

**TESTIMONY FROM NYCHA EXECUTIVE VICE PRESIDENT FOR COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT &
PARTNERSHIPS SIDEYA SHERMAN
SENIORS AGING IN PLACE IN NYCHA DURING A PANDEMIC
COMMITTEE ON PUBLIC HOUSING WITH THE COMMITTEE ON AGING
WEDNESDAY, APRIL 7, 2021 – 10:00 AM
REMOTE HEARING (VIRTUAL ROOM 2)**

Chairs Alicka Ampy-Samuel and Margaret Chin, members of the Committees on Public Housing and Aging, other distinguished members of the City Council, NYCHA residents, and members of the public: good morning. I am Sideya Sherman, NYCHA's Executive Vice President for Community Engagement & Partnerships. I am pleased to be joined by Ukah Busgith, Senior Director of NYCHA's Family Partnerships Department, as well as our partners at the NYC Department for the Aging (DFTA).

Thank you for this opportunity to discuss NYCHA's efforts to support seniors aging in place (including during the COVID-19 pandemic) – a mission that is one of our top priorities.

Collaboration During an Unprecedented Crisis

Over the past year, the coronavirus has brought immeasurable loss and disruption to our lives, sparing no spot on the planet. I'd like to take a moment to remember all those we have lost.

Every one of us has been deeply affected by the pandemic, and it has brought to light deep inequities and disparities around the globe related to health, economics, and connectivity. This extraordinary crisis has compelled us to come together – as a world, as a nation, as a city – to defeat it.

I have seen remarkable demonstrations of this cooperation, this perseverance, over the past 13 months – the resident leaders who organized food drives and PPE distribution and conducted their own informal wellness checks of neighbors; the hardworking NYCHA employees who came to work every day (when much of the city was sheltering in place) to keep the heat on and the elevators running and our buildings clean; the staff

in my department who communicated daily with residents and helped coordinate the distribution of food and other essentials and do outreach on COVID-19 testing and vaccinations; and the community and government partners who assisted with all these efforts, including members of the Council.

While the challenges are unprecedented, so too is the sense of ingenuity, strength, resiliency, and community.

Communicating Throughout the Crisis

Throughout the crisis, NYCHA has been following guidance from federal, state, and local experts to ensure our policies and procedures are thorough and responsive in the rapidly changing environment.

The pandemic has stressed the importance of timely and accurate communication. Since day one, we have been working nonstop to amplify the guidance from partners like the City of New York and the City's Health Department, to inform our residents and employees of the best health and safety practices to follow during the pandemic. As of April 2, we have delivered approximately 4.5 million COVID-19-related communications via phone calls, robocalls, emails, mailings, and rent inserts to residents and resident leaders, Section 8 residents, employees, elected officials, and advocates. To our social media reach of approximately 47 million, we posted about COVID-19 over 1,300 times between March 1, 2020, and April 2, 2021, on all our social media channels. We dedicated a page on our website to COVID-19 resources, and we've also posted important information and updates on *The NYCHA Journal*, our digital newspaper for residents. The COVID-19 safety posters we put up at all of our more than 2,200 buildings provide information in five languages, and other informational notices we distributed are available in 13 languages.

During the pandemic, the hardworking staff from our Community Engagement & Partnerships department made over 120,000 "wellness" phone calls to our most vulnerable residents, including seniors, to make sure that they understood how they

could stay safe, determine whether they had any special needs, and connect them to resources from DFTA and other partners. And we partnered with the New York Cares volunteer organization to provide seniors a “buddy” who makes routine calls to those requesting regular checks by phone – these calls are ongoing.

We send a newsletter to more than 230 resident association leaders two to five days a week to keep them informed about COVID-19, our efforts, and key NYCHA and City resources. At the height of the pandemic, we had almost daily phone calls with the Chair of the Citywide Council of Presidents (CCOP), and spoke with other resident leaders about two to three times per week, representing nearly 30,000 calls since the start of the pandemic. We also hosted 11 Resident Advisory Board meetings and are hosting monthly webinars for resident leaders with senior NYCHA and City leadership to discuss COVID-19. In November, we implemented weekly standing meetings with the CCOP and NYCHA’s executive staff, including Chair Russ.

And we provide elected officials with regular updates, including through a now-weekly newsletter specifically for elected officials and community partners. NYCHA’s Intergovernmental Relations team has held nearly 500 external meetings to date to brief elected officials, their staff, and other community partners on the Authority’s COVID-19 response and needs, and to respond to inquiries in real time. We have also co-hosted 18 tele-town hall events to provide updates and guidance to thousands of participants. And we are conducting informational webinars for advocates and addressing industry groups at their forums.

These communication efforts will continue to ensure that all our residents, including seniors, have the latest information and resources to keep themselves safe.

Reducing Financial Pressures for Residents

At the very beginning of the crisis, NYCHA suspended resident evictions for as long as the City is under a state of emergency, to help keep our families healthy and housed. In

addition, we closed our hearing offices and adjourned all cases before the Housing Court.

We also simplified our Rent Hardship Policy to make it easier for residents to apply. In only a few weeks, we amended a process that was admittedly burdensome for residents to benefit from. Now, with just a few clicks on a computer or by answering a few questions with a Customer Contact Center (CCC) rep, residents can request a rent adjustment due to a partial or full loss of income. There is no waiting period to apply, and residents can self-certify their loss of income. Our rent hardship policy is a powerful safety valve for families who lost work or income due to COVID-19, and a core feature of this stabilizing institution – because rent is generally capped at 30 percent of adjusted gross income. As of the end of March, NYCHA decreased rent for nearly 65,000 families in public housing and over 6,000 in Section 8.

Connecting Residents to Vital Services and Resources

COVID-19 Vaccinations

Since day one, we have been working with City agencies and community partners to connect residents to food, medication, and essential health and social services during this crisis – including COVID testing – to help keep residents safe, healthy, and informed. As we now embark on an unprecedented vaccination effort, NYCHA has worked hand-in-hand with the City to ensure NYCHA seniors have access to crucial information and locally available vaccine.

In January 2021, NYCHA and the City opened weekend vaccination clinics at three initial NYCHA developments, through which more than 2,000 seniors were vaccinated. Since then, NYCHA continues to help operate roving pop-up vaccination clinics at developments throughout the city, reaching a total of over 60 NYCHA sites so far. I have visited many of these vaccination clinics, and I am proud to say that they are real signs of hope and renewal after what has been a long and difficult year. NYCHA works closely

with the onsite DFTA senior center providers to host and help enroll residents for appointments.

These efforts are a key part of the City's work to ensure equitable distribution of the COVID-19 vaccine, including by making the vaccine accessible in neighborhoods hit hardest by the virus and addressing vaccine hesitancy at the community level. As of April 1, 2021, we have launched 7 of 11 long-term NYCHA vaccination clinics that will serve communities with a high concentration of NYCHA housing. These clinics will serve all eligible NYCHA residents, staying open for at least 4 to 18 weeks.

To spread awareness about vaccine clinics and help residents make appointments, NYCHA continues to promote the City's Vaccine for All campaign through all communication channels. Our outreach efforts are robust and include fliers, robocalls, thousands of person-to-person calls, emails to residents, and social media promotion. NYCHA has also trained key Community Engagement & Partnerships staff to be vaccine navigators – integrating vaccine messaging and resource navigation into routine outreach work. In partnership with the NYC Health Department, we are hosting community conversations for NYCHA residents to learn more and ask questions about the COVID-19 vaccine and on-site vaccination clinics; interpretation services are available at these virtual sessions.

We also work with our City and community partners to get the word out and assist our older and vulnerable residents. NYC Health + Hospitals Test & Trace staff and our Community Engagement & Partnerships staff organize door-knocking campaigns at developments and enroll eligible residents for vaccination appointments through direct phone calls.

Food Access

At the height of the pandemic, NYCHA and the City worked to enroll all eligible residents in GetFoodNYC. We also instituted bulk food delivery at many of our senior buildings and hired residents to assist with the delivery process. NYCHA also worked

with a variety of partners to help organize pop-up food distribution events and other targeted meal delivery programs. We would like to thank all of our partners, including members of the Council, for your assistance with these vital efforts.

Additional Support for Residents

Early in the pandemic, we installed hand sanitizer dispensers at all of our senior buildings.

To help our seniors stay cool and safe at home, NYCHA provided air conditioners to more than 16,300 households last summer, through Mayor de Blasio's Heat Wave Plan to protect vulnerable New Yorkers.

And the City has provided free tablets and internet service to more than 10,300 NYCHA seniors to help them stay connected to their friends and family as well as critical online resources. Thanks to DFTA and Older Adults Technology Services (OATS), NYCHA seniors can contact the Senior Planet hotline – which is staffed by OATS-certified, multi-lingual trainers – for assistance with technology and accessing beneficial virtual resources, such as how to participate in exercise classes or City Council hearings, order medication or food, or socialize with friends and family online. And nearly 3,000 seniors have participated in virtual trainings, workshops, and activities from OATS on topics ranging from how to use Zoom and Android to bilingual game nights.

Connecting Seniors to Supportive Services and Programs

Through partnership, NYCHA connects seniors to a range of supportive and other services. Our goal is to ensure seniors have access to quality programs and services so they can age in place safely and gracefully. This has always been our mission, and it has continued during the pandemic.

