



MESSAGE FROM THE PRESIDENT

“Sign us up.” That’s what we said to the New York City Department of Youth and Community Development when they reached out to local community organizations to pioneer the bold and innovative new Beacons program in 1991. Beacons were created as safe havens and alternatives to a toxic street culture of drugs and violence rampant in Harlem and the city at that time. The idea was to provide high quality development and support services that would allow young people to build a healthy and productive life for themselves and their community, and to keep families intact. In other words, it was a natural fit with the goals and strategies of the Harlem Children’s Zone.

Countee Cullen was the first Beacon that HCZ opened, and one of the first group of ten centers that launched the program citywide. We located it in PS 194, an elementary school on West 144th Street, on a block that was then the epicenter of drug trafficking in Central Harlem. We were in a fight for the life of the neighborhood, and we intended to win. We went right to the heart, to shield it from a mortal threat.

In the fifteen years since the Countee Cullen Beacon opened, we think we’ve won that fight unequivocally. In the middle of the block where drugs were once sold, children now do Double Dutch and shoot hoops. Where youths once carried, and regularly used, guns and knives, they now operate a computer lab, prep for the SAT exams, volunteer to help in hospitals, and run food drives at our Teen Center.

We’ve changed in those fifteen years as well. The programs we offer have expanded in number and scope. Countee Cullen now serves more than 2,200 people annually, from kindergartners to seniors, community members to residents citywide, with a continuum of programs starting with after-school through a full range of academic, social, recreational, and support services for youths and adults. In the process, Countee Cullen has become a model for communities interested in implementing the Beacon program all around the country.

We’re proud of that at HCZ. We’re proud of the difference that it has made in the lives of many people in our community, some of whom you’ll read about in this issue of *A Look Inside*. But mostly we’re proud of them, the people who helped us win back the heart of Harlem.

GEOFFREY CANADA
President/CEO



The Countee Cullen Beacon

On an average day, Steve Hamilton gets about four hours sleep. For this single father of three young children, there’s just too much to do in each 24 hours: work the night shift at Mt. Sinai Hospital as a patient-care associate; work overtime whenever possible to earn extra money for his children’s needs; take courses at Rockland County Community College to get his nursing degree; get the children ready for school each day; keep ahead of the housework; cook dinner and help with the children’s homework; then complete his own school-work after the children have gone to bed.

That’s been his routine every day for the last three years, ever since the mother of his children died and he took on sole responsibility for their care. An immigrant whose relatives remain in Jamaica, Hamilton has no family support near his home in Harlem. But the support he does have is something he really appreciates.

“I don’t know what I would do without the Harlem Children’s Zone Countee Cullen Beacon,” says Hamilton. “The children attend the program every day after school. For me, it makes it possible to go to college during the day and get my nursing degree. Much more important, the program has been just tremendous for my children. Countee Cullen offers kids all kinds of activities: academic, recreational, social, arts. And my kids participate in many of them. I’d say the most worthwhile thing they get is help with their homework. It’s not just someone sitting there watching while they complete assignments. It’s real help, one on one, from people who know what they’re doing and who care about my kids. That means so much to us. It means my kids’ schoolwork is begun before they come



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home, so that when we go over it every night, they're ready. I ask questions, check the work, talk to them about their classes. The time we spend together as a family is precious, so it's great to have some of the pressure of school-work relieved so that we can have some moments each day just reading for fun or talking with one another."

Engaging the Whole Community

The HCZ Countee Cullen Beacon is located in PS 194, a K-5 school on West 144th Street, in Central Harlem. Countee Cullen opened in 1991, one of the first group of ten centers

pioneering the innovative Beacons program developed by the New York City Department of Youth and Community Development. Beacons are school-based community centers offering after-school programs as well as programming for children, youths, and families, mostly after school, in the evenings, on weekends and during the summer. Although the Beacons program is geared toward school-age children, it also serves as a community resource, providing support and services to parents, senior citizens, and other community members. Some Beacons, like Countee Cullen, also provide services to residents citywide on a walk-in basis.

