driven roadmap for the three priority areas that would be addressed throughout this project: Environmental, Social, and Economic.

We created a series of workshops to dive deep into each of these three areas. Each meeting was three hours long and was hosted at Dyckman Houses, or across the street from the development at PS 5. We held a total of seven community events which added up to 517 hours of direct contact with 209 residents. Because the community has a large Spanish-speaking population, we provided Spanish interpretation in all of our events and produced all of our materials in both English and Spanish. During community events, discussions were recorded by WE ACT staff note-takers to capture the most important information and ensure integrity in reporting. As an additional step to assure that as many residents as possible had their voices heard, we also carried out a survey through intensive canvassing at Dyckman Houses (results of the survey can be found later in this report).

After a year of conducting workshops, we worked with an architect to map out specific recommendations made by residents. Through site visits and two community visioning sessions, we collected data on services, infrastructure, and open spaces and re-imagined what a healthy and resilient future for their development could look and feel like.
West 204th and 10th Ave. is hard to cross. Cars drive too fast on 10th Avenue. A dog park is needed on campus along 10th Ave. Dog poop is everywhere! It is also desired that dog curb receptacles be placed at building entries and at major paths on campus.

There is a lack of any sustainable infrastructure on campus - no solar panels, very small scale initiatives for urban farms and recycling.

Few trees and no bioswales exist on W 204, 203, 202, 201 Streets. There is no visual green connection between campus and waterfront.

Dyckman St. crossings are unsafe for pedestrians. The length is hard on seniors with no place to sit. Too much vehicular double-parking. The sidewalk is congested with vendors who should be relocated.

The scaffolds make the campus feel unsafe. More lighting and surveillance cameras are needed.

This intersection + Dyckman St. East of this area floods.

Dyckman Street + 10th Avenue floods.

Food trucks, mobile pop-up stores and vendors could serve residents leaving the 1 train subway stop and walking Southeast.

All the open spaces on campus are fenced off. More areas for free play and healthy activity areas are needed.

All buildings lack basic needs such as laundromats, exercise areas, computers, copier/printer. and free WiFi access.
West 204th and 10th Ave. is hard to cross. Cars drive too fast on 10th Avenue.

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More informal seating, game tables, and social spaces are needed on campus. There is little pedestrian activity on 10th Avenue. NYPD flood lights are located all along 10th Avenue.

There is no activity on 10th Avenue. Vacant lots and empty storefronts exist. Libraries, affordable markets, small retail stores, vocational training centers and could activate the area. More parking is needed generally in the neighborhood.

Campus areas and buildings along 10th Avenue flood regularly.
COMMUNITY SURVEY

To ensure that we included as many voices as possible, we created and administered a survey, which was completed by 148 Dyckman Houses residents. This survey also served as a vetting stage for the priorities identified through the community conversations and visionings.

Canvassing was carried out in partnership with Catholic Charities’ youth summer program. Catholic Charities youth volunteers were trained on environmental justice issues, canvassing, and interviewing skills, and WE ACT staff guided them through the surveying process which was done in English and Spanish, door-by-door as well as outdoors on the Dyckman campus.

Survey respondents identified key economic, social and environmental factors that they perceived to affect resident health, and some participants offered ideas on what NYCHA could do to address these issues.

Health Conditions and Health Services

Our survey showed that Dyckman Houses residents perceive their health to be worse than their fellow Inwood and Washington Heights residents. While 61% of Dyckman residents consider their health to be “good,” “very good,” or “excellent,” 68% of the Community Board 12 residents report enjoying good or better health (NYC Department of Health and Mental Hygiene Community Health Profile for Washington Heights and Inwood, 2018). Additionally, many Dyckman Houses residents reported suffering from asthma (39%) and a large majority (60%) responded that they know someone in Dyckman Houses who suffers from asthma.

When thinking of solutions and interventions, it is important to highlight that 52% of the respondents receive healthcare through Medicaid, 27% use Medicare, and 24% receive insurance from their employer or pay for it themselves. Therefore, by investing in addressing these unfavorable health determinants, the City could help alleviate some of the financial burden on these healthcare systems by preventing negative health outcomes rather than having to treat them.