Across our portfolio, NYCHA seniors have access to 108 senior centers and 11 naturally occurring retirement communities (NORC) programs operated by settlement houses

and other long-standing community-based organizations. The senior centers provide one-on-one counseling as well as recreational and cultural opportunities from DFTA and many other providers. At 11 NORC sites, homebound and non-homebound seniors are connected to services and get help with accessing public benefits and improving their health. Throughout the pandemic, many providers converted to virtual services and person-to-person calls to keep seniors engaged.

To enhance services, we have continued to formalize referral partnerships with local service providers to offer direct case management and other assistance to NYCHA residents citywide. Through our HUD-funded Elderly Safe-At-Home (ESAH) program, NYCHA Family Partnerships staff offer on-site assistance to senior residents, at 17 distinct seniors-only properties, to support them to live safely and independently in their homes. Through the ESAH program, staff provide home visits and connections to services and crime prevention and other workshops, and they organize volunteer “floor captains” to facilitate neighbor-to-neighbor support. Citywide, our Family Partnerships team responds to referrals submitted by property management and other NYCHA departments for vulnerable residents with social, financial, behavioral, and/or mental health concerns that place their tenancy at risk.

Serving the Community

Throughout this universally challenging experience, we remain guided by our top priority: promoting the health, safety, and quality of life of our residents, including seniors. We will continue to share the latest guidance and information with our residents and do all we can to connect them to lifesaving resources and services.

I would again like to thank the Council, the City, the State, and our community partners for their support, which is enabling us to overcome this pandemic and continue to transform this agency. I would also like to express our thanks to our resident leaders and residents who are also out on the front lines of the pandemic, helping to keep their neighbors safe. When this chapter in New York City’s history is written, it will show that

community and resolve made an incredible difference in how we surmounted this extraordinary challenge. We are all in this together and we are overcoming it together.

I would also like to note that our DFTA partners, who are with us today, are best positioned to comment on the two pieces of legislation that are being considered as part of this hearing.

Thank you. We look forward to continuing to update you on our work and are happy to answer any questions you may have.



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Gale A. Brewer, Borough President

April 7, 2021

**Gale A. Brewer, Manhattan Borough President
Testimony before the New York City Council Committee on Aging and
Committee on Public Housing
On Seniors Aging in Place in NYCHA During a Pandemic**

My name is Gale A. Brewer and I am the Manhattan Borough President. Thank you to Chair Chin of the Committee on Aging and Chair Ampry-Samuel of the Committee on Public Housing for the opportunity to testify.

NYCHA's 2020 Fact Sheet reports 40 senior-only developments citywide, plus 13 other senior-only buildings and addresses among family developments. These buildings, along with developments not designated as senior-only, are homes to over 62,000 public housing residents age 65 or older.

The COVID-19 pandemic has brought out needs that are unique to seniors. For example, when the pandemic forced the closure of senior centers, one of the biggest challenges was ensuring that seniors who were on DFTA's senior center rosters were added to the GetFood NYC list so they would start receiving home-delivered meals. The transition was far from smooth, leaving many seniors who used to get their meals in-person at senior centers in a bureaucratic limbo and a delayed start to home deliveries. My staff and I navigated the GetFood NYC registration system to add many seniors who fell through the crack onto the list. The need was especially great among NYCHA residents without internet access. They could not sign up online without assistance.

I support Intro 1827-2019, which would establish a NYCHA liaison within the Department for the Aging. If such a liaison had existed during the early days of the pandemic, the process to transfer all NYCHA seniors in DFTA's records to DSNY for food delivery could have been less piecemeal and more coordinated among the agencies.

Looking ahead, a NYCHA liaison at DFTA should facilitate training for NYCHA seniors who received a tablet but still do not know how to use it to navigate the internet. Additionally, my staff has worked with many NYCHA seniors who remain afraid and do not go out. A NYCHA liaison would be in the ideal position to determine how many seniors in both senior-only buildings and family buildings are in this category, and then to work with DFTA and partner organizations to arrange for regular wellness checks to meet these seniors' needs.

I also support Intro 0415-2018, which requires NYCHA to annually report on senior centers that operate within NYCHA buildings. According to an analysis done by the Regional Plan Association in 2020 using NYC Open Datasets, NYCHA provides facility space for 121 senior centers citywide, or 47.5% of all senior centers in New York City.

Between November 2020 and January 2021, my staff reached out to Manhattan's senior centers to gain a better understanding of their plans and concerns around reopening. Most centers reported that while they were waiting for DFTA to issue guidelines, they have taken the steps to stock up on PPEs and supplies in preparation for when they will reopen. Several centers expressed interest in contracting with DFTA to cook and deliver their own meals in lieu of using GetFood NYC to provide food for their members. Others reported consistent participation of virtual programming but only among seniors who had both the access and the know-how to get online.

The pandemic has changed how senior centers provide services to their members, and upcoming reopenings may not return things exactly back to how they were. It is therefore important to capture data from senior centers such as how many seniors are served, what programs are offered, and the number of concerns raised and resolved among senior centers, that can help establish a baseline for the "new normal." If Intro 0415-2018 passes, the first annual report will offer invaluable data for the current state of NYCHA-based senior centers and how these centers might adapt to operating post-COVID.

Finally, in order for seniors living in NYCHA to age in place well during the current pandemic, they must be able to safely and conveniently access the COVID-19 vaccine.

On March 27, I visited the Johnson Community Center in East Harlem, a pop-up vaccination site for all NYCHA residents that will remain open every Thursday to Sunday through June 20. At the time, New York's vaccine eligibility was for those age 50 and up, so the Johnson site was meant to provide older NYCHA residents with access to the vaccine. To my dismay, there were very few NYCHA residents showed up to get their shot. It was clear that such dismal turnout in a district with the second highest number of public housing in the country was the result of poor communication.

Many senior NYCHA residents have share with me that they do not know where to get the vaccine. For example, Ms. F is homebound and is eligible for the J&J vaccine. She called my office because she did not receive any information from NYCHA on how to have someone come to her apartment and administer the vaccine. It was my staff who helped her schedule an appointment.

NYCHA informed my office that they communicated vaccine information via emails and robocalls, but many seniors do not have email. For residents who received NYCHA's robocalls, they reported that no one answers when they called the phone number provided by the message. And robocalls are not helpful for residents who do not have a phone number nor for those who rely on their home attendant to take their calls if the home attendant does not speak English.

Many NYCHA residents, especially older adults, rely on print communication. Information about the vaccine should be posted outside and inside of management offices in multiple languages, as well as posted in lobbies and on every floor with frequent updates.

I have visited vaccine sites operated by the City and the State. I understand that through the City's pop-up vaccination sites, almost 9,000 NYCHA seniors have been vaccinated as of early April. NYC Health and Hospital Corporation expects the pace of vaccination to increase as more doses of the J&J vaccine becomes available, but that can only be achieved if increased access is paired with more effective outreach to NYCHA seniors.

NYCHA residents cannot safely age in place during a pandemic unless the city is intentional about prioritizing senior public housing residents. I urge the administration and members of the public housing and aging committees to hold NYCHA accountable and to allocate the necessary resources for NYCHA to effectively reach every senior in all its developments.



**Testimony of
Leo Asen
AARP New York**

**New York City Council
Committees on Public Housing and Aging**

NYCHA Oversight Hearing

4/07/21

**Remote Hearing
New York, New York**

Contact: Kevin Jones (646) 668-7550 | kjones@aarp.org

AARP Testimony - City Council Committees on Aging and Public Housing - Oversight Hearing

Subject: Seniors Aging in NYCHA, Support for Int. 1827 and Int. 415

Good morning Chairs Chin and Ampry-Samuel and members of the City Council Committees on Aging and Public Housing. My name is Leo Asen and I am the President of AARP New York, representing the 750,000 members of the 50+ community in New York City. Thank you for providing me with the opportunity to testify at today's oversight hearing to discuss seniors and older adults aging in NYCHA and potential solutions to protect the health and wellbeing of older adults aging in public housing.

Prior to the pandemic, NYCHA has had a significant impact on the lives of older New Yorkers. In 2019, 21.2% of New Yorkers who were residing in NYCHA housing were 62 years or older, which is roughly 119,632 residents in total. In addition to offering affordable housing opportunities for the City's aging residents, NYCHA has also provided a range of educational and social programming for its older residents at nearly 121 senior centers across New York City.

However, NYCHA has been plagued with a myriad of infrastructure and operational issues prior to the onset of COVID-19 due to years of disinvestment from the federal government and neglect from City and State leaders.

A [needs assessment](#) conducted by the City and NYCHA in 2018 found that NYCHA required around \$31.8 billion in projects to bring buildings across the City to a state of good repair, including basic capital improvements such as boiler replacements, elevator maintenance, and kitchen and bathroom repairs for apartment units. Without these critical investments, NYCHA's aging tenants, who are predominantly Black and Hispanic, have suffered immense consequences as a result of the decisions made by City, State, and federal leaders.

