

1-1-1987

Dorchester House Multi-Service Center: One Hundred Years of Community Service, 1887-1987

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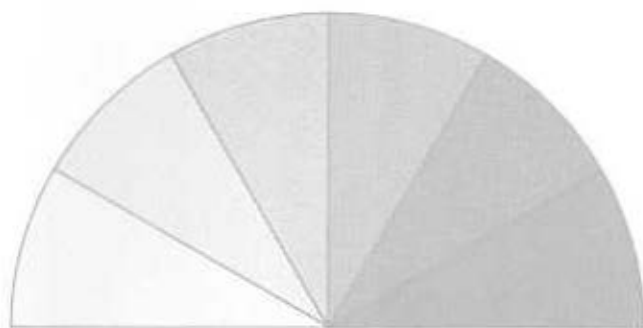
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Recommended Citation

Genovese, Linda and Mock, Elizabeth R., "Dorchester House Multi-Service Center: One Hundred Years of Community Service, 1887-1987" (1987). *Joseph P. Healey Library Publications*. Paper 16.
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HOUSE
MULTI-SERVICE CENTER

ONE HUNDRED YEARS OF
COMMUNITY SERVICE

1887 - 1987

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This booklet was produced as a joint project of the Joseph P. Healey Library of the University of Massachusetts at Boston, and the Dorchester House Multi-Service Center, and was funded through a grant from the Boston Globe Foundation, 1987.

DORCHESTER HOUSE: ONE HUNDRED YEARS OF COMMUNITY SERVICE 1887 - 1987

Dorchester House has remained a vital part of its community since it was established in 1887. Beginning as a one-room industrial school in the Fields Corner neighborhood, Dorchester House has grown from a settlement house into a modern, multi-service center offering a wide range of social, educational, recreational, and health services to people of all ages. Over the past one hundred years, Dorchester House has continuously met the ever changing needs of the Dorchester community.

Once an independent municipality, Dorchester developed as an attractive suburb of metropolitan Boston in the late nineteenth century. In the years following the Civil War, each new wave of foreign immigration pushed families across Boston's borders. The extension of railroads, streetcar lines and municipal services connected Dorchester to the expanding city. The development of Dorchester as a suburb of Boston eventually resulted in its annexation by the city in 1870. Within the next thirty years, hundreds of new single and two family homes, triple deckers and tenements were built to accommodate an expanding population. A new era of urban growth erased the old character of Dorchester's farms and market gardens. Strange customs and different languages permeated the once homogeneous, rural town. Community leaders became increasingly concerned with the rapid population growth, the congestion, and the lack of wholesome activities in the neighborhoods.

Two Dorchester leaders who were forcefully aware of the their neighborhoods' needs were the Reverend Christopher R. Eliot of the First Parish Unitarian Church and the Reverend T.J. Volentine of the Fields Corner Congregational Bethany Society Church. Their concern focused on the needs of children. They inspired Caroline S. Callendar and other First Parish members and friends to organize social and educational activities for the youths of Dorchester neighborhoods. Early programs included a morning kindergarten, a boys' reading and game room, and

sewing classes for girls. In 1887 the efforts of these three leaders were brought together to organize a small, yet comprehensive community program known as the Fields Corner Industrial School. Here in one room of the Fields Building the foundations of Dorchester House were established. Boys and girls eagerly participated in the art and educational programs and, quickly, a second room was needed for the expanding classes. Over the next two years the neighborhood's response to these early efforts was so successful that a decision was made to secure a separate building in order that more children could be accommodated in the offered programs.

"A NEIGHBORHOOD HOUSE"

In the winter of 1889, the founders of the Fields Corner Industrial School rented a small house at No. 7 Gordon Place in the Fields Corner section of Dorchester. At this time Gordon House, as it was popularly called, broadened its programs to serve adults as well as children. Its purpose was to do preventative social work in the neighborhood by cooperating with existing charitable agencies or by supplying new community services. "We aim," pledged Caroline Callendar, "to make better men and women in both home and civic life by teaching neighborliness."