Language and Cultural Differences

Respondents also identified strong tensions exacerbated by language and cultural differences, which we also observed during community meetings. Indicators of social cohesion scored very low. For instance, only 28% of residents participate in the Tenant Association or other community group. In addition, 12% say they cannot rely on any of their neighbors, 25% feel they can rely on very few neighbors, 21% said they can rely on some of their neighbors, and only 27% feel they can rely on most of their neighbors. This is why, throughout our process, we focused on strengthening solidarity among these groups to increase their collective power.

Rezoning and Infill

Participants also showed concern about issues beyond their building and development. Fears regarding the Inwood Rezoning included worries about rising rents in the surrounding areas (50%), losing a sense of community (29%), and increased vehicle and foot traffic (25%). When asked to comment on the proposed infill in Dyckman Houses, residents showed concern regarding adding market-rate housing units on campus (56%), or affordable housing units within the development (38%). This indicates that if NYCHA moves in this direction, the decision may be met with resistance by existing tenants.
What do you feel are the most important **ECONOMIC** issues in our community?

- **52%** Lack of good paying jobs
- **43%** Lack of education/training
- **46%** Low income/financial stability

Which of the following **SOCIAL** factors most affect our community?

- **46%** Crime and violence
- **42%** Lack of good schools
- **38%** Substance abuse

Which of the following **ENVIRONMENTAL** factors most affect the quality of life?

- **45%** Poor air quality indoors
- **41%** Lack of cleanliness indoors and pests
- **39%** Mold
COMMUNITY EVENTS

Seven community conversations were held at Dyckman Houses between 2017 and 2018 by WE ACT’s environmental health staff and a bilingual community organizer (with additional support from Caracol Language Co-op, an interpretation and translation provider). During these meetings, which gave residents an opportunity to discuss issues and interact with one another, we provided a platform for them to voice their ideas and concerns about how their development’s physical environment and other features affect their health. We worked to increase awareness about how health outcomes connect to social determinants of health, helped participants identify priority areas for interventions, and developed a set of recommendations for physical improvements (infrastructure, new amenities, and open space) that would create an environmentally resilient, sustainable, and healthy future for Dyckman Houses residents within the broader Inwood neighborhood.

During this process, NYCHA introduced preliminary plans for an infill project on the Dyckman Houses campus. To better inform residents and help them weigh their options, we shared publicly available information with them, discussed the potential impact, and developed recommendations on how to best mitigate unwanted outcomes.

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Additional lighting, DOT benches, trees, and bioswales line the Dyckman St commercial spine. High visibility crosswalks and neckdowns at major intersections make safer pedestrian crossings. Recommended also along 10th Avenue and at waterfront access corridors to the East.

Flood barrier wall tapers down to street moving West on Dyckman St. and integrates seating. Selected parking spaces at the end of the principal campus N-S axis double as areas dedicated for food trucks / vendor stalls. Fences removed at green space to allow for yoga / activities.

Recommended alternative location for NYCHA infill project.
A. Elevated courtyard (for flood prevention) with seating and game tables marks the beginning of the W 201st St and Academy St “green” corridors (with new trees, bioswales) to the waterfront. A dog park culminates the courtyard at the North edge and visually marks the beginning of W. 202 St to the waterfront. Ground-level open storefronts, sidewalk cafes, and small businesses at new developments along 10th Ave.

B. Landscaped berm at campus edge (for flood prevention) with integrated ADA ramp for resident access. New (flood-able) parking lot at Sherman Creek edge offers up to 90 spaces. This doubles as space for a farmer’s market on certain days/times. Softscape/marsh at creek restores ecology.

C. New urban / community farm areas offer affordable fresh food and social activities. Scaffolding removed throughout. New lighting, CCTV cameras, benches, trash / recycling /dog curbing receptacles line the campus paths. Solar panels on rooftops and at new solar canopies at parking lots.
SURROUNDING AREAS

Residents value the convenience and central location of the development and show a sense of pride and belonging to their community. In light of the recently passed Inwood rezoning, some residents see this as an opportunity to improve services, while others are fearful that the neighborhood character will change.