Each Beacon center works collaboratively with the host school and the community and engages a Community Advisory Council comprising parents, youths, school personnel, and a wide range of community stakeholders. By providing services, especially to young people, through a comprehensive delivery system, the centers are able to address the critical developmental needs of youths, their families, and the community at large.

A New York City Mayoral Commission recommended creation of the Beacons in 1991 to address the lack of constructive activities available to youths after school. They believed that involving children and teens in positive youth development programs in safe havens in their neighborhoods would help reduce drug use and solve other problems in disadvantaged communities.

It was a sound and, it turns out, successful concept. But, as Jackie Bradley, Assistant Director, remembers, it was also a challenging concept to implement. "In 1991, this block on West 144th Street had the some of the highest drug activity of any street in this neighborhood," says Bradley. "So [HCZ CEO and President] Geoffrey Canada said, 'That's

where we're going to put our Beacon. That's where there's work to be done.' When we first got here, local residents had very little hope of any programs lasting. We knew we had to really work to create a good relationship with the community. We started a lot of activities to let people know we were here to help. We opened a play street on West 144th. Residents started to say, 'Hey, this is good. I can see my kids jump rope, play ball, run through the sprinklers barefoot. We had a health fair and Jazzmobile on the block. We started the Teen Youth Council, and teens got involved staging events around drug prevention, crime prevention, gang prevention.

"The young people loved using the gym for basketball. That included some gang members. And they started bringing drugs and weapons into the school. So we shut down the gym. And the gang members came into the school; they staged a confrontation with us. They said, 'How can you shut us out? We're members of this community.' I spoke with them. I said, 'What you're doing is wrong, but we want to give you a chance.' So we came up with this idea of making the gang members themselves responsible for screening everyone who came into the gym, keeping out drugs, preventing violence. It gave them an opportunity to prove themselves and to help the community. And it worked. Not only did the gym become a safe place, but many gang members started to get jobs after that. Then many got back into school, then college. That's our philosophy; that's how this program works. If you fall into place with what we're doing, the program continues to spin people upward."

Providing a Broad Range of Programs

That philosophy is extremely ambitious. And to make it work, the staff is continually extending their outreach to the community, monitoring and improving their programs, and reviewing and enhancing their own performance. Today, the Countee Cullen Beacon serves about 2,200 people annually, 1,500 youths and 700 adults, with a staff of 122 – 14 full time and the rest part time. The center opens at 9:00 a.m. and closes at 9:00 p.m. weekdays, 5:00 p.m. Saturdays, year round. In those hours, it operates a broad range of programs, starting with adult computer classes, workshops, and informal gatherings in the morning; through after-school academic and recreational programs in the early afternoon; to youth development and leadership programs for teens, family support programs, and substance abuse preventive services in the evenings.

For maximum effectiveness in meeting diverse community needs, the Countee Cullen programs are often linked with one another, with other HCZ programs, and with a host of external programs and projects. For instance, after-school academic support is developed in conjunction with the curricula and goals of local schools; the Single Stop program provides on-site services and referrals within a vast network of government and nonprofit agencies; and





through its community service program, Countee Cullen gives teens the opportunity to work in the neighborhood helping organizations, such as hospitals and soup kitchens.

Director Latasha Johnson oversees this thriving network of programs and sets the pace (warp speed) and tone (serene) of the operation. She has a two-word explanation for why it all works so effectively. “Total dedication,” says Johnson. “Our staff is very talented and very well trained. But the key is that they are, each one of them, highly motivated. Look, we would all like it if every neighborhood, every home, every family was ideal. But it’s not that way. And that’s what the Harlem Children’s Zone is here for. To help our children and families and neighborhood, to provide services in those areas where they are most needed. You have to know that and feel that and care about that deeply to work here. And especially, you have to really be a person who’s in it for the lives of the young people.”

That caring attitude is evident in every aspect of Countee Cullen’s work, starting with outreach efforts to recruit participants. “We really get the word out,” says Johnson. “At least once a month we host two special events for the community. We advertise on Craig’s List. We reach out to local colleges and community centers and compare—you offer this, we offer that, how can we work together or refer people to one another? We’re on the corner after school, talking to parents. And after someone joins, we keep up with them. When we don’t see you for a while, we call. If a child has not shown up for a couple of weeks, I want to know what’s going on with that. I say, ‘Give me that phone. I want to know if there’s a problem.’

