



**NESTOR L. FERNANDEZ II**  
 CEO/Executive Director  
*TEL HI Neighborhood Center*

**HL:** As a legacy nonprofit dating back to 1890, what is the mission of TEL HI?

**NF:** “To enhance the lives of people in our community.”

**HL:** For what age groups does TEL HI provide services?

**NF:** Our youngest client is three months old and our oldest is 102. [smiles]

**HL:** Is this exclusively for residents in the Telegraph Hill Neighborhood?

**NF:** Absolutely not. We serve students at Francisco Middle School, who come from all over the city to this “new immigrant school,” which means that newly arrived students from other countries are placed there. Also, our preschool is rated as one of the best preschools in San Francisco and attracts families from all over San Francisco. Additionally, our seniors often travel across the city to attend our lunch program and exercise classes. Our location in Telegraph Hill makes us appear to be in an upscale neighborhood, but in reality, we have affordable housing a block away from our campus and \$10 million dollar homes just up the hill. It is truly a good mix of people from different cultures, nationalities, and economic backgrounds.

**HL:** Have you been able to keep things going during the pandemic?

**NF:** Yes, we never closed due to the pandemic—not for one day! We made a scary choice at the time: that it was important for TEL HI to stay open to serve the San Francisco community. We kept our doors open, providing childcare for the children of essential workers, doctors, nurses, firefighters, law enforcement, as well as other frontline workers. We also kept our senior food program operating to make sure that our

seniors had something to eat. We provided virtual learning from day one by upgrading our technology to make sure that we were able to connect with our kids, and that the kids who came to the center were able to connect to their classrooms and schools. Our staff provided manpower for the food pantry where we served over 3,000 families at the peak. In short, TEL HI never closed its doors to the community, and we are actively looking for ways to expand our programs and services.

**HL:** How are these efforts supported financially?

**NF:** Initially, we received immediate support from donors who knew us well. They saw that we were open, providing services, and making a difference; they didn’t hesitate to support us financially. As more people came to know us, we began receiving funding from new donors. Fortunately, the funding we receive from the city continued, supporting the critical work that we do. In fact, Mayor London Breed presented TEL HI with a letter of commendation for that work during the early days of the pandemic.

Additionally, several foundations with which we work closely came forward with financial support. And rather than cancel our annual fundraiser, which was scheduled at the Palace Hotel, we did our first ever virtual fundraising event. I think we were as scrappy as we have ever been because the stakes were so high! But we’re not done yet. There is a huge challenge on the horizon of how we transition our clients from sheltering in place to in-person services—not to mention the students who will need our assistance as they re-enter the classroom for live instruction. There’s still a lot of work to do!

**HL:** Anything new at TEL HI?

**NF:** Yes! The biggest news I can share with you is the opening of our new childcare center at 188 Pierpoint Lane, a half-block from the Chase Center at Mission Bay. Our new childcare center is amazing: the layout of the classrooms, the playground and structure, and the location. We are extremely proud to be able to offer childcare to Mission Bay residents and those who work in the area.

This project has been in the works for over six years, and we are finally ready to open our doors to 61 infants, toddlers, and preschoolers sometime this summer. This is big news for TEL HI, as we are expanding our reach outside of the North Beach/Fisherman’s Wharf area.

**HL:** What are your goals for the next three to five years?

**NF:** A few important projects: expanding our childcare centers into other parts of San Francisco and the Bay Area; deepening our commitment to providing STEAM (science, technology, engineering, arts and math) curriculum by creating a makerspace and recruiting experienced educators; providing important professional development opportunities for our staff; and, looking for ways to venture deeper into social enterprise opportunities that will bring revenues, so that we can reinvest in our programs and services to further our reach and increase the number of people we’re able to serve.

We measure success not by net income, but by the number of people we are able to serve. That has now grown from 300 per day when I started in my role to currently over 1,200 per day. [telhi.org](http://telhi.org)