Recommendations

1. Ensure permanence of local businesses and safe relocation of street vendors along Dyckman and Nagle Streets.
2. Promote opening of new, fresh, affordable, and culturally appropriate food retailers along 10th Avenue.
3. Control noise and illicit activities outside the bars along 10th Avenue.
4. Decrease the storm surge flood risk at Dyckman Houses with raised courtyards, berms and flood barriers along 10th Avenue and Dyckman Street.

In August 2018, after three years of planning, meetings and protests, the City Council overwhelmingly approved to rezone large parts of Inwood, often referred to as the last affordable neighborhood in Manhattan. The proposal is part of Mayor Bill de Blasio’s plan to rezone up to 15 neighborhoods across the city and create and preserve 300,000 units of affordable housing by 2026. Inwood became the fifth neighborhood, all low-income and largely of color, to be rezoned under the plan. The rezoning will create and preserve 4,100 units of affordable housing, including 925 units on city-owned land and 675 units that will be established in market-rate buildings. According to the Inwood Points of Agreement, Dyckman Houses campus is set to receive 180 - 250 units of 100% affordable housing.
Tenants expressed their pride in the development and highlighted an overall sense of community among Dyckman Houses residents. However, a large number of them indicated that language barriers have contributed to isolation of Latinx and Black communities in the development, and the absence of solidarity and compassion among these groups was clearly evident throughout this project. Spanish-speaking residents refrain from participating in tenant groups and tenant association meetings, which weakens the authority of these decision-making bodies. On the other hand, English-speaking residents have expressed frustration about the lack of participation and volunteerism by non-English speaking residents in development-wide groups and activities. These challenges have divided residents and has hindered their ability to hold NYCHA accountable. NYCHA’s language services fall short in practice, especially during the weekends, and force family and friends to fill the communications gap. Additionally, interpretation services during Tenant Association meetings are offered but not sufficient to ensure meaningful participation of non-English speakers, especially for residents who speak Spanish or Mandarin/Cantonese.

In one of the meetings, we – the English-speaking people – put earphones on so that we could understand when they spoke in Spanish. So, that was a good thing because you got a sense of what everyone experiences when you’re not English-speaking or when you’re English-speaking and someone is speaking in Spanish; that was one of the highlights for me.

Dyckman Houses Resident

**Recommendations**

1. NYCHA must ensure that language access services – both translation and interpretation – receive appropriate resources through tenant input/evaluation and quality assurance processes.

2. NYCHA should hire bilingual residents to offer language services to monolingual residents and utilize guidelines and resources from the New York City Human Resources Administration and Mayor’s Office of Immigrant Affairs during tenant association meetings and other events.

3. NYCHA’s Office of Resident Economic Empowerment and Sustainability should offer language courses at Dyckman Houses Senior or Community centers to better facilitate internal resident engagement as well as serve as an asset to help participants gain employment.

4. Tenant Association meetings across NYCHA must be conducted in multiple languages to ensure representation and participation by all residents; NYCHA should provide resources for interpretation and translation services which can be paid for by using Tenant Participation Activity (TPA) funds.

5. To the extent possible, those serving on the Dyckman Houses Tenant Association must be representative of the development’s demographic profile.
The vast majority of residents find the overall campus beautiful because of its wide open spaces and large trees. The parks, gardens, playgrounds, and benches are essential to the community’s wellness. They provide much needed ventilation, recreation, and gathering spaces. Residents appreciate open spaces and the newly constructed herb garden planted by Outer Seed Shadow (OSS), but they indicate that access and maintenance can be greatly improved.

**Recommendations**

1. Remove the fences from fenced-off lawns to make spaces more accessible and inviting.
2. Add athletic areas and make improvements to existing children’s playgrounds.
3. Build a dog park on the edge of campus and provide bags and dog waste receptacles around the campus and outside the entrances of residential buildings.
4. Plant rain gardens along 10th Avenue and in the corner of Nagle and Dyckman Streets to help alleviate flooding.
5. Maintain trees and permeable landscape areas on campus and improve stormwater management with additional trees, bioswales, and storm drains along adjacent streets.
Residents highlighted the importance that the daycare, community, and senior centers have in making Dyckman Houses a healthy community. They identified many amenities and services that would have a positive impact on their quality of life.