“But in many ways the program sells itself. We serve about eighty percent of the students from PS 194 in our after-school program. But we have young people who come from PS 123, PS 200. Our middle school and high school students come from all the different boroughs, not just from Central Harlem. They commute. A lot of young people take responsibility and say, ‘You know what, this is my program, so I’m going to tell my friends about my program, so my friends can enjoy all the great things that we’re doing.’ That says something about the program.”

Steve Hamilton learned about Countee Cullen on the day when he signed his son up to attend PS 194. “I had tried some other after-school programs for my children,” says Hamilton, “and they weren’t very

successful. But I had a great feeling about the Harlem Children’s Zone, from the moment I first spoke with one of their workers at the front desk of PS 194. She seemed to really care about my family. And it sounded like Countee Cullen after-school offered many different kinds of programs. I thought my kids would surely find something in all those programs that they liked and that was good for them.”

Leveling the Playing Field

The Countee Cullen New Vision After School Program, which serves about 180 elementary schoolchildren K-5, offers a broad range of academic and recreational programs, including homework assistance, tutoring, language (French), community service, sports and fitness, chorus, dance, arts and crafts, drama, photography, and film. Additional academic support is provided through separate onsite HCZ programs, including SMART (Shaping Minds Around Reading and Technology), an individualized reading program administered via computers, and the 5th Grade Institute, created to help children meet the challenges of entering middle school by developing their academic, leadership, and social skills.

A walk through PS 194 during the hours of the after-school program, 3:00 p.m.-7:00 p.m., feels like a visit to a hive—swarming with activity, all of it orderly and purposeful. Every afternoon, the children start their after-school activities with a nutritious free meal, in the cafeteria. Then, organized into 13 groups, each comprising about 14 students, they move to the classrooms, auditorium, play yard, library, gym, and work spaces, where they alternate 50-minute periods of academic support with recreation. Whether they are doing homework, playing tag, or conjugating French verbs, the children are invariably highly focused, deeply engaged, and closely supervised.

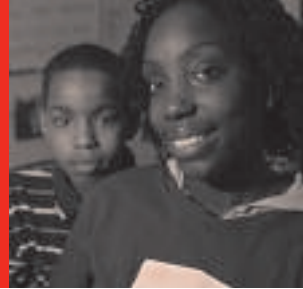
More than 30 staff members and Board-certified Department of Education teachers work in the after-school program in specialized capacities, as child-care workers, counselors in training, and administrative assistants. Peer mentors, high school students who participate in the Countee Cullen Futures Academy, also work as volunteers in the after-school program. As head of the program, Tinnycua Hunter, New Visions After School program coordinator, guides and supervises its staff and helps to shape its vision and goals.

“I’m on a mission here,” says Hunter. “I was on a completely different career path before coming to Countee Cullen: public relations. It was rewarding and I enjoyed it. But in 2003, when I moved here, I found a different meaning, and importance, to my work. I love what I do: I love working with young children. And I know how important this work is. There’s a very large body of research demonstrating just how vulnerable children are in after-school hours.”

From the point of view of safety alone, research compiled by the National Institute for Out-of-School Time shows that juvenile crime triples and that young children are at greatest risk of violent crime from a non-family member in the five hours after

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“We work hard to engage children in other areas of development. We keep them physically active and teach teamwork through a variety of sports programs, formal and more loosely organized. We stretch their imaginations with arts programs like chorus and dance. We combine leadership with community service, encouraging our children to step into positions of responsibility by helping out, for instance by cleaning up their work areas at the end of each day. We also stage special events, like carnivals and egg hunts, for the children; and center-wide events, like our

school lets out. And children without supervision during those hours are at a significantly greater risk of a host of problems: truancy, stress, substance abuse, and poor school performance. Without adults to guide and encourage them after school, children spend most of their time in front of the TV. And for children in low-income neighborhoods, that compounds an existing disadvantage in reading. Children from low-income families enter first grade with about 25 hours of one-on-one picture book reading experience, compared with as much as 1,700 hours for middle-class children. At age three, the vocabularies of children from low-income families are considerably smaller (less than half, typically) than those of middle-class children.