For years, NYCHA tenants have borne the brunt of these unsafe and substandard [housing conditions](#), which range from heat and hot water outages in the middle of [the winter](#), lead, mold and pest infestations throughout developments, and broken plumbing in apartment units.

In addition, NYCHA's residents that are elderly and/or have a disability have especially suffered from chronic elevator outages in buildings across the City, which can prevent them from leaving their buildings entirely when outages occur. In addition, many of these issues have been allowed to persist for weeks, months, and even years at times without being properly repaired or fixed by the agency's staff.

These issues have plagued NYCHA for years and have had an immense impact on the health of NYCHA tenants throughout the COVID-19 pandemic. With the onset of COVID-19, older adults living in NYCHA buildings have been significantly impacted by the spread of the virus and have tragically made up a large share of the deaths from COVID-19. Public health experts have [highlighted](#) how NYCHA's old and deficient air filtration systems, which often break down and require a lot of maintenance, do not provide sufficient ventilation throughout their buildings and increase an individual's risk of contracting the virus without proper air ventilation.

These issues have also worsened the quality of life and wellbeing of tenants throughout the pandemic, especially for older adults and individuals with disabilities. Officials have documented how [chronic elevator outages](#) and the continued lack of reliable elevator maintenance throughout the pandemic has severely disrupted the lives of NYCHA's tenants. This reality has made it even harder for individuals who have mobility issues and require elevator services to access vital services during the pandemic, such as meal deliveries, groceries, healthcare, and other critical social services.

These unsafe conditions witnessed throughout the pandemic and in years prior are simply unacceptable. We call on the City to work with its partners at the State and federal level to implement policies and set aside additional funding that will help address and resolve these issues immediately.

AARP fully supports Intro 1827 and the creation of a NYCHA liaison within the Department for the Aging. As noted before, the pandemic has had a severe impact on the lives of older NYCHA

residents and exacerbated problems that already existed for tenants living in NYCHA. We believe that it is imperative for the City to create a specific position within the Department For The Aging that has a deep understanding for the issues facing older NYCHA tenants and who can serve as an advocate and resource to address and resolve these issues for the duration of the pandemic and in future years.

AARP also supports Intro 0415 in order to develop mechanisms that would help City leaders better understand the scope and services offered at NYCHA senior centers. NYCHA senior centers are a critical component of the City's infrastructure and provide a wide array of services for the physical and mental wellbeing of older New Yorkers. As the City begins to recover from COVID-19, these senior centers will be crucial to addressing the needs of older New Yorkers and the issues that have been exacerbated by the pandemic, especially regarding food insecurity, social isolation, healthcare, and other related social services.

In addition, we believe that the City should expand funding allocated to NYCHA senior centers in the FY22 budget in order to address the needs of its aging residents amid the City's process of recovering from the pandemic.

However, we believe that the City, State, and federal government need to go further and set aside significant financial investments to address NYCHA's \$31 billion worth of capital infrastructure needs that have gone unmet for too long. As the Biden Administration has expressed significant interest in addressing the country's infrastructure needs in the coming months, we call on the City's leaders to work with the federal government to secure additional funding that will allow NYCHA to make widespread capital improvements, beginning with elevator repairs, air ventilation system upgrades, and other projects will help mitigate the spread of the COVID-19 virus throughout NYCHA developments immediately.

We strongly believe in the critical affordable housing opportunities that NYCHA offers for older New Yorkers, but urge the City to take immediate action in order to ensure that all of its

residents are provided with a safe and healthy place to live as they age with dignity across New York City.

Thank you for allowing me the opportunity to testify today.

HAMILTON-MADISON HOUSE

TESTIMONY TO

NEW YORK CITY COUNCIL

COMMITTEE ON AGING & PUBLIC HOUSING

Seniors aging in place in NYCHA during a pandemic

PRESENTED BY BONNIE LUMAGUI
ASSISTANT EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR
SENIOR SERVICES AND COMMUNITY SERVICES

Good morning Councilmember Margaret Chin and Council Member Alicka Ampry-Samuel and members of the committees. I am Bonnie Lumagui, Assistant Executive Director for Senior Services and Community Services at Hamilton-Madison House. My colleagues and I are grateful to you for holding this hearing on the vital and timely topic of senior centers in Public Housing.

Hamilton-Madison House has long been deeply dedicated to supporting seniors in Manhattan, especially in the neighborhoods of the Lower East Side and Chinatown. In particular, we extend services to low-income and immigrant seniors, many of Asian descent residing in NYCHA. We operate a Social Adult Day program, Caregiver support programs, the City Hall Senior Center, three Naturally Occurring Retirement Community (NORC) programs including, and, most relevant to this hearing, the Smith NORC located in the Smith Houses in NYCHA on the Lower East Side of Manhattan.

Perhaps more than any other population, the adverse effects of COVID-19 have been felt acutely among seniors, and that is especially the case for seniors residing within NYCHA. As is well known, the large majority of those who have sadly died from the virus have been seniors and the population has therefore been compelled to remain at home and avoid contact with others, making them more susceptible to isolation, mental health difficulties and other struggles.

The closing of senior centers in particular has created serious challenges, in that these programs serve as hubs and safety nets for seniors for multiple essential purposes, including meals, translation services, and access to other essential services. To compensate for the loss of senior centers, we have pursued alternative methods for supporting seniors, and we thank Trinity Church and Common Pantry for providing pantry to our seniors. We are also delivering Meals made available from the organization Rethink that are funded through grants from foundations. We look forward to the day when we can reopen the Smith NORC Center, and we intend to

partner with NYC Department for the Aging (DFTA) and others to ensure that reopening can occur in a manner that maximizes safety for seniors and staff and, at the same time, and allows for the most satisfying possible experience.

Toward this end, following are our comments and recommendations:

SUPPORT IMMIGRANTS

- Ensure that all senior centers serving immigrant populations are fully equipped to respond to the unique post-COVID-19 needs of the population, with respect to matters of nutrition, health and cultural matters.
- To address and support seniors who feel anti-Asian and other anti-immigrant sentiment makes them unsafe to travel independently.

RECOMMENDATIONS TO DFTA -- COMPREHENSIVE SAFETY MEASURES

- Issues safety and screening protocols and procedures and extends the resources necessary to comply, including staffing to manage screening, temperature checks.
- Extend resources to allow for proper ventilation, adequate cleaning and crowd control as many centers are located in basements
- Require that staff utilize PPE and provide face coverings, shields and gloves
- Provides additional funding for purchase of cleaning and sanitizing supplies to allow for daily disinfecting and for deep-cleaning by professional services
- Install plexi-glass barriers are utilized to allow for separation between staff and participants
- Install hand-sanitizing stations are
- Stagger staffing schedules as feasible
- Do not include volunteers in programming
- Put in place clear policies for managing situations in which participants do not comply with safety rules

RECOMMENDATIONS REGARDING MEAL PROVISION

- In the case of Grab and Go meals, make special efforts to ensure social distancing

- Establish criteria as to the eligibility of meal recipients and who may accept meals on behalf of seniors

RECOMMENDATIONS – UPCOMING NORC AND SENIOR CENTER RFPS

We strongly urge the delay of RFPs until seniors centers reopen to full capacity. To complete a proposal for a multi-year contract requires time and attention that is not presently available as organizations are focused on meeting the increased needs that the pandemic has created. We also find it impossible to plan and develop programming in our current situation with COVID as we do not have a clear timeline for reopening.

If a new RFP is issued, we recommend that a new Concept Paper that reflects the latest circumstances and affords direct services organizations the opportunity to comment and thereby share perspectives about the ways in which the environment has been altered by the pandemic and how, accordingly, programming should be shaped for the future.

Thank you again for the opportunity to testify at this matter. Hamilton-Madison House would be pleased to partner with City Council and DFTA to ensure a safe and productive reopening to senior centers in NYCHA.



**New York City Council Oversight Hearing:
Seniors aging in place in NYCHA during a pandemic**

April 7, 2021

Good morning. My name is Molly Krakowski, Senior Director of Government Affairs at JASA. Thank you, Chair Ampry-Samuel, Chair Chin and members of the Committees on Public Housing and Aging for the opportunity to testify today at the oversight hearing on seniors aging in place in NYCHA during a pandemic.

JASA is a not-for-profit agency that honors older New Yorkers as vital members of society, providing services that support aging with purpose and partnering to build strong communities. For over 50 years, JASA has served as one of New York's largest and most trusted agencies serving older adults in the Bronx, Brooklyn, Manhattan, and Queens. JASA has a comprehensive, integrated network of services that promotes independence, safety, wellness, community participation, and an enhanced quality of life for New York City's older adults. These programs reach over 40,000 clients and include home care, case management services, senior centers, NORC supportive services, home-delivered meals, caregiver support, continuing education, licensed mental health, senior housing, advocacy, legal services, adult protective services, and guardianship services.

We are very appreciative of the New York City Council's continued focus on the needs of the most vulnerable New Yorkers throughout the pandemic. The spotlight on this population and older New Yorkers must remain as the Council negotiates the FY22 budget. While vaccinations are now taking place and there is a light at the end of the tunnel, COVID-19 will remain with us for the foreseeable future and adequate funding is necessary in order to safely resume in-person services and programming.