A dedicated Board of Directors, with Miss Callendar as president for over twenty-five years, assumed all the duties and responsibilities of funding, staffing and planning programs. Money was raised through community socials, monthly whist parties, and rummage and bake sales. Direct appeals were made to Boston bankers, local philanthropists, and other influential



No. 7 Gordon Place

friends. Teachers, volunteers and aides were drawn from the community as well as from the Board itself.

Smiles and laughter filled the small rooms and halls of Gordon House as young people took part in woodworking, clay modeling and drawing classes. Students acquired practical skills through cobbling, cane seating, sewing and knitting instruction. Clubs such as the Little Housekeepers and the boys' Hero Club



Gordon House cobbling class, c.1900.
(photograph courtesy of Federated Dorchester Neighborhood Houses, Inc., archives)

became popular pastimes for many children. The Junior Garden Club met twice weekly to tend twenty-four little flower and vegetable gardens in the backyard of the house. Combining education and play, these activities gave the children the opportunity to get to know one another, have fun, share responsibilities and to learn something new about their world. Parents and other adults were included in other house activities.



Mothers' clubs were formed to provide fellowship and to lend support to the nursery and kindergarten. The popular Callendar Club brought art, literature, and music to adults through museum trips, theater, and social teas. Entire families enjoyed outings and picnic suppers at Franklin Park, Nantasket Beach, Waverly Oaks, and Salem Willows.

Over the years, a wide variety of social and educational activities continued to be offered. Increased attendance and the demand for additional programs resulted in the decision to create the position of a central coordinator. In 1898 the first superintendent was hired to oversee a \$750.00 annual operating budget. "So much done for so little," noted Reverend Eliot,



Students of Dorchester House classes, c.1910.

Money was budgeted for organized team sports for the first time in 1910. The healthful benefits of outdoor exercise were experienced through track, baseball, and basketball leagues. Younger boys played snatch, captain ball, and sockem. "Not only physically, but morally," wrote Miss Callendar, "for every boy learned in these games the importance of manliness, honor, justice, and clean speech."

Throughout its first twenty years of service, Gordon House developed into an important part of the Dorchester neighborhood. To more accurately reflect its community mission, Gordon House changed its name in 1907 to Dorchester House, and two years later it became incorporated under the



laws of the Commonwealth. "Dorchester House," proclaimed Miss Calendar, "gives the vicinity a common meeting ground and creates neighborly relations which would otherwise not exist."

The establishment of Dorchester House coincided with the Progressive Movement in American history, a period when many conscientious Americans were attempting to cure the ills of the industrial society by improving the social environment in the new urban neighborhoods. The development of Dorchester House into a neighborhood social service agency during the late nineteenth century was evidence of the need for social reform. This need was expressed in the form of the "settlement house". Dorchester House was called a settlement house because its staff lived in the house or in the surrounding neighborhood in an effort to understand the community's needs. These early efforts of social service eventually led to the modern field of social work. Unlike existing social service agencies, the settlement house required its members to work together for the improvement of the neighborhood and conditions of their lives in general.

"A SETTLEMENT HOUSE"

In 1913 Dorchester House joined other settlement houses as a member of the Boston Social Union, later the United Settlements of Greater Boston. Dorchester House shared in this social service network of staffing, programs, funding and education. House staff served on Social Union committees and as Social Union delegates. Dorchester House members participated in intersettlement dinners, conferences and sports competitions with members of other Boston neighborhood houses.

Young idealistic college students responded enthusiastically to the social message of settlement work. Emerson College students delighted youngsters with stories and dramatics. Boston Conservatory students entertained with music and song. Massachusetts Art School students taught Little Color Classes. The Inter-collegiate Community Services Association sent Vassar College students to lead summer programs.