“My mission?” says Hunter. “To even up that playing field. And beyond that, to give the children in the New Vision After School program an intense interest in learning, a passion to become the best they can be. So we reach out to children in many ways. Of course we offer homework help, academic enrichment, computer literacy. And we track our students’ performance in school. When they’re not doing well, we put them on what we call ‘academic alert.’ Then a group of key staff members constructs an academic action plan that usually includes extra support, often one-on-one for an extended period after school, in those areas, especially reading and math, where a child is struggling. The SMART program operating on-site aims to improve the reading level of each participating child by one grade level after one year of application. And the Lending Library, part of SMART, gives students the opportunity to borrow one book a week to read at home with their parents. We also track behavioral issues with our children, including special needs children. For children with continuing behavior dysfunction, we follow a program of behavior modification, beginning with conflict resolution through crisis intervention, that includes significant parent involvement.

gospel concert, for children and their families to enjoy together. And of course we run a summer day camp every year that continues and complements our regular academic and recreational programs and adds a lot of extras, like trips to Bear Mountain or Rye Playland. We’re interested in the whole child, and in nurturing, supporting, and developing the whole child—every day, in every way we can.”

That comprehensive approach has proved to be very successful at reaching and helping different children in different ways. A good example is Steve Hamilton’s three children — eight-year-old Shabastian and seven-year-old twins Shenell and Shenay.

“I am blessed with really good kids who are well behaved,” says Hamilton. “I know that sounds like, and is, a doting father’s opinion. But it’s also true. Still, my kids have issues sometimes, like all other kids. Last year, for instance, Shenay started to have a little trouble with her schoolwork, mostly her reading. She wasn’t failing, but I knew she wasn’t doing as well as she could. I met with the staff at Countee Cullen, and they arranged some one-on-one tutoring for her. It worked. She became much more focused, much more motivated. And she’s doing much better in school.

“My three children participate in a lot of different programs at Countee Cullen. That’s brought out different strengths in them. They’re in the SMART program, learning about computers and improving their reading at the same time. They’re in arts and crafts programs. They get to go to all kinds of special things, like seeing plays on Broadway. Two of my kids are performing in plays themselves through Countee Cullen. I just love that they’re getting to participate in the performing arts. I believe that teaches them so much: it gives them a sense of direction, discipline, a chance to understand what performance means — practice, hard work, the excitement of putting yourself out there, the applause. My children are a lot less shy, a lot more confident for that experience. They’ve really been helped by Countee Cullen.

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It's been a great blessing; I call it a great gift for my family, for all of us, my children and me."

The staff at Countee Cullen calls it a great beginning. The Beacon after-school program is the first in its continuum of programs for children, youths, families, and community members. Once children graduate from fifth grade, they are eligible to participate in the Middle School Academy, one of the Countee Cullen teen programs. Begun in 2005, the academy provides intensive support to students in the crucial middle grades, when they transition from elementary school to high school, from childhood to young adulthood.

Keeping Children on Course to Success

"Youngsters in those middle years often need help and guidance to stay on course," says Carmen Rodriguez, Middle School Academy coordinator. "If they can stay focused, keep their grades up, maintain good habits, they're going to have a much better experience in high school and a much better chance to succeed academically. It's our job at the Middle School Academy to give them the support, often intensive support, they need to keep moving in the right direction."

That support starts with a student advocate, assigned to each of the students enrolled in the Middle School Academy. Like case managers, student advocates monitor many aspects of a student's behavior and performance. They meet frequently with each student in their charge, talk over schoolwork and social issues, review test scores and report cards. They also meet regularly with each student's guidance counselors, teachers, tutors, and parents to get a fuller picture of what's going on behind the report card, so they can anticipate and address issues that may hinder a student's development or achievement. If a student's school performance begins to fall below grade level, it is usually the student advocate who first liaises with teachers, tutors,

parents, and counselors to determine whether that student should be placed on academic alert. And once an action plan has been drawn up to help students improve their school performance, it is the advocate who works closely with the student to make sure the plan is followed.