JASA in Public Housing

JASA has a long-standing productive partnership (approximately 40 years) with the New York City Housing Authority, NYCHA. We currently have five DFTA contracted senior centers located in NYCHA sites: Throggs Neck (Randall-Balcom Houses), Sue Ginsburg (Pelham Parkway Houses), Bay Eden (Baychester Houses), Williamsburg (Williamsburg Houses), and Cooper Park (Cooper Park Houses). In addition, JASA provides NORC Supportive Services Programs

at the Bushwick/Hylan and Surfside/O'Dwyer Gardens developments. In addition, two communities are now part of the PACT program: Bay Eden (Baychester/Murphy) and Williamsburg.

Many NYCHA residents are also assisted by JASA case management, elder abuse prevention, caregiver support, and other services. JASA is pleased to have the opportunity to speak to the positive relationship we have with NYCHA, as well as some of the challenges we face in hosting programs in NYCHA developments as well as those that our clients experience as tenants.

Co-locating senior centers and programs within NYCHA housing serves a great need within these communities. Several NYCHA developments are home to a high number of older adults. They may be designated as NORCs, Naturally Occurring Retirement Communities, where people moved in when they were young, raised their families, and have now grown old.

NYCHA has proven a strong and supportive partner with JASA in our NORC programs, participating in community events, and providing support to help JASA secure additional funding and services. There is a similar response to partnering with JASA at the senior centers within NYCHA sites. It is clear that NYCHA recognizes the importance of enhancing services to its growing older adult tenant population. In 2019, NYCHA supported JASA's application to New York State Office for Aging; during a competitive RFP process, JASA secured new funding for the Bushwick/Hylan NORC program and ongoing NYSOFA funding for the Coney Island Active Aging NORC program (serving the Surfside and O'Dwyer Gardens developments). The Bushwick Hylan NORC program was one of only three new NORC programs funded by NYSOFA. NYCHA's Performance Tracking and Analytics Department was very helpful in providing information for these applications.

JASA's successful efforts to secure philanthropic funding for the programs located in NYCHA developments are supported by the ability to speak to the meaningful partnership. For example, JASA implemented the Community Health Navigator Program in Williamsburg and Bushwick and in parts of the Bronx, communities with disproportionately high rates of diabetes, hypertension, and preventable hospitalizations. Community Health Navigators (CHN), community residents aged 55+ who have been trained and have learned to manage chronic health conditions, coach and help their neighbors to overcome barriers and access medical services, social care and support. The Community Health Navigators help to deliver the following programs: Chronic Disease Self-Management Group Program (in English, Spanish and Haitian Creole), Diabetes Self-Management Group Program (in English and Spanish), Chronic Pain Self-Management, the Diabetes Prevention Program, Healthy Eating Peer Coaching, Monitoring/Hypoglycemia Peer Coaching, Peer-Led Blood Pressure Screenings and

a FIT Club programs to control blood pressure and increase physical activity. The project has delivered on its original objectives to (a) motivate healthy behaviors, (b) improve diabetes (and hypertension) self-management, and (c) reduce the rates of preventable hospitalization for diabetes and related comorbidities. To date, we have trained over 1000 participants in these programs, including residents of the Bushwick/Hylan NORC and NYCHA locations in the Bronx. Based on this success, JASA expanded the initiative to the Williamsburg and Cooper Park Senior Centers, and other Bronx and South Brooklyn NYCHA developments.

JASA and NYCHA's Family Partnerships Department are also looking to expand our existing collaboration. In March, Family Partnership and JASA Services leadership staff met to explore better practices for enhancing coordinated, inter-agency social services access across boroughs. JASA staff will be providing an aging services resource presentation later this month for Bronx Partnership housing site staff.

Unfortunately, NYCHA's demonstrated commitment to helping its senior residents age in place is seriously challenged by an aging facilities' infrastructure and limited maintenance capacity. This negatively impacts program operations as well as the experience of individual tenants. Typical issues include broken doors, flooding caused by rain and leaks, out of service elevators, uneven sidewalks, etc. Building security and lighting needs are other concerns. There are often long wait times for service ticket response and multiple tickets must be submitted. JASA welcomes Int. No. 1827, which would see the creation of a much-needed liaison between NYCHA and facilities and matters impacting older adult residents.

COVID-19:

Throughout the pandemic, JASA staff have reached out to thousands of NYCHA program participants, ensuring their safety and connecting them to services. On-line classes, support groups and presentations continued via zoom and members were encouraged to participate. Despite efforts to keep connectivity high, this year has been extremely isolating for many older New Yorkers. Social isolation, already a concern in the aging services community prior to the pandemic, has been exacerbated by the significant COVID-19 health concerns that overwhelmingly impact older adults and people with underlying conditions.

In many testimony opportunities this year, we have noted how the pandemic clearly revealed a technology gap, with older adults at risk of not having equipment, Wifi access, or adequate training. The need for access to technology has never been more clear, and significant investment is needed to fill the widening gap. Without thoughtful investment in technology and resources to fully engage, physical distancing translates into social isolation. This past January, the City, in partnership with Older Adults Technology Services (OATS) provided internet-connected T-Mobile tablets for thousands of NYCHA senior residents. JASA applauds

these efforts and should this initiative be expanded, JASA recommends that the City use this as an opportunity to partner with existing senior service providers operating in NYCHA developments, to maximize the investment by creating deeper connections and support within the community.

JASA is working closely with the City to reach out to all JASA clients and program participants and assist with vaccine appointments, education and transportation to/from appointments as necessary. For example, staff have assisted clients in securing vaccine appointments through JASA's partnership with New York-Presbyterian Hospital and other sources as the vaccine becomes more widely available. JASA staff worked to ensure that NYCHA-arranged pop-up vaccine clinics at Throggs Neck and Sue Ginsburg senior centers were successful and NYCHA continues to host a longer-term clinic at the Bay Eden senior center location. In addition, JASA is reaching out to/and identifying homebound NYCHA residents in need of vaccinations, as part of the latest vaccination campaign initiative for homebound individuals.

JASA looks forward to continuing our collaborative work with NYC Housing Authority, DFTA, and the New York City Council.

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**New York City Council
Committee on Aging
Chair, Council Member Chin
Committee on Public Housing
Chair, Council Member Ampry-Samuel
April 7, 2021
Oversight – Seniors aging in place in NYCHA during a pandemic**

I'm Brianna Paden-Williams, the Communications and Policy Associate at LiveOn NY. Thank you for the opportunity to testify on seniors aging in place in NYCHA during the pandemic.

LiveOn NY's members include more than 100 community-based nonprofits that provide core services which allow all New Yorkers to thrive in our communities as we age, including senior centers, home-delivered meals, affordable senior housing, elder abuse prevention, caregiver supports, NORCs and case management. With our members, we work to make New York a better place to age.

In New York City, NYCHA represents one of the greatest providers of affordable housing for low-income seniors. Currently, 38% of New York City Housing Authority (NYCHA) households are headed by an older adult age 62 and over, and an estimated 7,700 units are designated specifically for older adults. Just as the buildings are aging, so are the tenants that occupy them, making the need for quality, safe services in NYCHA paramount to the success of the community. Unfortunately, however, providers of services such as Senior Centers and NORCs that operate in NYCHA community spaces face daily challenges just to keep the doors open.

While an emphasis must be placed on improving the living conditions of residents living in NYCHA developments, it's also important to acknowledge senior service providers have not been immune to the challenges during the pandemic.

Prior to the onset of the pandemic, and potentially exacerbating the pandemic's impacts, inadequate conditions in NYCHA developments including poor ventilation systems, broken elevators, leaking roofs, and recurring mold have long been one of the many challenges providers have worked to alleviate. While working to mitigate these repairs, providers are frequently faced with fines and violations, in addition to lengthy approval processes by NYCHA that exacerbate the timeline for repairs.

The impacts of these fines and conditions are not only monetary: instead of spending critical time providing critical services for NYCHA residents and the surrounding community, providers are forced to become experts in the nuances of repair systems wholly outside of their job description in order to simply stay afloat. This impact cannot be understated as these non-profit providers work tirelessly to provide high quality services to those who need it most and, through these suboptimal systems, are being consistently hamstrung from meeting their city-mandated and personally motivated aims. Now, in the midst of a pandemic, it's critical that these repairs and conditions are addressed as they pose an even greater risk for residents and staff as we look ahead to resume in-person services and programming.

In response to these difficulties LiveOn NY recommends:

- **The City must work to continue to increase capital funding for public housing** to support ventilation upgrades and other critical infrastructure improvements that will improve both residential and community space within NYCHA;
- **Redirect fines to ensure nonprofits are not penalized for violations that are out of their control.** Nonprofit human service providers, who lack site control and rely on NYCHA to make repairs, should not be subject to citations and fines from DOHMH or FDNY due to NYCHA's failure to make those repairs. When violations are found during inspections, and if these violations have already been reported to NYCHA by the provider, the provider should not be penalized. At this time, the fine should be automatically negated, and NYCHA should be notified by the fining agency of a need to cure the violation in question;
- Restore and baseline all one-time funds for NYCHA Social Clubs. All funding for senior programming in NYCHA community spaces should not rely on one-shot funding from the Administration, but should be sustainably baselined and incorporated into the full scope of DFTA services;
- **Fully fund the Indirect Cost Rate (ICR) Initiative, which is critical to ensuring nonprofits operating in NYCHA remain viable into the future.** Recent cuts to the ICR Initiative have threatened the viability of New York City's nonprofit human service providers, leaving current NYCHA Senior Center, NORC, and other providers scrambling to pay staff and get by. To truly support nonprofits the City must reverse course and fully implement the ICR Initiative;
- **Include funding promises made to Senior Centers in the FY22 Executive Budget.** Fully allocate the \$10 million in Senior Center Model Budget funding and \$5 million in Senior Center Kitchen funding to ensure that this workforce -- made up of predominantly women and people of color -- are paid competitively for their work. This funding will support not only Senior Centers located in NYCHA, but the broader Senior Center portfolio.