**Services and Amenities**

**Needs**

According to NYCHA’s Physical Needs Assessment released in March 2018, a **$250 million** investment is needed in Dyckman Houses.

1. Install a laundromat on campus, revenues from which can be used to fund the senior and/or community centers.
2. Build a communal office space with computers, copy and printing services.
3. Open a gymnasium on campus where people can exercise without having to leave the development.
4. Extend weekday Dyckman campus clinic hours, including opening it on Saturdays, and add a pharmacy.
5. Enhance recycling and waste management through outreach and education.
6. Raise or protect electrical and mechanical equipment prone to failure from flooding.
7. Renovate the Community Center:
   - Update the facility and fix leaks.
   - Offer access to social services, vocational training, and resume building and career planning services that could be run by Resident Economic Empowerment & Sustainability (REES).
   - Offer language and public speaking lessons.
8. Introduce indoor and outdoor campus amenities to encourage healthy and active lifestyles such as fitness/wellness areas, informal seating and gathering spaces, dog park areas, designated farmer’s market/food truck areas, and community gardening areas of a greater scale.

**Safety and Security**

Although Dyckman Houses is not considered a high-crime zone according to the Mayor’s Plan for Neighborhood Safety, residents explained that the lack of police presence, unanswered calls to the 33rd Police Precinct and insufficient lighting on campus makes them feel unsafe.

**Recommendations**

1. Install additional exterior lighting and CCTV cameras throughout the complex, and clarify who is responsible for monitoring them.
2. Support the Dyckman and Marble Hill Houses Tenant Associations’ request to switch service from the unresponsive 34th Police Precinct to the more responsive Police Service Area (PSA) 6. PSA 6 is responsible for providing security and delivery of police services to NYCHA Public Housing.
3. Remove scaffolding not in use, which currently blocks light around buildings.
4. Improve access and connectivity from the campus to any public waterfront spaces east of 9th Avenue, to be developed in accordance to the Zoning Resolution and Waterfront Access Plan at the Harlem River.
5. Encourage the creation of active community spaces and new commercial spaces to support local, small business.
INFEILL PROCESS

During one of our meetings, news of a potential new building on campus was raised by the Tenant Association president Nathaniel Green. All tenants present were surprised by this comment, so WE ACT contacted NYCHA and other public housing advocacy groups to learn more about the infill process. We shared the information we gathered with tenants and helped them think through what this could mean for their development, what the alternatives are and how they could best prepare to discuss this issue with NYCHA.

I’m really upset. Thank you WE ACT for coming here and telling us [about the infill development]. We’ve been hearing rumors but we haven’t been getting information. And it’s unfair to the residents living here in Dyckman. We should’ve known this before. We have to do better. Thank you for telling us the information so [we have] the capacity to answer and ask questions in an intelligent way and to say no.

Dyckman Houses Resident

Recommendations

1. NYCHA must robustly engage the Dyckman Houses resident community through meetings and outreach beyond the Tenant Association.
2. The Tenant Association must inform all residents of preliminary conversations with NYCHA and involve the whole Dyckman Houses community in the negotiation.
3. Key priorities and recommendations that result from any resident engagement must be adequately considered by the developer chosen from those responding to the RFP.
4. The net revenue must be allotted to expenses associated with repairs/improvements to Dyckman Houses.
5. Any new amenities offered as part of this negotiation must be co-located in existing buildings to ensure tenant control.
6. The 25% of units in the new building promised to NYCHA residents must be for Dyckman Houses residents.
7. Dyckman Houses residents must be given priority and proper training for jobs created due to construction.
8. NYCHA and the developer must minimize any noise and debris due to new construction that may affect residents in neighboring buildings.
9. NYCHA must avoid removal of any existing trees, permeable surface, and open space as these green elements are critical to flood prevention, stormwater management, air quality management, shade and social spaces on campus.
10. NYCHA must consider alternative locations on campus to the one publicly announced between buildings 1 and 2 along Dyckman Street (location A in diagram above); one such alternative is at the Northernmost parking lot along Nagle Street to the West of Building 7 (location B in diagram above).

