

# Cultivating A Better Future For The Bronx

An Interview with Eileen Torres, Chief Executive Officer, BronxWorks

**EDITORS' NOTE** *As the leader of the BronxWorks agency, Eileen Torres serves as the ultimate advocate for the more than 60,000 residents of the Bronx that receive services from BronxWorks as well as the nearly 1,000 employees across the organization. Torres has been with BronxWorks since 1995, starting in administrative roles, serving as Admin Counsel and General Counsel, and interim Executive Director/COO in 2013. Torres was appointed Executive Director in 2014. Her education and background as an attorney have been invaluable in guiding BronxWorks in the highest standards of nonprofit governance and as an implementing partner for many New York City government programs. In 2023, the Board of Directors named Torres the Chief Executive Officer of BronxWorks. Torres is on the board of United Neighborhood Houses (UNH) and serves as the chair of the UNH Executive Directors Council. She is also on the board of the Human Services Council (HSC), the Council of Family and Child Caring Agencies (COFCCA), and Lyft's New York Racial Justice Alliance. A graduate of Cardinal Spellman High School, Torres earned a BS degree from Pace University and a JD from the Northeastern University School of Law.*



Eileen Torres

the agency would expand its services to address core community and social needs, providing HIV/AIDS prevention and education at the height of the AIDS epidemic in the 1980s, operating senior centers, providing homeless services and shelters, offering services for immigrants and more. In the early 1990s, we joined United Neighborhood Houses of New York and became a settlement house. Settlement houses provide many programs including community events, childcare, and services for the elderly, many of which we already offered. A

few years later, BronxWorks merged with the Girls Club of New York and secured our flagship building at 1130 Grand Concourse, known today as the Carolyn McLaughlin Community Center, a beacon of community programming for Bronx youth.

In 2009, we rebranded and changed the agency's name to BronxWorks. Today,

BronxWorks operates over 60 locations around the borough where our Bronx neighbors seek a breadth of social services and programs. Our 1,000+ staff are from the Bronx community and reflect the communities we serve. BronxWorks staff are extremely dedicated to providing services to the underserved and most vulnerable.

**How do you define BronxWorks' mission?**

Our mission is evident in the work we do every day, and we strive to live our mission in all ways. BronxWorks helps individuals and families improve their economic and social well-being. From toddlers to seniors, we feed, shelter, teach, and support our neighbors to build a stronger community. BronxWorks is committed to helping break the cycle of poverty while providing a vital safety net to those that seek assistance.

**Will you provide an overview of the services and programs that BronxWorks offers?**

As mentioned previously, BronxWorks is a settlement house; a full service, social service

**ORGANIZATION BRIEF** *BronxWorks(bronxworks.org) helps individuals and families improve their economic and social well-being. From toddlers to seniors, the agency feeds, shelters, teaches, and supports its neighbors to build a stronger Bronx community. In all aspects of its work, BronxWorks strives for the highest ethical and performance standards. It is guided by the belief that people must be treated with dignity and respect, regardless of their present situation or past experiences.*

**Will you highlight the history of BronxWorks and how the organization has evolved?**

BronxWorks first opened its doors in 1972 as the Citizens Advice Bureau (CAB) during the height of the welfare rights movement. Beginning with just one location, assisting seniors with housing and public benefits were the two key issues CAB dealt with during the organization's early days. The innovative model was based on an organization in Great Britain. Over the years,



BronxWorks CEO Eileen Torres visits students at a BronxWorks Early Childhood Learning Center





*A BronxWorks food pantry, serving Bronx residents in need*

agency that provides an array of programs to our Bronx neighbors. Most of our program participants live at or below the poverty line. We provide enriching opportunities for growth for people in every stage of their lives. We maintain a network of low-threshold safe haven programs for the unhoused; we support people and families in achieving permanent and affordable housing; we provide skills and career development; we address food insecurity in the borough to improve health outcomes; we provide child-care and after-school programs for children and youth; we provide adult education and literacy classes for non-English speakers; and we offer no-cost legal assistance for housing cases, immigration, and domestic violence. In addition, BronxWorks is committed to addressing the health disparities in the borough and offers nutrition and wellness through our community health initiatives. We also provide emergency food, programs for older adults, and college search and prep for young adults. It would be impossible to name the multitude of programs and services we offer. We strive to be a place where our neighbors can learn how to address challenges they are facing. Many of our resolute staff are bilingual so we can ensure there is always someone on our team who can communicate with the diverse populations we serve.