The Dorchester business community was especially encouraged to support House endeavors. Local businessmen donated the

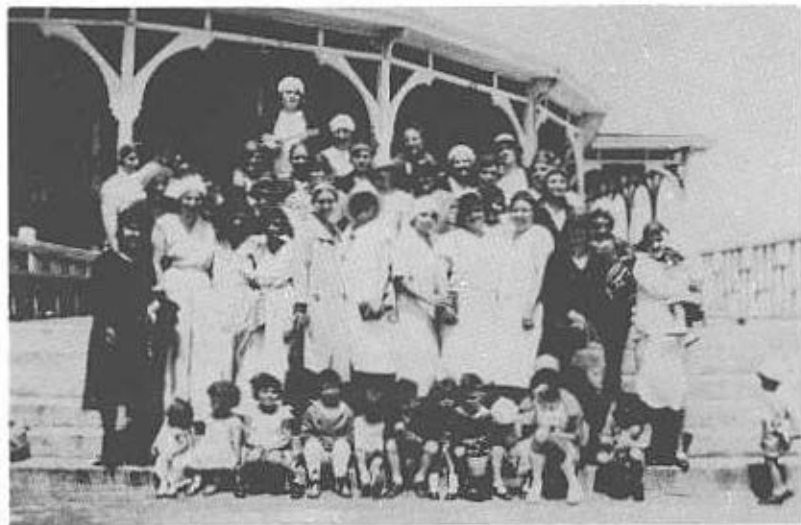


Boys arriving at Camp Dorchester at Lake Ponkapaog in the Blue Hills, 1923.

use of their trucks and buses to transport boys to Camp Dorchester in the Blue Hills. House staff were given free tickets to distribute for movies, rides and sports events. The Boston Elevated Company treated the Dorchester House Mothers' Club to an enjoyable three-hour train ride through Brookline, Cambridge and then back home by Dudley Street.

In 1914 the first medical clinic was introduced. The Milk and Baby Hygiene Association established a branch station at Dorchester House. A doctor and nurse provided weekly checkups to over two hundred neighborhood babies. For ten years this medical team educated mothers, weighed infants, and provided pure milk on Baby Hygiene Day.

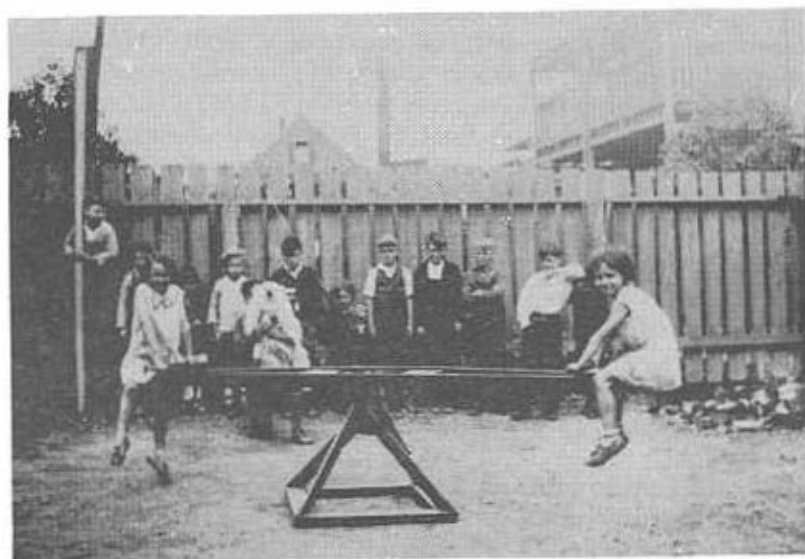
During the first decade and a half of the twentieth century, new waves of foreign immigration created another dramatic population shift in Dorchester. Italians, Jews and Canadians moved into the predominately Irish neighborhood. Dorchester House quickly responded by offering English Language, Citizenship, and United States History classes in an effort to encourage and support these new Americans. "While the children come flocking, demanding the best we have to give and adults respond freely when we make the right approach, we should not fail them," wrote an early headworker.