Additionally, LiveOn NY strongly supports the following bills that would potentially improve operations for providers and transparency in NYCHA developments:

- **Intro 1827, introduced by Council Member Ampry-Samuel, is an act to provide a dedicated NYCHA liaison within DFTA.** To ensure there is a clear and consistent line of coordination, there should be an individual within the Department for the Aging (DFTA) whose sole focus is to coordinate with NYCHA on matters impacting older adult public housing residents. This individual could support and streamline processes for DFTA funded services that may include establishing a system to receive comments and complaints, delineating roles and responsibilities regarding repairs at Centers located within NYCHA developments and make recommendations to improve programs and facilities that serve older adults public housing residents.
- **Intro 415, introduced by Council Member Chin, is an act to require NYCHA to report annually on Senior Centers within NYCHA buildings.** As we look to create better solutions for older adults who rely on Senior Centers for critical services, receiving an annual report from NYCHA would provide service providers and community-based organizations with the necessary information and data — such as the number of people served by each center, or the programming provided at each center — to create evidence-based solutions that better support older adults and advocate for investments and legislation on the City and State level. The City Council should work with the Department for the Aging, prior to passage, to confirm if the information that would be mandated reporting under this bill is already being collected, or can be easily collected by providers, so as to not create additional data collection requirements where those don't already



Making New York a better place to age

exist. Further, it should be considered if this information is already available through Local Law 140.

As we look ahead to the warmer season when Senior Centers located in NYCHA will act as Cooling Centers for those in need, NYCHA developments and DFTA fiscal must work to accelerate the approval for repairs or replacements of poor HVAC systems. Further, as DFTA moves towards reopening of in-person senior services, funding and flexibility for budget amendments must be prioritized to ensure Senior Centers in NYCHA can proactively address leaks and other issues that are critical to the safety and health of staff and older adults.

Thank you for the opportunity to testify at today's hearing.

LiveOn NY's members provide the core, community-based services that allow older adults to thrive in their communities. With a base of more than 100 community-based organizations serving at least 300,000 older New Yorkers annually. Our members provide services ranging from senior centers, congregate and home-delivered meals, affordable senior housing with services, elder abuse prevention services, caregiver supports, case management, transportation, and NORCs. LiveOn NY advocates for increased funding for these vital services to improve both the solvency of the system and the overall capacity of community-based service providers.

LiveOn NY administers a citywide outreach program that supports seniors in communities where benefits are most underutilized. This program educates thousands of older adults, including those who are homebound, about food assistance options, as well as screens and enrolls those who are eligible for SNAP and SCRIE/DRIE.

**Testimony of Suhali Méndez
Senior Advocate, Disability Justice Program
New York Lawyers for the Public Interest**

to the

**New York City Council
Committee on Public Housing
Jointly with the Committee on Aging**

regarding

Oversight Hearing - Seniors Aging in place in NYCHA during a Pandemic

April 7, 2021

My name is Suhali Méndez and I am an Advocate in the Disability Justice Program at New York Lawyers for the Public Interest (NYLPI). NYLPI is a civil rights organization with a robust disability rights practice, and housing advocacy for people with disabilities is an important part of our work.

NYLPI represents tenants in matters involving the need for reasonable accommodations, such as apartment and common area retrofitting, transfers to accessible apartments, and protection for use of service animals, as well as other housing discrimination issues. We appreciate the opportunity to provide testimony regarding accessible public housing in New York City.

NYCHA is Largely Inaccessible for People with Disabilities

We commend your work on the [Introduction Number 415](#) sponsored by Council Member Chin and [Introduction Number 1827](#) sponsored by Council Member Ampry-Samuel. It is important that the New York City Housing Authority (“NYCHA”) create accessible resources and spaces for its senior citizen residents.

However, NYCHA is also plainly not meeting its responsibility to provide accessible housing for seniors and New Yorkers who have disabilities. Based on information we have received from NYCHA tenants, waitlists for accessible apartments can be years long, and NYCHA refuses all too frequently to make reasonable modifications to existing apartments, entrances, and common areas which would create additional, much-needed accessible units.

In order to meet the needs of seniors who live in NYCHA and all New Yorkers with disabilities, the New York City Housing Authority (“NYCHA”) must also take immediate action to: (1) increase the number of accessible apartments within NYCHA’s portfolio; (2) make reasonable accommodations and modifications for existing NYCHA tenants; and (3) vastly decrease the amount of time that tenants with disabilities must wait to obtain accessible housing.

NYCHA must increase its accessible housing stock in order to meet the needs of NYCHA tenants who have are senior citizens and/or have disabilities. In order to facilitate some of the needs of the tenants who are senior citizens and/or people with disabilities, it is imperative to have the appropriate resources available and to have accountability on the effectiveness of these resources.

Over the years, NYLPI has received calls from people with disabilities who live in NYCHA housing and have waited many months – sometimes years – for reasonable accommodations or to be transferred to an accessible apartment. We hear frequently from NYCHA tenants who report that their elevators are in woeful disrepair, and continuously break down, leaving them trapped. Accessible features, such as elevators, must be maintained in working order so that they may be readily used by tenants with disabilities.

While both federal guidance and a 2000 settlement resulting from the *Rivera v. NYCHA* litigation mandate that five percent of NYCHA housing units must be accessible, this figure is over twenty years old, arbitrary, and untethered to the demands of New York City’s public housing population. As documented in New York City’s 2019 AccessibleNYC report, approximately 11% of New Yorkers – or over one million people – disclosed living with a disability.¹ Furthermore, as noted in the Mayor’s Housing New York 2.0 Report, “residents who are least 65 years old is projected to increase by 40 percent between 2010 and 2040.”² Nearly 40 percent of NYCHA households are headed by residents age 62 and older. In addition, about 21 percent of the NYCHA population are aged 62 or older.³

New York City has repeatedly promised to build more senior housing on existing NYCHA land, which has thus far been wholly insufficient to address the crisis for people with disabilities who live in NYCHA or need NYCHA housing.

Robust Enforcement of Accessibility Laws

Increasing the accessibility of NYCHA programs and adding to the accessible housing stock is not enough to meet the needs of NYCHA residents, however. New York City must hold NYCHA to the standards set by the New York City Human Rights Law (“NYCHRL”), which prohibits disability discrimination in the sale or rental of housing, and requires the provision of

¹ <https://www1.nyc.gov/assets/mopd/downloads/pdf/accessible-nyc-2019.pdf>

² <https://www1.nyc.gov/assets/hpd/downloads/pdfs/about/housing-new-york-2-0.pdf>

³ https://www1.nyc.gov/assets/nycha/downloads/pdf/NYCHA-Fact-Sheet_2019_08-01.pdf

reasonable accommodations to enable people with disabilities to fully enjoy their housing.⁴ Notably, the protections under the NYCHRL have been interpreted more broadly than its state and federal counterparts. The NYCHRL requires, and the needs of NYCHA tenants with disabilities warrant, an expansion of the services NYCHA provides, far beyond the five percent required by outdated federal guidance and the *Rivera* settlement, which is now over 20 years old.

As we have seen in the non-NYCHA housing context, consistent and aggressive enforcement of anti-discrimination laws allows more people with disabilities to remain in their existing homes. Our office has assisted countless people with disabilities who lived in untenable situations merely because their landlords or managing agents refuse to provide them with legally-required reasonable accommodations. We have spoken to numerous people with mobility impairments, including seniors, who could not safely enter and exit their buildings because their landlord refused to provide a ramp or an elevator key to allow access through an accessible alternative entrance. Other clients with disabilities have been at risk of eviction because their landlord claimed they were “harboring a pet,” when in reality they had a legally-protected service animal that provided them with critical emotional support or physical assistance.

In order to meet the needs of its tenants, NYCHA and New York City must both take further immediate action to address the needs of senior citizens and tenants with disabilities. We implore the Mayor’s Office and the City Council to take steps to match the supply of accessible NYCHA housing to the needs of the public housing population.

About New York Lawyers for the Public Interest

For more than 40 years, NYLPI has been a leader in advocating for marginalized New Yorkers, working to accomplish equality of opportunity for all. We utilize a community lawyering model to bridge gaps between traditional civil legal services and civil rights advocacy, and to fortify capacity for both individual solutions and long-term impact.

Our work encompasses comprehensive organizing, policy campaigns, impact litigation, and individual legal services, and we are guided by the priorities of our communities as we advocate for the rights of people with disabilities, equal access to health care, immigrant opportunity, invigorated local non-profits, and environmental justice for low-income communities and communities of color.