Location A at Dyckman Street (publicly announced)
(-) Destroys central view corridor
(-) Shades over open space
(-) Tree removal up to 20 trees
(-) Removes permeable surface
(-) Construction disturbance to Buildings 1 and 2
(+ ) No displacement of parking

Location B at Nagle Avenue (recommended)
(+ ) Maintains central view corridor
(+ ) Shades over rail line
(+ ) Tree removal up to 1-2 trees
(+ ) Builds on paved surfaces
(+ ) Construction disturbance to Building 7 only
(-) Displaces 40 parking spots
One key issue of concern is NYCHA’s ineffective system of communicating with its tenants. This has created a cascade of problems that include NYCHA’s dysfunctional call line and ticketing system, and residents’ distrust of management due to the lack of clear instructions on when, where and how to report a problem.

"We have a right to know and we should not be kept in the dark [...] By the time we hear it, it’s already been said and done [...] I’ve lived here for 40 years and changes have been made here about my life without my knowledge.

Dyckman Houses Resident"

### Recommendations

1. Create and implement a more effective communication strategy that allows residents to obtain relevant information in an appropriate time and fashion.
2. Overhaul NYCHA’s reporting scheme, including the ticketing system and its 718 call lines; residents asked for NYCHA complaints to be folded into the city’s 311 line to increase transparency.
3. The Tenant Association should create materials and/or host a training session on how to report problems to NYCHA and clarify what their role is in assisting residents with their complaints.
4. The manager’s office should extend its hours beyond 4 pm and offer language assistance not only on weekdays, but also on weekends.
5. NYCHA must inform and work with tenants to set maintenance appointments as opposed to doing it unilaterally; its current practice results in missed appointments and wastes both the residents’ time and NYCHA’s resources.
6. Any future release of NYCHA’s Physical Needs Assessment must be accompanied by a timeline of when repairs will get done; pressure from elected officials is key to get this done.

### INDOOR ENVIRONMENT

During our two years of engagement with residents, the issue of unhealthy indoor environments was a recurrent theme. Countless accounts included second-hand smoke, persistent mold, pests, uncomfortable temperatures, noise pollution, broken elevators, to name a few. Residents noted how these conditions not only affect their physical health, but also impact sleep, irritability, and stress – all of which can hinder visits from friends and family and increase isolation.

### Recommendations

1. Implement the Smoke-Free NYCHA initiative, making sure that there is no retaliation against neighbors who encourage enforcement. Residents also suggested designating specific smoking zones around the development grounds.
2. Fix fans, leaks and building infrastructure to prevent mold from growing. Residents stressed that workers responsible for this must be trained in effective remediation practices to prevent the recurrence of mold growth. NYCHA’s Mold Busters strategy is a step in the right direction, but residents in Dyckman Houses have yet to see its implementation.
3. Replace/update elevators.
In addition to the community-driven series of recommendations, which have become the foundation for our advocacy efforts to improve health conditions in Dyckman Houses, a major outcome of this project was the difference it made for resident-participants in terms of:

1. Understanding fundamental environmental health issues, how the environment affects the daily lives and health of Dyckman Houses tenants, and how the decisions made by NYCHA determine whether or not residents live in healthy conditions;

2. Recognizing their own individual and collective agency in determining NYCHA policies and practices, along with the mechanisms and strategies for leveraging that agency.

Participants also wanted to increase their level of community engagement and to advocate on their behalf and their neighborhoods’ by attending Tenant Association meetings, joining WE ACT’s membership to fight for housing improvements, learning and educating others about NYCHA’s infill plan, organizing neighborhood youth groups, working with local business to promote the hiring of local Black youth, developing a housing garden project and requesting that NYCHA conducts housing checks for mold and lead contamination. The vast majority of participants (93%) reported interest in attending a future event like the community conversation that we hosted.

The New York Academy of Medicine's evaluation of the program found that:

- **95%** reported that the topics covered in the community conversations were useful.
- **55%** indicated that “all” or “most” of the information presented was new to them.
- **93%** planned to tell their neighbors and people they live with about what they learned.
- **75%** intend on taking action in their housing development based on the topics discussed.