Italian Mothers' Club at Nantasket Beach, 1932.

The onset of the Great Depression in the 1930's and the country's subsequent economic collapse brought increased hardships to an already strained community. Unemployment was at an all-time high as spirits sank lower. The Dorchester community suffered. Fathers were out of work and mothers were forced to look for jobs. Child-care programs became an important part of House services. Staff, students and volunteers rallied what little resources they had to meet the urgent needs of the neighborhood. "Many of those who formerly enjoyed commercial amusements are now without funds to enjoy the same," reported a concerned headworker. "They are flocking in droves to Dorchester House." When a cutback in funds discontinued Camp Dorchester, resourceful staff members converted the backyard gardens into a summer day camp. An empty lot was rented from a local businessman to serve as a playing field. Talking movies were shown for the first time to capacity crowds at the House. University, business and civic groups treated youngsters to holiday parties.

During this decade of disillusionment, Dorchester House became an important haven for those uncertain about the future. With the persistent depression and with the loss of key



Day camp at Dorchester House in 1932.

benefactors, obtaining funds to support house services became a major problem. Undaunted by the scarcity of money, however, the House's commitment to caring would continue to strengthen the surrounding community for the next fifty years. In an urgent effort to obtain needed funds, Dorchester House became in 1934 a participating member of the United Fund of Greater Boston, now the United Way of Massachusetts Bay. National government relief funds also funneled into Dorchester House from the Works Project Administration (WPA) and the Federal Emergency Relief Administration (FERA).

Miss Callendar, who had been co-founder and the main benefactor of Dorchester House, died in 1931 after giving over forty years of personal service to the institution. In deep appreciation of her life's work, Dorchester House was dedicated to her memory. At a community memorial service, a bronze plaque was fastened by the front door of Dorchester House at No. 7 Gordon Place, reminding all who passed of her unyielding ability, energy and guidance.

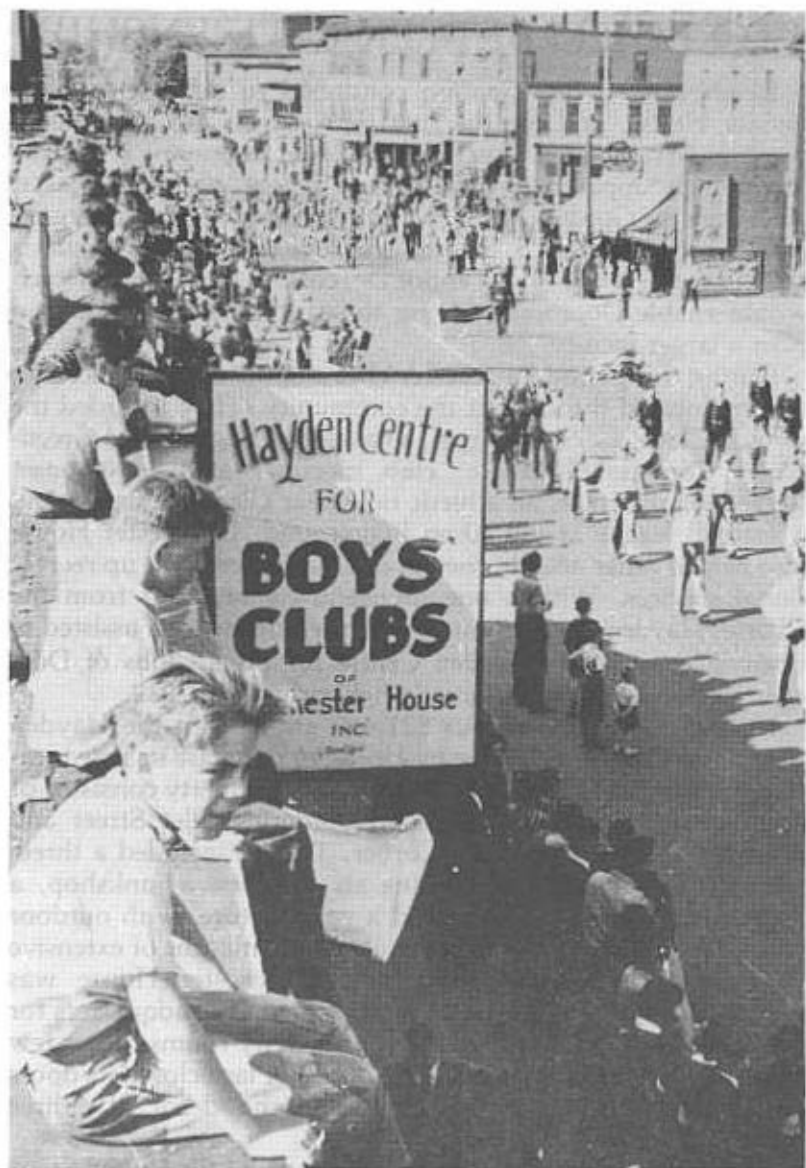
"TO BUILD BETTER CITIZENSHIP"