NYLPI’s Disability Justice Program has represented thousands of individuals and triumphed in numerous campaigns improving the lives of New Yorkers with disabilities. We have long fought disability-based discrimination in housing, and our landmark housing victories include access to NYCHA housing for persons with disabilities, as well as ensuring that countless private landlords accommodate their tenants with disabilities.

Ongoing Support from NYLPI

We thank the City Council for convening this important hearing to promote affordable, accessible public housing in New York City. We appreciate the opportunity to provide this written testimony on behalf of our clients with disabilities who seek and deserve equal access to NYCHA's services. Please feel free to contact us at (212) 244-4664 or smendez@nylpi.org.



New York City Council Hearing

Committee on Aging, Committee on Public Housing

April 7, 2021

Subject: Seniors Aging in Place in NYCHA Public Housing During the Covid-19 Pandemic

Testimony: Beth L. Williams, Esq., Deputy Director of Legal Services, Project Guardianship

I am Beth Williams, the Deputy Director of Legal Services for Project Guardianship, formerly a demonstration project of the Vera Institute of Justice. Project Guardianship is a non-profit agency that serves as court-appointed guardian pursuant to Article 81 of the New York State Mental Hygiene Law. In our 15 years of operation, we have served over 500 individuals in New York City for whom a judge has determined their functional limitations necessitate the assistance of a guardian of either person, property, or both.

I have represented many seniors across New York City who reside in NYCHA public housing. Based on my experience, there are two main reasons for seniors to be displaced from their NYCHA homes: 1) decline in health and ability to perform activities of daily living requiring placement in a facility; and 2) termination of the

tenancy and eviction due to recertification, non-payment, or nuisance issues directly related to cognitive decline.

NYCHA has approximately 326 developments, of which only a dozen (12) are naturally occurring retirement homes (NORCs). While the twelve NORCs provide social and medical assistance and recreational opportunities to their senior residents, only a few programs exist for seniors who reside in the other 314 developments, including those designated as senior buildings. These programs aspire to provide visitation services wherein the appropriate agencies would be notified if the visitor determines the senior needs additional assistance. Given the risks associated with spreading Covid-19, I suspect these visitation services have either been suspended in their entirety or drastically modified, in which case NYCHA senior residents are likely not getting the visitation that results in the referrals to the care and help they need.

When a senior does not get the medical assistance and support they need at home, they often decline and end up in a nursing facility. When this happens, unless the senior has a strong advocate with a lot of time and resources, returning home is often an impossible hurdle.

One major barrier to returning home that I have seen is the apartment layout will not accommodate a wheelchair, and often there is insufficient space for a live-in aide. More often than not, requests to NYCHA for reasonable accommodation modifications to the apartment fall on deaf ears, and the alternative to modification,

which is transfer to another apartment that is typically not in the same neighborhood, is the very antithesis of aging in place.

Another impediment has to do with the condition and habitability of the apartment. When evaluating a senior for homecare or an increase in homecare hours, the apartment must be assessed by a managed long-term care (MLTC) provider to determine whether it is safe and habitable before awarding homecare hours through Medicaid. Unfortunately, given the state of many of NYCHA's developments, apartments do not pass the habitability requirements of an MLTC. Again, requests for the necessary repairs, if they are acknowledged, can take months if not years to materialize.

With respect to tenancy termination and evictions, all too often NYCHA senior residents who are suffering from cognitive decline end up unable to manage their recertifications, have difficulty managing their finances, including paying rent on time, and can present with nuisance behaviors (hoarding, paranoia and harassment) that are the result of underlying kinds of dementia. In too many instances, these seniors become victims of elder abuse, e.g., unauthorized occupants move in to their home or a bad character steals funds they otherwise would use to pay rent. While staff at a NORC may be able to recognize these issues and intervene early, oftentimes staff in other developments are not trained to recognize symptoms of cognitive decline or elder abuse in their aging populations and, as a result, tenancies are terminated and evictions proceed. Thus, it is important NYCHA train

its staff and implement safeguards in its policies and procedures for seniors who are struggling with rent, recertification, disturbing behaviors, and exploitation. A good start would be appointing a guardian ad litem by right in any termination proceeding for seniors 60 and older.

Finally, while legal guardianship is not the first line of defense in ensuring seniors age in place in their community homes, Project Guardianship has been very successful in maintaining our clients in the community. I hope NYCHA administration would be open to ongoing trainings of their staff and decision makers on the use of Article 81 guardianship and the role of a legal guardian when there are no family or friends willing or able to provide support to its senior residents.

Thank you to the Councilmembers and the Committees for inviting me to testify at this hearing.



Testimony to the New York City Council's Joint Hearing of the Aging and Public Housing Committees

**Delivered in person on April 7, 2021
by Melissa Sklarz, Senior Governmental Relations Strategist**

On behalf of SAGE and the lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender (LGBT) elders we serve, thank you to the members of the New York City Council's Aging and Public Housing Committees for holding this hearing today and allowing me the opportunity to present testimony. My name is Melissa Sklarz and I am the Senior Government Relations Strategist for SAGE. Founded in 1978 in New York City, SAGE is the country's first and largest organization dedicated to improving the lives of LGBT older people.

Housing is a basic need and one that becomes more crucial as we get older. In New York City, housing challenges are severe. Countless older LGBT people find themselves priced out of the neighborhoods where they have lived for years, due to rising rents and diminishing income. Unless effectively addressed, this crisis among LGBT older people will only worsen, as this population doubles as more out LGBT people age into their retirement years. Research estimates there are between 3- 4 million LGBT older people in the United States and this population will double by 2030 according to a 2016 Williams Institute study. Yet, today, there are only roughly 600 units of LGBT-welcoming affordable housing nationwide. The gap between the need and available housing units is a chasm.

Forty-three years after our founding, SAGE has realized a dream that has been years in the making. With support from the City and New York State, SAGE has opened New York State's very first LGBT welcoming affordable elder housing: Stonewall House, located on the Ingersoll Public Houses campus in Fort Greene, Brooklyn, and Crotona Pride House, located in the Tremont neighborhood in the Bronx.

These buildings offer affordable, LGBT-friendly elder housing and feature ground floor full service SAGE Centers, open to building residents and older people from the local neighborhood. Through these SAGE Centers, SAGE will offer care management and support services for the local elders in the neighborhoods surrounding these buildings.

Opened in December of 2019, Stonewall House, located on NYCHA's Ingersoll Houses campus, is the state's first LGBT-friendly elder housing and the largest LGBT-welcoming elder housing development in the country, and offers 145 affordable apartments, of which 25% house formerly homeless elders. The marquee of Stonewall House is its state-of-the-art street level

SAGE Center that offers LGBT-affirming programming and services. When older adult centers are allowed to open and offer in-person services, the SAGE Center will be open to elder residents in Stonewall House, older people in the local community and elders residing in the neighboring public housing campuses of Ingersoll, Whitman and Farragut Houses.

In the Bronx, SAGE partnered with HELPUSA to build Crotona Pride House in East Tremont. Crotona Pride House offers 83 LGBT welcoming affordable apartments and its ground floor SAGE Center there will be the largest SAGE Center in the city. This development will also house a diverse elder population and 30% of the units will house chronically homeless older people. Although the COVID-19 pandemic delayed the timeline for completion, residents are moving in, as we speak. When older adult centers are allowed to open and offer in-person services, the SAGE Center will be open to elder residents in Crotona Pride House, older people in the local community and throughout the Bronx.

Each of these SAGE Centers will offer life changing and lifesaving services to building residents and elders from the nearby neighborhoods including daily nutritious meals, comprehensive care management and support services.

Service-enriched LGBT friendly housing, like that offered through Crotona Pride House and Stonewall House, is crucial to allow older people to age in place and in community. Aging can be wrought with challenges, including social isolation and diminished income. For LGBT elders, the barriers mount. Many LGBT older people have experienced stigma and discrimination throughout their lives as a direct result of their sexual orientation and/or their gender identity. This affects their financial security and overall well-being. Recent studies show that more than four in ten LGBT Americans over the age of 65 cite financial problems as a major concern. Further 47% report having less than \$10,000 in savings and assets, and 30% are concerned about their housing stability.

Data shows that care management and support services diminish health care costs, both Medicare and Medicaid, and a reduction of the need for ambulatory care. We are proud of our record of service to our elders and these new LGBT friendly elder housing developments will further cement SAGE's reputation as an exemplary care provider for elders. As affordable housing becomes a priority across the nation, SAGE, in partnership with the New York City Council, can show other cities how to ensure that elders can age with dignity and safety.

The need for services and programs for older people has never been more important than during this last year. Like all older adult centers in the City, SAGE has not offered in person congregate programming at our five SAGE Centers since the COVID-19 pandemic forced a shut down of older adult centers in March of 2020. To ensure that the LGBT elders who we serve have access to community and connection, SAGE has reinvented and reimagined our programming to reach and engage LGBT elders. We have pivoted our programs and services to telephonic and virtual formats to ensure that the thousands of LGBT elders who rely on SAGE continue to be engaged and stay connected. From yoga and Spanish classes to discussion groups, SAGE is offering more than 100 virtual SAGE Center programs each week, attracting

hundreds of LGBT elders and allies. In addition to our SAGE Centers' virtual programming, SAGE is offering ongoing virtual and telephonic meetings, support groups, financial support services, and programs through our SAGE Positive and SAGEVets initiatives.