The Middle School Academy also provides a range of services to help students choose and gain entrance to the high school that is best for them. Those include site visits to high schools; consultation with, and advice from, high school students in the Futures Academy who serve as Peer Mentors to middle school students; and assistance in preparing for the high school application process and for standardized examinations.

In the middle years, students are forming strong, often life-long, behavioral patterns. And the Middle School Academy works hard to ensure that those patterns are healthy and sound. MSA provides a variety of recreational, cultural, and social activities as well opportunities for community service that make good use of students' time and enhance their leadership capabilities. The academy also sponsors a series of life skills workshops that provides information and guidance on important issues faced by middle school students. On a recent weekday afternoon, a group of high school students from the Harlem Teen Abstinence Program held a workshop on goals for students in the Middle School Academy.

Harlem TAP, based in the Harlem Hospital Center, advocates abstinence from all forms of negative behavior, including alcohol, drug abuse, and violence, and all of its members practice sexual abstinence. TAP leaders are well educated in the subjects they teach, and they run a tight, no-nonsense workshop.

As soon as they middle school students are seated and signed in, Myrna, the workshop leader stands and asks: "What is a goal?"

"Something you want," one student answers. Silence. Another student tries: "Something you want to achieve in life."

"Good," says Myrna. "And what are your goals?" "To be in the NBA." "To be a lawyer." "To become a criminologist." "To be the king of England."

"Those are long-term goals," says Myrna. "And some of them are not realistic—or funny," she says without a smile. "You can't get anywhere without knowing where you're going, without setting realistic long-term goals. But you can't achieve your long-term goals without setting, and meeting, short-term goals.

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Helping Teens Take Charge of Their Future

Getting young people to think, plan, and work hard and purposefully for their future are some of the chief goals of all the teen programs at the Countee Cullen Teen Center. Chiffon Pope, Coordinator of Teen Services, who oversees those programs, explains why. “It’s a well-known fact that when young people today leave school they will enter a complex, rapidly changing, and highly competitive marketplace,” says Pope. “So it’s the job of those of us who work with young people in their student years to help prepare them well for what’s ahead. By definition, we can’t prepare them for every contingency in a world evolving this quickly. But we can get them to look to their own futures with some clarity and many competencies. Here at the Teen Center, we encourage and support the development of many, many aspects of our students. We want them to be and do their best right now. And we want them to have big dreams, to be ambitious about their future. More than that, we want them to understand that they have

the power—and through applying themselves, they can have the skills—to make their dreams come true.”

To that end, the Teen Center offers a wide range of programs, including academic support and educational enrichment, high school drop-out prevention, young women’s and men’s groups, life skills, arts and recreation, community building, and leadership development. At the core of the teen programs is the Futures Academy, an academic and social development program whose main focus is college preparation.

Futures offers teens in grades 9-12 a rich array of services: one-on-one tutoring; S.A.T./P.S.A.T. preparation; college counseling, which provides group and individual counseling to 11th and 12th grade students and their parents on college-related issues from financial aid to future goals; trips to different college campuses to allow students to examine their choices firsthand; service projects, such as parks beautification and holiday toy drives, that allow teens to give back to their community; educational workshops on subjects ranging from team building to economics, and from job readiness to spirituality; the Teen Lounge, which allows young people to socialize with their peers and other members of the community in a safe, welcoming environment; the Teen Center, which contains a computer lab and a quiet space for study; and the Summer Peer Achievement Program, which provides jobs and job training to teens.

“Everyone is welcome, actually encouraged, to participate in all of these programs,” says Jacqueline Corniel, Futures Academy Coordinator. “And many do. But what tends to happen is that as our young participants get a clearer vision of where they’re going, and what they need to do to get there, they begin to tailor

So what are some short-term goals that can help you achieve your goals of becoming a basketball player, criminologist, or lawyer?”

Suddenly the middle school students are serious and thoughtful. One answers, “To get in the NBA, I need to practice playing basketball.”