Neighborhood participation continued to increase at Dorchester House, and for the first time, boys' and girls' headworkers were hired to structure individual programs. It became increasingly apparent that space, equipment, and resources at the house on Gordon Place had become grossly inadequate. A new director, Dwight S. Strong, was hired in 1939 to conduct a social needs survey of the entire Dorchester community which would enable Dorchester House to select a new location and plan a larger facility.

During this period Dorchester House sponsored five activity centers located throughout the community. They included the Grover Cleveland School gym, a basketball league at the Greenwood Community House, club meetings at the Neponset Recreational Center, an athletic field near Glovers Corner, and a softball league at the Alsen Playground. Dorchester House also helped other neighborhoods of Dorchester to set up recreational services. With a one thousand dollar grant from the Charles Hayden Foundation, Dorchester House staff assisted in opening the Charles Hayden Centre for Boys Clubs of Dorchester House in the Neponset neighborhood in 1939.

In May 1941, a generous \$21,460 grant from the Hayden Foundation allowed Dorchester House to purchase its new location at 1345-1353 Dorchester Avenue. The property consisted of approximately two acres of land bordering Ellet Street and Leedsville Street near Fields Corner. The lot included a three-story tenement building housing six families, a junkshop, a laundry, a shoe repair shop and a vacant store, with outdoor space adequate for a playground. After ten months of extensive cleanup and renovation, the new Dorchester House was dedicated on March 8th, 1942, and opened as headquarters for social service work with twenty-four activity rooms. Just a few blocks away, the cottage at No. 7 Gordon Place closed its doors after serving the Fields Corner neighborhood for fifty-three years.

The attack at Pearl Harbor and the entry of the United States into World War II abruptly curtailed any future plans for building a new modern facility for Dorchester House. Dorchester residents looked outside their community borders, and with a deep sense of patriotism they mobilized their energies in-



Charles Hayden Centre for Boys Clubs of Dorchester House, opened 1939.
(photograph courtesy of Federated Dorchester Neighborhood Houses, Inc., archives)

to supporting the united war effort. Hundreds of Dorchester men went into military service, while wives and mothers worked in local defense plants. Programs at Dorchester House adapted to meet the wartime needs of the community. Twelve-hour day-care shifts were offered for the children of working parents. Children arrived as early as 6:30 a.m. so that mothers, clad in overalls, could make the 7:00 a.m. shift at the Quincy Ship Yards. A medical clinic was opened and staffed by Harvard Medical School students. Physical examinations were offered along with vaccinations, diphtheria shots and TB patch tests. Due to the war's progression, the clinic lost its Harvard staff and physical examinations were suspended. However, the House redesigned its Health Program to include talks, movies, and poster and pamphlet distribution. The Red Cross taught first aid courses and instructed residents in air raid precautions. Led by the Italian Women's Club, House members rolled and made all types of surgical dressings for the armed services. Between 1942 and 1945 they worked for 3,500 hours and produced 90,000 items. In addition, over 47,000 pounds of scrap rubber were gathered for collection by local Air Raid wardens for wartime production. Dorchester House's successful work in support-



The "new" Dorchester House at 1345-1353 Dorchester Avenue, 1942.

ting the community during the depression and war years fostered a deeper sense of neighborhood pride.