**How critical are metrics to measure the impact of BronxWorks' efforts?**

Metrics are a tool used to provide critical results to our stakeholders illustrating the progress we are making. Metrics help to show funders that their investments in our work are

providing real outcomes. And while metrics are a vital part of the story of the impact of our work, BronxWorks finds it equally critical to connect with and build strong trust and relationships with our neighbors. We closely follow our clients to monitor their progress and provide encouragement and additional resources to keep them on track. BronxWorks staff also actively participate in local community boards, government, and other civic meetings to listen directly to our neighbors. Through our close relationships with the communities we serve, BronxWorks remains nimble and flexible. It is critical to adapt quickly to changing needs and that is what makes us so unique.

**How valuable is it for BronxWorks to have such an engaged and committed board of directors?**

We are truly fortunate to have an engaged board of directors, led by the chair and executive team. The BronxWorks board is comprised of a committed group of leaders who are dedicated to our mission and the Bronx community. While a few board members have served the organization for three or more decades, we have been fortunate to also attract new members with diverse backgrounds and skill sets. The board is charged with governance and oversight as the organization considers the next 10, 20, and 50 years ahead. The BronxWorks Board of Directors is committed to cultivating a better future for the Bronx.

**You have been with BronxWorks for almost 30 years. What has made the experience so special for you?**

It certainly is an honor to be a part of BronxWorks for so many years. I have had a unique opportunity to witness firsthand the organization's and, more importantly, the borough's growth and progress. There has been profound change and great strides made to offer a comprehensive network of services for people who are seeking them. During my tenure, I have seen and heard countless stories from individuals whose lives we have touched in some way. It is always rewarding to hear how our work has impacted our neighbors, some in smaller ways and some in significant ways. I genuinely believe we are changing the trajectory of many of our program participants, and witnessing those changes is deeply meaningful. And while we share in the progress, we are also there in times of crisis. The borough suffered immeasurable challenges during the pandemic and the years that followed. My BronxWorks colleagues stood front and center during these dark times to provide support in countless ways. Those days were undoubtedly the most challenging we have all experienced.

It has also been a great privilege to watch our participants grow up within the organization. Watching a young person who first came to BronxWorks in our early childhood center, then participated in summer camp, go off to college is just awe-inspiring. Sharing the joy of a family who was unstably housed establish their own home is extremely fulfilling. And to experience this with our staff, who may have joined BronxWorks in the early days of their career and are now in a leadership role, is so rewarding. I am equally proud and humbled by my role as CEO. To see how our organization has evolved to serve more than 65,000 Bronx residents annually is truly an honor.

**What are your priorities for BronxWorks as you look to the future?**

As I said, BronxWorks is an organization that evolves as unique needs arise and grow. In the short term, we are focusing on addressing vital needs and high-demand services. Demand for emergency food continues to grow, exacerbated by current economic conditions. In addition, workforce development is a continued priority. We want to ensure that job seekers in the Bronx can find viable career paths and establish personal financial growth. Addressing the continued need for affordable and vibrant childcare and after-school programs is also part of our imminent priorities. These three areas are truly intertwined and dependent upon each other for Bronx families.

Long term, we are looking at the housing crisis and ensuring our participants, including the homeless, have the resources they need to secure a stable home. We continue to follow the Housing First model, which is the understanding that progress for underserved communities is impossible when people are not stably housed. Permanent, affordable housing is a vital step to breaking the cycle of poverty. Investing in our physical plant and capital projects is also a long-term priority for BronxWorks. ●