Well, every [meeting] that I was able to attend, I was able to come away with something...You have the right to live as good as the person richer than you. You have the right to live as the people that live on 50th Street, mid-Manhattan. We should not be subjected to rats and roaches because of who we are, or where we live... I learned about environmental justice.

Dyckman Houses Resident
One thing it teaches me – I’m so thankful to be a part – it teaches me how to be a go-getter when it comes to getting things done in my neighborhood and my community. I’ve learned so many things about environmental justice. It’s really a learning process for me, and I’m very happy to learn as much as I did learn, and hopefully will be continuing to learn about where I live.

EHJLT Participant
Advocacy is essential to realizing the vision of NYCHA Villages, and to resolving the public health crisis that NYCHA residents face. Our advocacy work began concurrently with the project, and evolved as we gained a better sense of the most pressing problems faced by Dyckman Houses tenants. For our ongoing advocacy work, we relied on three strategies: Communications, Tenant Leadership, and Coalition-Building.

**Communications:**
1. Highlighted the connection between substandard housing and health problems.
2. Leveraged WE ACT’s thought leadership on environmental justice and environmental health.
3. Created a social media toolkit with environmental health and housing messaging and shared it with partners.
4. Conducted a week-long blog series focusing on the intersection between health, housing, and affordability.

**Tenant Leadership:**
1. Comprised of WE ACT members living in public housing in Northern Manhattan and other community members who reside in public housing, the WE ACT Healthy Homes Working Group has been meeting monthly since August 2018. It is led by residents and facilitated by WE ACT staff, with participants sharing their experiences of living in public housing, developing solutions at the community level, and building solidarity across developments.
2. In September 2018, WE ACT trained and guided 11 residents in writing and submitting testimony to the U.S. District Court for the Southern District of New York. The hearing was on the proposed $1.2 billion settlement of lawsuits aimed at holding NYCHA responsible for decades of neglect.

**Citywide NYCHA Coalition:**
1. With the help of the Community Service Society, WE ACT has been convening meetings and weekly calls with public housing groups to discuss strategies to improve public housing and spearhead the creation of a citywide NYCHA Coalition. The group has and continues to mobilize NYCHA residents from across the city to develop a shared plan to improve living conditions in NYCHA. Current members include of this coalition include: Committee Against Anti-Asian Violence (CAAAV), Urban Justice Center (UJC), Good Old Lower East Side (GOLES), Families United for Racial and Economic Equity (FUREE), St. Nick’s Alliance, and WE ACT.

On the heels of a series of major 2018 NYCHA scandals – involving lead, repairs, and pests – it’s impossible not to question whether the Mayor’s NYCHA 2.0 Plan is a well-intentioned vision for overhauling New York City’s public housing developments or simply an attempt to offload the responsibility to private owners. Pushing for the answer will require a well-organized, large-scale campaign in which engaged resident groups like our NYCHA Villages participants will play an important role.

This NYCHA Land and Healthy Homes Coalition will have to contend not only with widespread disrepair that includes exposure to lead and other hazards, but also the effective undermining of public housing developments through the selling or negotiating of NYCHA “infill” rights and up to 33% of existing NYCHA units to private, for-profit owners.
We should speak up, we should complain, we should call our representative. We should organize it. We should tell NYCHA what’s going on in the building. And another part, participate – you know, we learned things like that. Walk into the office if you have to, mention to them what’s going on. Not just once; two, three, four times. You know, being a group.

EHJLT Participant
With 21% of WE ACT’s 800 members living in Northern Manhattan public housing, this project has taken on a great deal of significance for our organization. The need to respond to the daily threats to human health and dignity that Dyckman Houses residents continually face made it necessary for WE ACT to be more present and close to the ground than we had anticipated.