The end of World War II brought peace and prosperity to the country and the Dorchester community celebrated. In the post-war years at Dorchester House seniors swayed to the sounds of the Marian Hiltz Orchestra on Monday nights. Teens jitterbugged at weekend dance contests. Charles Amorasino's boxing classes and Tuesday evening intersettlement matches were well attended. Weekly field trips took youngsters to the Children's Museum, Children's Theatre, Boston Red Sox games at Fenway Park, and special attractions such as the rodeo at Boston Garden to see Roy Rogers and Trigger. Scouting became increasingly popular. Bluebirds and Campfire Girls joined the ranks of the Boy Scouts, Girl Scouts, Cub Scouts and Brownie troops. Saturday morning house movies featured the Kit Carson cowboy series. The Harmonica Club entertains regularly with lively melodies, and twenty small boys tapped their hearts away at weekly dance classes.

In the 1950's and early 1960's, Dorchester House continued to be as popular and exciting as ever. Sports Night Suppers brought boys together with their fathers, brothers and other



Dorchester House day-care children at lunch, 1944.

friends for an evening of fellowship and tribute to a local sports hero. The Crystalettes wrote and produced such plays as "TV Themes" and "Around the World in 80 Minutes" for in-house groups and Mother-Daughter Dinners. House services continued to reach deeper into the community. With aid from the United Way, Dorchester House staff members opened the Columbia Point Youth Center in the new Columbia Point neighborhood in 1957. Four years later a small clubhouse was opened in Pope's Hill. Support continued to come from Boston business and academic institutions. The First National Bank of Boston's Firnabank Club and New England Telephone, as well as Northeastern, Boston University, and Harvard fraternities hosted children's holiday parties and provided hundreds of Christmas gifts annually.

In her 1962 annual report during Dorchester House's seventy-fifth anniversary year, Executive Director Edith Babkey noted a record-breaking increase in house participation. An overwhelming 20,000 participants joined in house activities and



Bluebird Troop, 1947.

scheduled events during the previous year. The "Challenge of 1963" was to continue their commitment to community service despite limited resources. The Dorchester Avenue facility proved once again to be too small for the neighborhood's demands.



The Crystalettes, 1959.