SAGE has also launched brand new virtual programs and initiatives. One of our new programs is SAGECents, a financial wellness app developed specifically for LGBT elders, to improve LGBT elders' financial stability and reduce economic stress, in these uncertain times. SAGE also launched SAGEConnect, a national virtual program that matches volunteers with LGBT elders to combat social isolation. To date, we've connected nearly 500 LGBT older people from across the country— including hundreds from across New York State—with volunteers.

All of these virtual initiatives are only effective if LGBT older people have the technology to access them. Older adult centers need funding to purchase and distribute technology to older New Yorkers so they can remain at home with the necessary technology and internet speed to participate in virtual programs and services.

SAGE is hopeful that the Council and the Department of the Aging will partner with providers to help increase access to technology among our City's older people. One potential bridge for the digital divide is the bulk purchase of technology for our city's elders, ensuring access and connection for older people including those most marginalized like LGBTQ elders. Although New York City benefits from many standout programs and services for older adults, too many of do not adequately address what older New Yorkers want and need today, especially in the midst of a global pandemic. Changing this needs to be a key a priority for the City, which can do so by allowing flexibility and encouraging service providers to experiment with new models and approaches, including virtual program and service delivery, in procurement processes.

Further, New York needs better broadband and wifi access in public housing. In fact, last year, the Mayor committed to spending \$157 million in ending digital redlining and providing high-speed internet to those who need it most. This investment will extend new internet service options to 600,000 underserved New Yorkers, including 200,000 NYCHA residents over the next 18 months. This approach will create a path to universal broadband across New York City. Older adult centers must be included in this plan to ensure that older people can access the internet and engage in services and programs.

Thank you for the opportunity to testify. SAGE deeply values our partnership with the Council – your support continues to be greatly valued and appreciated. We look forward to working together to ensure that our LGBT elder pioneers can attain housing, access technology, engage in services and programs so that all older New Yorkers can age with dignity and respect.



**Testimony of United Neighborhood Houses
Before the New York City Council Committees on Aging and Public Housing
Council Member Margaret Chin, Chair, Aging
Council Member Alicka Ampry-Samuel, Chair, Public Housing**

Oversight – Seniors Aging in Place in NYCHA During a Pandemic

**Submitted by Tara Klein, Senior Policy Analyst
April 7, 2021**

Thank you for hosting today's important hearing on seniors aging in place in NYCHA during a pandemic. United Neighborhood Houses (UNH) is a policy and social change organization representing 44 neighborhood settlement houses, including 40 in New York City, that reach over 765,000 New Yorkers from all walks of life. A progressive leader for more than 100 years, UNH is stewarding a new era for New York's settlement house movement. We mobilize our members and their communities to advocate for good public policies and promote strong organizations and practices that keep neighborhoods resilient and thriving for all New Yorkers.

UNH members provide a wide variety of services to over 80,000 older New Yorkers each year by operating programs such as senior centers, Naturally Occurring Retirement Communities (NORCs), home delivered meals, case management, home care, geriatric mental health, and others, often funded by New York City's Department for the Aging (DFTA) and the City Council. Of the nearly 120 NYCHA-based sites run by settlement houses, 30 of these leverage DFTA funds to serve older New Yorkers within NYCHA developments, and countless more settlement house sites serve nearby older NYCHA residents. UNH and its settlement house members employ the philosophy that older adults are valued members of our neighborhoods, whose wisdom and experience are important to the fabric of our communities.

Older adults are the age group most vulnerable to COVID-19, and settlement houses have been on the frontlines in meeting their emergency needs. Settlement house programs provide older people with food via home delivered meals programs, referring and signing people up for GetFood NYC deliveries, and partnering with private sources as well as NYCHA to coordinate free food deliveries in buildings. They assist older adults in accessing financial benefits through one-on-one case assistance, and provide mental health supports through senior centers and NORCs. They have also been providing older adults with access to COVID-19 tests and vaccines – through referrals, serving as NYC direct enrollers for vaccine appointments, and by hosting their own testing and vaccination sites in partnership with the State and City.

Settlement houses also provide numerous virtual activities to reduce social isolation among older adults. Through a DFTA-NYCHA partnership, the City successfully distributed tablets to older adults living in NYCHA developments to allow them to access these activities. This effort must be expanded through this year's budget to allow more older New Yorkers access to devices, WiFi, and training. Additionally, funding for technology infrastructure must be made available to senior centers and NORCs themselves to assist them in building out their virtual programming, the need for which does not appear to be going away.

To strengthen these critical programs for pandemic response and beyond, the City must adopt the FY 2022 aging budget priorities put forth by UNH and other advocates, including fully funding the senior center "model budget" with \$10 million that is owed, investing \$16.6 million into the home delivered meals program, \$1.7 million for NORC salary parity, \$2.86 million in Council funding to expand the Geriatric Mental Health Initiative, a significant investment into technology for older adults and the nonprofits that serve them, fully funding the Indirect Cost Rate Initiative, and a restoration of all Council discretionary and one-year Administration funding.

For older adults with mobility issues living in NYCHA developments, the on-site programming offered by settlement houses and other social service providers is especially valuable – particularly given the increased challenges to mobility presented by the pandemic. However, due to NYCHA's tremendous capital repair backlog, the on-site centers in NYCHA developments are plagued by day-to-day maintenance challenges that make it difficult to keep centers safe for community members.

UNH strongly supports Intro 1827 by Council Member Ampry-Samuel to add a staff member at DFTA who is dedicated to supporting aging services in NYCHA developments. UNH has long been calling for this reform – the position previously existed and settlement houses have indicated that this staff position was enormously helpful in troubleshooting repair needs and other interagency issues that may arise. A similar position exists at the Department of Youth and Community Development (DYCD), and Cornerstone contractors have found that the existence of an internal inter-agency advocate is extremely helpful, especially for moving along repairs.

Given the capital repair backlog across NYCHA's portfolio – the result of long-term federal divestment from public housing – NYCHA's buildings, and the community centers in them, have been plagued by a litany of issues: Peeling paint risks exposure to lead and must be immediately remediated, leaks create constant need for new ceiling and floor tiles, and plumbing challenges require constant attention. Though NYCHA, as the landlord, is technically responsible for addressing these issues, the reality is that due to backlogs, they are slow to respond to any non-emergency repair requests, forcing the nonprofits that run these centers to divert scarce time and resources to advocating to NYCHA for maintenance work or risk facing an onslaught of fines and citations from the City's regulatory agencies that regularly inspect these spaces.

Everything from plumbing, fire extinguisher maintenance, repairs to kitchen equipment, and electrical work has become a major challenge for the nonprofit human services contractor, who must choose between footing the bill for repairs without any resources to help them do so, or spending countless hours on the phone with or e-mailing an ever-growing list of NYCHA contacts in an attempt to move repairs forward. A NYCHA-liaison position at DFTA could help providers advocate to NYCHA for much-needed repairs.

We also support Intro 415 by Council Member Chin requiring NYCHA to report annually on senior centers within NYCHA buildings, which will help the City better understand how these centers are utilized. This will be particularly useful as the City continues to make decisions around closing or consolidating severely underutilized NYCHA senior centers, as happened two years ago and led to a budget fight to “save” several centers that were critical to neighbors.

Finally, **UNH continues to urge DFTA to delay its pending procurement for Older Adult Centers.** In addition to several budgetary concerns, there is a large degree of uncertainty around the future of in-person senior center programming as centers remain physically closed and it is unknown what services will look like in the future. Given the fact that this procurement envisions the system for the next three years with an option to extend for three additional years this seems short-sighted. Further, there is a very real need for the aging services network to give full attention to vaccinating older adults and planning the transition to in-person services right now, stymieing the potential for creative approaches to apply for an RFP. We strongly believe that this is not the time to proceed with this procurement.

Thank you. To follow up, please contact me at tklein@unhny.org.



NEW YORK CITY COUNCIL COMMITTEES ON AGING AND PUBLIC HOUSING
Wednesday, April 7, 2021, 10:00 a.m.

SUBJECT: Oversight - Seniors aging in place in NYCHA during a pandemic.

Good morning. My name is Peter Kempner. I am the Legal Director and Elderly Project Director at Volunteers of Legal Service (VOLS). Thank you, Chair Chin, Chair Ampry-Samuel, and the members of the Committees for holding this important hearing.

Prior to the pandemic related shutdowns, the VOLS Elderly Project conducted over a dozen monthly legal clinics at New York City senior centers. Some of these legal clinics were held at senior centers located in New York City Housing Authority (NYCHA) developments. We targeted these senior centers to ensure that we are reaching seniors who need our services the most. Over the course of the last year, we have shifted to a remote delivery model but are looking forward to the day sometime soon when we can resume our in-person clinics safely.