Through this work, we have once again seen the importance of organizing and building solidarity among frontline communities in changing systems that attack our human rights. In addition to the community-driven recommendations detailed above, WE ACT has seen three salient areas of focus for advocacy emerge from NYCHA Villages:

**Upstream Interventions:**
Where we live is at the core of our daily lives. With more than 20,000 complaints of mold-related maintenance filed every year, which is in excess of 50 complaints every single day, NYCHA must work on implementing a comprehensive mold response initiative that eliminates it from the source. Given that 80% of our survey respondents are covered through Medicare or Medicaid, NYCHA could tap into these resources to address housing conditions and prevent hospitalizations and other medical expenses. This model has been used effectively in several cases in which health providers pay for upstream interventions that result in savings, and it could certainly be implemented by NYCHA for mold and the myriad of other issues that are sickening its tenants.

**Language Justice:**
We recognize the importance of upholding language justice as a tool of empowerment, communication, and strategy. We endorse the demands present in the “No Access” report published by CAAAV and the Community Development Project at the Urban Justice Center and support the Language Access Bill (Intro 1681-2017). Although the bill is a good start, our limited English-proficient tenants throughout the city demand more. We want a bill that requires interpretation services for the same languages (Arabic, Bengali, Chinese, French, Haitian Creole, Korean, Russian, Spanish and Urdu) that the Department of Education requires for public schools in New York City since many of the children that attend public schools live in public housing with their families.
Open & Green Spaces:
Based on our work on-site and our 30 years of experience in connecting the social determinants of health to the health and well-being of communities, we understand that preserving and enhancing open and green spaces is essential to improving community health at Dyckman Houses. Open and green spaces also are important to mental health. Having access to green spaces can reduce health inequity, improve well-being, and aid in the treatment of mental illness. Some analysis suggests that physical activity in a natural environment can help remedy mild depression and reduce physiological stress indicators. For this reason, we challenge the idea put forth by the NextGeneration NYCHA 2.0 Plan of developing “underutilized land” and offer the following recommendations to NYCHA to reimagine the role these vital spaces can play in the housing development:

1. Transfer ownership of open and green spaces in public housing to the New York City Parks Department for maintenance and protection from development (infill).
2. Continue working with the New York State Office of Parks, Recreation & Historic Preservation to create an inventory of gardens, buildings, and facilities on public housing properties that are more than 50 years old and have the potential for landmarking.
3. Improve the safety and security of residents of Dyckman Houses by enacting the previously mentioned recommendations and actualizing the Mayor’s Action Plan for Neighborhood Safety (piloted in 2014 across 15 housing developments) which resulted in decreased crime and an increased sense of safety among residents.
4. Assess how young people in Dyckman Houses are affected by crime, violence, and the criminal justice system in comparison to young people in Inwood/Washington Heights and New York City as a whole. Based on those findings, develop a program housed at Dyckman Houses in collaboration with Inwood Community Services and Catholic Charities that engages young people and strengthens the community. Twenty-two percent of residents living in Dyckman Houses are under the age of 18, yet despite extensive outreach efforts, we were not successful in capturing young people’s perspectives on safety and security. Therefore, we recommend a study in conjunction with the Department of Youth and Community Development (DYCD), Inwood Community Services and NYCHA.

Although much collective work remains in order to turn this set of recommendations into an effective advocacy plan, the process of creating a vision for a healthier Dyckman Houses was an important and empowering first step for residents, and one that helped them overcome divisions and realize that they had a critical role to play—individually and collectively—in protecting and transforming their homes, neighborhood, and community.

In conclusion, as the previous sections of this report demonstrate, taking part in a series of community meetings has had a dual benefit for those who participated:

1. Participants were able to create their own vision for change that could make life better for everyone living in Dyckman Houses.
2. Dozens of Dyckman residents have gained the knowledge and skills necessary to become effective leaders in a large-scale advocacy campaign necessitated by NYCHA’s system-wide failure to adequately serve its tenants.

Finally, WE ACT has managed to bring advocacy groups together and align them around the common goal of improving the quality of life of NYCHA residents and to create a vision to achieve healthy homes throughout New York City.
Since 1988, WE ACT for Environmental Justice (WE ACT) has engaged in community-based participatory research and evidence-based campaigns to identify social determinants of health and gain an understanding of how they affect the daily lives and long-term health of low-income communities and communities of color. Over the years, we have come to understand that social, environmental, and economic factors have a powerful effect on health, and that prevention— from both a human and a financial perspective — is quite often more effective than treatment.