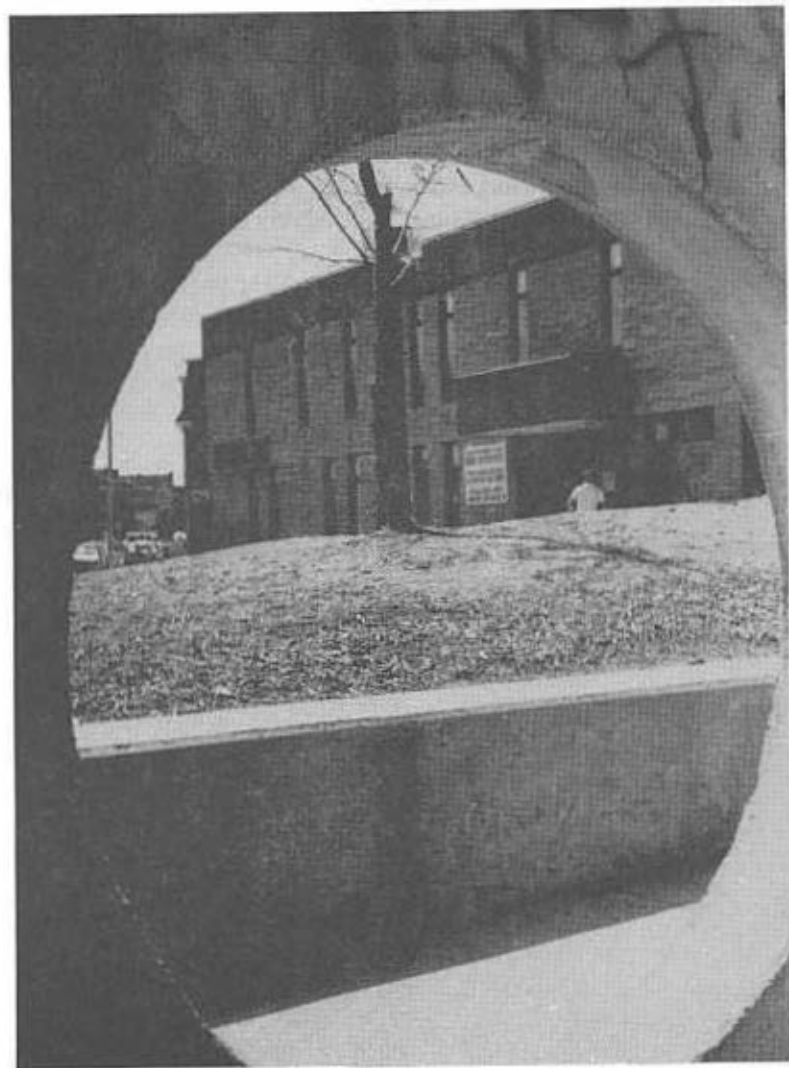
"A MULTI—SERVICE CENTER"

Perhaps the most important change in the administration of Dorchester House was in 1965, when the United Way and the United Community Settlements recommended that Dorchester House federate with other area settlements. A similar suggestion in 1949 had been overwhelmingly rejected. However, this second proposal was seriously considered. Confident that this step could benefit the community, the Dorchester House Board of Directors agreed to merge with Little House, Denison House, and the Columbia Point Youth Center to become the Federated Dorchester Neighborhood Houses, Inc. While each agency retained its independence, they collectively shared a central FDNH administrative office.

The Dorchester House Board of Directors and those of the merging settlements were augmented by a Federated Board of Directors, who assumed many administrative and financial responsibilities. In conjunction with the Federated Board, House Councils were established in each House with responsibilities which included planning programs, hiring personnel, appointing committees and operating the individual facilities. Community participation in decision-making was strongly encouraged. "Councils," advocated Director Jim Hooley, "should represent more community interests and should be more active in policy making and program planning." In partial response to such sentiments, a Governing Board was established at Dorchester House to exercise decision-making authority.

As the need for a new Dorchester House facility became more critical, a group of concerned citizens organized into the Determined People of Dorchester in 1967. This hardworking group of neighborhood activists advocated the creation of a new Dorchester House Multi-Service Center which would provide full recreational, athletic, educational, and medical facilities. "The only weapons we had," recalled a Determined People member, "were unity and determination." In 1968 they drove to Washington, D.C., to meet with Speaker of the House John W. McCormack and top officials of the United States Department of Housing and Urban Development to learn exactly what steps they needed to take to build a new facility. Community support, they were told, was a critical ingredient in making their plan a reality.

"The new building," wrote the Dorchester House Director, "is furnishing us a rallying point around which to help the community grow." Representatives from neighborhood church, civic and fraternal groups joined in these initial planning stages. Petitions were circulated throughout the community. Monies



Dorchester House Multi-Service Center

raised locally through the City of Boston, the United Way, Dorchester businesses, neighborhood groups and hundreds of private individuals supplemented a one million dollar HUD grant to fund the new building.