“How often?” asks Myrna. “How many hours each day, each week? How will you measure your progress? Who will help you measure it? A coach? A teammate? Do you know the requirements to get into the NBA? Exactly? How will you find out? Do you need to graduate high school? College? Do you have a better chance of being noticed by a scout if you go to certain high schools or colleges? What kind of grades do you need to get into those schools? What about taking out your notebooks and making a list of all the short-term goals you need to set, all of you, that will allow you to reach your long-term goals.”

One by one, the students take out their notebooks and begin writing down a step-by-step path for getting where they want to go in life. And for the rest of the hour-long workshop, they struggle to be methodical, practical, and thorough in describing the different means they must use to achieve their very different goals. But at the end of the hour, they all agree on one common starting point. “No matter where we want to go, to get there we have to study hard and do well in school,” one student says. “I never thought about it before,” says another student, “but I have to start right now, in sixth grade, if I want to get into a good high school. And then high school is a short-term goal to get into college. But now I can see all my short-term goals, and if I meet them, I can be whatever I want to be.”

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What tends to happen is that as our young participants get a clearer vision of where they're going, and what they need to do to get there, they begin to tailor their program use to help meet their goals.

their program use to help meet their goals. So students who are anxious about their test scores will begin spending more time in the test preparation programs; those who are new to the neighborhood might want to spend more time mixing with their peers in the lounge. The Futures program is incentivized: students receive a small stipend for meeting biweekly participation requirements. And they're encouraged to save that money through a financial planning program we've set up. It's all designed to learn and practice the lessons they need to master to succeed in college—and in life, really. And for those who work the program, it's been incredibly beneficial.”

One of the students who has worked the program well is Khalia Harrison. She joined the Countee Cullen teen programs in fall 2002, at the beginning of her freshman year in high school. Harrison lives in The Bronx and attends Eleanor Roosevelt High School in Manhattan. Her high school, which opened only a short time before she entered, had few extracurricular activities. She had lots of energy and little to do when the school day ended.

“My aunt lives just across the street from PS 194,” says Harrison. “She heard about the Countee Cullen teen programs and told my mother, and my mother suggested that I come down here and look into it. I joined up right away, mostly for the social programs: I thought it would be a good way to make new friends. But I ended up spending most of my time with the older kids who were all going to college, and right away I knew I wanted to be like them, to go away to college. So I began taking workshops here, to get better in subjects I liked — like English

and history — and to improve my performance testing in subjects I wasn't so great in, mainly science.

“In the Futures Academy I tried lots of different programs. I especially liked the community service projects, working on AIDS awareness and with City Harvest. But as I started my junior and senior years of high school, I started concentrating on everything I had to do to get into college. I took lots of workshops on the financial side: how to get grants, scholarships, and jobs. The program helped me to get really good jobs, at Discovery Center in Central Park one summer and at J.P. Morgan another summer. I went on a lot of site visits to colleges. I met with coordinators in the program to think through what I really wanted out of school. And one of the things I decided was that I wanted to go to an historically black college. I've been in mixed schools since the 4th grade, and it's been great; mostly I've had good teachers who really pushed me. But I wanted the experience of being in an academic environment that was mostly black.

“I applied to six schools and got accepted at most, including my dream school, Hampton College, an historically black college in Hampton, Virginia. I was so excited I jumped up and down when I got the acceptance letter. With help from the staff at Futures, I managed to put together a combination of grants and loans and work/study programs so that I can afford the tuition and board. But my acceptance was contingent on my attending Hampton's summer bridge program. I hadn't counted on that, and my mother and I couldn't afford it. So the Harlem Children's Zone paid for it. They paid the tuition and registration fee for the summer program. All we have to pay for is books, and I've been working evenings and Saturdays at a local supermarket to save up for that, so I'm going to be able to make it.

“I got so much support from Harlem Children's Zone and Countee Cullen. Everything from motivating me to go to college to helping me do well on my Regents to choosing the right school to helping with the finances. They even helped me get clear about why I want to go to college. I know that the economy is changing, and that I need more than a high school diploma to have a good future. I realize that furthering my education will make me more savvy and smart about decisions I make in life, whether they're financial, social, or anything else. I know college is something that I can't afford, in any sense, to miss out on. And Countee Cullen not only helped me to understand that, they helped me to make it happen. Right now, I'm a little nervous about what's next, but basically I'm feeling really good about everything, and prepared for what's ahead. And my mother, she's just so happy for me. She says she's really proud of me. And that makes me really happy too.”