It is one of our goals to make certain that New York City seniors living on fixed incomes and residing in NYCHA apartment are protected from displacement. Most cannot afford to rent apartments in the private market and alternative forms of affordable housing are tragically scarce. The stability seniors find in their NYCHA tenancies may be all that separates them from homelessness and the city's shelter system. We recognize this as a legal services provider and our objective is to equip these seniors with some tools that may help them achieve long term stability.

The core work that the VOLS Elderly Project does is the drafting and execution of life planning documents which include Last Wills and Testaments, Powers of Attorney, Health Care Proxies, Living Wills and other advance directives. We help ensure that our clients have the right plan in place in the event of incapacity or death. In addition to this primary work, the VOLS Elderly Project also provides representation and advocacy on housing issues, benefits access, and other legal issues seniors face. We serve clients with incomes up to 200% of the Federal Poverty Level, a universe of 541,000 older New Yorkers.

The critical documents we draft for our clients make certain that their wishes are clear and are carried out by the people they love and trust the most. They also ensure that seniors can live in the community for as long as possible and help to avoid costly and intrusive legal proceedings like guardianships. These documents enable older New Yorkers to maintain income, avoid homelessness, they safeguard that dying wishes are fulfilled, and ensure caregivers can provide the needed support to access health care services so they age in place with dignity and respect.

The devastating impact of the pandemic on vulnerable seniors, who have suffered 80% of the COVID-related deaths in New York City, has only reinforced the urgency and importance of planning for disability and end of life. Sadly, too few seniors have properly planned for the future. Among the U.S. population, it is estimated that only one-third have completed an advance directive. Many low-income seniors think that because they do not have resources or wealth to pass on to the next generation, they do not need to have advance directives in place. They are wrong.

There are many examples of why low-income seniors experiencing cognitive or physical decline would need to have the right documents in place to stabilize their lives. A senior who has executed a Power of Attorney authorizes their agent to seek government benefits to pay for housing costs, to sign leases, to do their annual recertification for their NYCHA tenancy, and to deal with any issue that may arise with their apartment. Without this tool a caregiver may find themselves powerless and the senior at risk of eviction because rent is not being paid and NYCHA recertifications lapsed. The agent can also apply for Medicaid benefits to access homecare services to allow the senior to stay in their home instead of being placed in a nursing facility.

Sadly, we have encountered unnecessary and illegal barriers put in place by NYCHA which have hindered seniors and their agents who have properly planned. We recently assisted a senior who had risen to the top of the NYCHA transfer list, and an apartment was made available for her to move. When the time came to sign the transfer documents she was hospitalized and could not appear in the management office to sign her paperwork. She had a Power of Attorney in place and her agent attempted to sign the paperwork on her behalf. NYCHA refused to allow the agent to sign, insisting that the paperwork be brought to the tenant's hospital bedside. Unfortunately, this was next to impossible because the pandemic had shut the hospital down to outside visitors. When we reached out to the NYCHA legal department to assist this client they pointed us to a provision in the NYCHA Standard Procedures Manual that stated that only tenants who have "lost mental capacity" may have their agent under a Power of Attorney sign documents on their behalf.¹ This NYCHA policy, memorialized in their Manual, not only violates New York State Law which requires government agencies to honor properly executed Powers of Attorney regardless of the capacity of the principal, but also fails to recognize the needs of many seniors who may be of sound mind but physically frail. Fortunately, the agent was able to get these documents to the tenant's hospital room through great determination. Had NYCHA followed state law and taken a practical approach to accommodating this disabled senior, the agent's extraordinary actions would have been unnecessary.

Our hope is that the oversight being conducted today by your two Committees, and the actions outlined in Int 0415-2018 and Int 1827-2019 will bring to light many of the issues that plague seniors living in NYCHA developments. Cooperation between the New York City Department for the Aging and NYCHA as well as the transparency that is brought by annual reporting on seniors residing in NYCHA developments can only serve to better the lives of the seniors living in and seeking services through NYCHA.

Thank you for allowing us to submit this testimony and for supporting our work with New York City seniors.

Peter Kempner, Esq.
Volunteers of Legal Service
Legal Director and Elderly Project Director

¹ NYCHA Standard Procedures Manual, Attachment C

https://nancyebailey.com/2021/03/15/questions-about-the-aft-and-neas-learning-after-covid-vision/?utm_campaign=shareaholic&utm_medium=linkedin&utm_source=socialnetwork

Questions About The AFT and NEA's "Learning After Covid Vision"

March 15, 2021 By [Nancy Bailey](#) [7 Comments](#)

Teachers are the most important individuals in a child's schooling, and during the pandemic, they have gone above and beyond to reach out to students.

AFT President Randi Weingarten and NEA's Becky Pringle are to be commended for speaking out about Covid-19 in support of student and teacher safety. The teachers' unions have been criticized unfairly for trying to do what's right for the safety of students and teachers.

But why does their new post-Covid-19 guide tip a hat towards nonprofits and groups that are not friendly to teachers and public education?

How exactly will schools change after Covid-19? Are teachers aware of the union connections and what they mean by words like restructuring schools? Is it about online learning? How involved will teachers be in that restructuring process and is it for the betterment of students?

[Learning Beyond Covid: A Vision for Thriving in Public Education](#) at first glance might seem positive and it makes some good points. But many of the links raise questions. Why are the teachers' unions highlighting these groups?

The Aspen Institute and Social-Emotional Learning

The Aspen Institute has always been about privatizing public education, highlighting [charter schools](#), and [promoting school choice](#) with Education Reform Now and ExcelinEd.

The cited Aspen paper here has to do with social-emotional learning (p. 5). There's much student well-being talk which is expected after what students

have gone through with the pandemic. But social-emotional learning was controversial before the pandemic.

The same questions remain. When does the student behavioral data collected online become intrusive? Who is privy to this information? How will it be used?

Aspen is mentioned also referencing their [Climate Play](#) which they co-wrote with ExcelinEd.

Here are the [primary funders of the Aspen Institute](#).

New Hampshire Department of Education Highlighting PACE, a Competency-Based Program

PACE has been criticized for being online outcomes-based instruction connected to Common Core State Standards. Here's the [article](#) about it connected to the Christensen Institute, which is all about disruption with online learning.

Beware especially of the conversion of high-stakes standardized testing to the [online assessment](#) for which CBE is known. Why is the union highlighting this form of assessment (p. 6)?

Teacher Residencies

The unions want teachers “profession ready” and they promote Teacher Residencies, specifically noting San Francisco and Seattle as the way to make teachers (p. 13). But these [alternative programs](#) are much like Teach for America, promoting *service* more than choosing teaching as a profession.

The Community Schools Playbook

The idea of community schools has gained popularity, and schools that bring people together who care deeply about students and their needs are important. Questions have to do with the [emphasis on partners](#) and whether they take over the public's ownership of their schools.

What do they mean by [deeper assessment](#)? Where does the teacher fit in a thriving ecosystem? How are teachers empowered with [Battelle for Kids](#)?

It's critical that children get good health care. No child can be expected to learn if they are unwell. Schools have always included some health screenings. But if schools become the dominant place for health care to occur because children have no other access to it, what happens to the school?

Are they truly community schools if outside corporations or individuals take control? The school board is critical to democratic public schools. Partners may facilitate this process or they may end it.

If outside entities take over the school, isn't like another charter school?

The unions have connected with The Community Schools Playbook (p. 14) and they highlight Partnership for Community Schools. [Scroll through the groups here.](#)

There are some good groups here. But **Teach Plus, Education Reimagined, Remake Learning, Big Picture Learning, Consortium for Educational Change, Nellie Mae Education Foundation, The Alliance to Remake Schools**, are about changing schools to emphasize technology.

Where do teachers fit?

The Center on Great Teachers & Learners from The American Institutes for Research (AIR)

The [self-assessment tool highlighted](#) here (p.19) for teachers might have some good suggestions, social-emotional learning tool for teachers, but it comes from a group that is part of AIR which has a long list of [clients](#) including the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation, The Education Trust, AT&T, and universities and school districts, and more.

The real clients in public schools are the children, but even then, the word clients is a business word that doesn't seem to fit.

Learning Forward

[Learning Forward](#) is mentioned as promoting teacher growth, but they include the **Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation, American Express, Get It Right: Common Sense on the Common Core campaign from the Learning First Alliance, Teach to Lead**, and many more groups that are about school privatization.

Has there been a miraculous change since the pandemic? Have these organizations, most of them funded and supported by the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation, changed their stance about public schools? Are they now in tune with the democratic foundation of what makes a public school?

Where do teachers stand when it comes to schools after Covid-19?

Joseph Mugivan
j.mugivan@yahoo.com

It might help the discussion if we always kept in mind the “who makes decisions” question. Schools themselves have perhaps never been experienced as mini democracies by staff, students or families. In a daily living sense they are formally top down dictatorships except for some benign dictatorships that at least FEEL democratic.
The best way to teach it is by practicing it

Deborah Meier
<deborahmeier@me.com>
Sent from my iPhone

On Apr 1, 2021, at 9:05 PM, Joseph Mugivan <j.mugivan@yahoo.com> wrote:

https://nancyebailey.com/2021/03/15/questions-about-the-aft-and-neas-learning-after-covid-vision/?utm_campaign=shareaholic&utm_medium=linkedin&utm_source=socialnetwork

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