A Health Committee was formed from the Determined People group to deal directly with citizen rights to medicine and good health care. The Tufts Student Health Organization conducted a community-wide medical needs survey during the summers of 1968 and 1969 revealing that only six physicians served the neighborhood of 35,000 people. With support from the Health and Hospitals Department of the City of Boston, the Permanent Charity Fund, and the Regional Medical Foundation, a health center was opened in 1970 in three rooms at Dorchester House.

On June 3rd, 1972, the day before Dorchester Day, ground breaking ceremonies were held in the vacant lot next to the old Dorchester House building, and in May, 1974, the Dorchester House Multi-Service Center moved into its new, modern facility at 1353 Dorchester Avenue. A second floor addition was built three years later with Hill-Burton funding. The new community center now encompassed an olympic swimming pool, full-size gymnasium, teen center, senior lounge, activity rooms, child-care facilities, as well as a full-service Health Center.

Today, Dorchester House continues to offer a wide variety of health and social service programs to the surrounding community. Some of these services are day-care and pre-school programs; after-school day care; senior services together with an on-site lunch program; a neighborhood aide program including outreach and advocacy; plus a comprehensive Health Center providing adult and pediatric medicine, obstetrics-gynecology, mental health, nutrition, optometry and ophthalmology, podiatry, dermatology, and dental services. Recreation services offer many leisure-time activities such as arts and crafts, swimming, gym activities, organized athletic leagues, special needs programs and summer camp.

Dorchester House has moved into the 1980s, strengthening its commitment to the neighborhood, through an active partnership with local community development groups. In 1979, the Dorchester House staff helped organize the Freeport-Adams Neighborhood Association which targeted crucial problems in the community, most notably the need for affordable housing

and the deterioration of the Fields Corner commercial district. To address these problems the Freeport-Adams Neighborhood Association and Dorchester House played a key role in the establishment of two important ongoing community development groups, Dorchester Senior Housing, Inc., and the Fields Corner Community Development Corporation (CDC). The Fields Corner CDC has evolved into an independent redevelopment agency which has built affordable rental housing and revitalized commercial space in their neighborhood. Dorchester Senior Housing, which has continued to be affiliated with Dor-



chester House, planned and constructed a ninety-one unit senior housing building which opened in 1983 adjacent to Dorchester House. Kelly House, as it was called, was built as a joint venture between Dorchester Senior Housing, Inc., and the private development firms of Peabody Construction Company and Robert Walsh Associates, the first successful public/private construction endeavor in the area. Two years later, Dorchester Senior Housing once again joined Robert Walsh Associates to rehabilitate the former Liggett Building in nearby Fileds Corner. The revitalization of this anchor building signaled a regrowth of



Seniors' lunch program, Dorchester House, c. 1980.

interest at a time of disinvestment in this once vibrant business district.

The year 1987 marks the one hundredth anniversary of Dorchester House and its commitment to serving the citizens of Dorchester. Since its establishment in 1887 as a one-room industrial school in Fields Corner, Dorchester House has grown into a modern, vital community agency, offering a wide variety of social, educational, recreational, and health services to people of all ages. During the past year alone, more than 135,000 contacts were made with Dorchester House social service programs, while the Health Center provided medical care to over 48,000 patients. Today, Dorchester House oversees a three million dollar annual budget funded by a combination of Massachusetts state and Boston city contracts and grants, private fees, special fundraising, and support through Federated Dorchester Neighborhood Houses from the United Way and a variety of foundations. Dorchester House continues as a member agency of FDNH and the Health Center operates under the license of Boston City Hospital. Close affiliations also continue with Tufts Community Mental Health and New England College of Optometry.



Kelly House, 1984.

House services continue to reach deeper into the surrounding area through outreach, advocacy and community development programs. For the past century Dorchester House has met the



Dorchester House Health Center patient, 1982.

needs of an expanding and ever-changing community while continuing to be faithful to its original commitment as a neighborhood house.

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Photographs (unless otherwise noted) are from the Dorchester House Records, 1909-1983, in the Archives of the University of Massachusetts at Boston.