Caring for the Countee Cullen Family

While Countee Cullen, like all Beacons, was originally set up mostly to serve youths, it has over time developed an array of adult programs designed for





the parents of youngsters in the program, for other adult community members, and, through its Single Stop walk-in service-delivery system, for residents citywide. Those programs include informal social gatherings and workshops such as family dinners, movie nights, Bingo parties, and the Friday Morning Cafe, providing information and activities primarily for stay-at-home parents; formal programmatic components such as adult computer training, a parent support program, adult men's basketball, and African dance classes; and social service supports services, which includes on-site social services

and referrals as well as substance abuse preventive services—Countee Cullen is the site of the largest Narcotics Anonymous meeting in Harlem.

With the support of the Robin Hood Foundation, HCZ created the Single Stop program to help low-income families seeking assistance with benefits. Single Stop at Countee Cullen starts with one-on-one counseling, provided by Hattie Elmore, Single Stop Coordinator.

"Most of our clients come to us through other Countee Cullen programs," says Elmore. "Their children may attend after-school, or they may have taken a dance class one evening and talked to someone in the group who told them about us. Many others hear about the program through our citywide outreach, often third-hand word of mouth. It doesn't matter. Once they're here, we do everything we can to help. The first step is to meet with each client and make a thorough assessment of their needs. Then we connect them with the appropriate support services. Those services are specifically defined, but the truth is, we do absolutely everything we can to help meet all their needs once they've come to us for help."

The defined services at Single Stop include an assessment of the government benefits available to each client, such as Food Stamps, medical benefits, child-care, assistance with telephone service, and

rent reduction; onsite legal services with issues such as eviction, immigration, custody battles, and small business matters; social services referrals for a host of issues from domestic violence to foster care to substance abuse, mental health, and homelessness; assistance with filing taxes and determining eligibility for the Earned Income Tax Credit; and a variety of financial services, including credit counseling and help in developing a personalized financial plan.

Single Stop clients, like all Countee Cullen participants, also have access to an extraordinary network of programs and services provided by HCZ as well as government and nonprofit programs throughout the city. Many Countee Cullen staff members reach out to other agencies, but Latonia Greene Saunders takes networking to another level. For the past six years, Greene Saunders has worked as the Countee Cullen Community Organizer. Her office is filled to chin level with binders listing and rating community, city, and federal resources. But she's always in search of more ways to help.

"I'm a woman on the move," says Greene Saunders. "I'm out there every day, day and night, seeing who and what's out there and seeing how they can work together with us to build up our community. I canvas the streets regularly to see if there's a new organization, business, or church that might want to partner with us, or that might need help of some kind, which could mean a job for one of our clients. I attend meetings of the community board, the police precinct advisory councils, the Teen Council. I help link us up with medical providers for our health fairs and with DJs for Jazzmobile. I beat the drum for the annual HCZ Peace March and I help create the menu and get the food for our Thanksgiving dinners. There's nothing that I wouldn't, or don't, do to help others who need my help. That's why this job is perfect for me. Because it's not a job, it's a calling. It's what I was born to do."

The kind of dedication demonstrated by Greene Saunders is typical of Countee Cullen staff and volunteers. That, and its remarkable ability to implement an extraordinary vision, have made Countee Cullen a mentor for the 80 Beacon programs citywide and a model for similar programs nationwide. Representatives from government and nonprofit agencies around the country regularly visit the site to learn how it has become such an effective support and advocate for the community.

"I can tell you why Countee Cullen is so effective," says Saunders Greene. "We treat everyone like our own. Now many of us are, in fact, local residents. I live right on the block. Latasha Johnson, Jackie Bradley, and lots of other staff people live right here in the neighborhood. So many times the people who need our help are our neighbors, they're the people we see at church or when we're shopping for groceries. But we're a family at Countee Cullen, and we look at everyone who comes here like they're family. It doesn't matter if they live next door or way up in the Bronx or out in Brooklyn. They're just like us, they're part of our family. That's how we treat them. That's why we care so much."

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