



**TESTIMONY**

Presented by

**Lorraine Cortés-Vázquez  
Commissioner**

on

**FY 2021 Executive Budget**

before the

**New York City Council  
Committee on Aging & Committee on Finance**

on

**Thursday, May 14, 2020  
1:30 P.M.**

Good afternoon, Chair Chin, Chair Dromm, and members of the Aging and Finance Committees. I am Lorraine Cortés-Vázquez, Commissioner of the New York City Department for the Aging (DFTA). I am joined this afternoon by Jose Mercado, our Chief Financial Officer, in what seems to be our new norm via virtual conferencing. I hope that during this time you and your families are doing well and are in good health. I thank you for this opportunity to discuss DFTA's Executive Budget for Fiscal Year 2021.

### **COVID-19 RESPONSE**

During this unprecedented crisis, the Department for the Aging continued to boldly carry out its mission to ensure the high-quality of life and well-being of older New Yorkers. Our priorities were clear and are even more critical during this public health crisis: combating food insecurity among older New Yorkers, maintaining social engagement for thousands of older adults who regularly attended our senior centers, and ensuring uninterrupted access to case management services and traditional home delivered meals.

When senior centers closed, we worked to quickly transition our operations to ensure that a daily meal continued to get into the hands of our senior center members. During the pandemic, our congregate meal system initially shifted into a “grab-and-go” model and then to a direct meal delivery system (DFTA Direct) that has since merged with the city's broader food insecurity initiative, GetFoodNYC. The transition from the “grab-and-go” congregate meals to direct delivery meals is our agency's response to follow the guidance of DOHMH: to ensure that older New Yorkers, especially those with underlying health conditions and limited economic resources, are able to access food while they remain safely at home. I want to thank

our Food Czar, Commissioner Kathryn Garcia, for expanding and enhancing the older adult direct delivery food program (DFTA Direct) beyond the 44,000 who received more than 1.2 million meals since March 16th. Mayor de Blasio asserted that no New Yorker would go hungry and the Administration is working tirelessly to meet this commitment every day.

I am also pleased to report that all Department for the Aging programs providing educational, recreational and social services have shifted to virtual programming, continuing engagement and contact with participants through various outlets while they are staying at home. Senior centers are offering exercise classes, art workshops, Zoom chat sessions, and other services. The geriatric mental health programs continue via telephonic outreach. Other DFTA programs that are available telephonically or virtually include caregiver support services, case management, and Health Insurance Information, Counseling, and Assistance Program webinars. DFTA's Friendly Visiting program, which pairs older adults with volunteers for weekly visits, has also transitioned from in-person visits to telephone calls conducted two to three times a week, maintaining social connections that the program has built. Prior to the pandemic, approximately 800 friendly-visiting volunteers engaged older adults across the city. Now, thanks to partnerships with the Department of Health and Mental Hygiene (DOHMH), NYC Services, and NY Cares, the program now boasts nearly 1,000 friendly visitors. The Friendly Visiting program continues to accept and recruit new volunteers. Anyone interested in participating in the program can contact DFTA's Aging Connect at 212-AGING-NYC.

While DFTA continues to work closely with our sister agencies to implement innovative approaches to provide uninterrupted services for older adults, we also work hand-in-hand with our network of dedicated service providers. Senior center staff, for instance, continue to engage center members through daily wellness calls

to help counter the negative effects of social isolation. During these calls, members can learn about the many programs that continue to be available during this crisis. Since the closing of congregate centers, over 150,000 reassurance calls have been made to senior center participants.

Since the onset of the pandemic earlier this year, DFTA—including its Office of Emergency Preparedness—activated immediate action. As we prepared to address food insecurity among the older adults served through our network, parallel work went into our equally important social engagement efforts. Because older adults are among the most susceptible to the virus, DFTA will continue to closely monitor the evolving situation and will pivot our efforts, refocus our attention and shift our priorities as needed.

## **BUDGET OVERVIEW**

All of this brings me to the reason why I am here before you today. The FY '21 Executive Budget projects \$386 million in funding, which includes allocations of \$173 million to support senior centers, \$41.8 million for home delivered meals, \$38.1 million for case management, \$34.4 million to support home care for homebound seniors who are not Medicaid eligible, \$6.2 million for NORC programs, and \$8.1 million for caregiver services.

Given the uncertain long-term and short-term impacts of COVID-19, including economic challenges as we move toward FY '21, the current climate has brought about a rethinking of the priorities previously outlined in our preliminary budget hearing. For instance, as previously stated, model budget funding was to commence at the start of FY '21. The unexpected public health emergency has compelled us to reassess certain plans and priorities. While this particular funding remains a

commitment of ours, the Administration will continue to closely monitor the still evolving pandemic and its impacts and implications to these priorities.

## **HOME DELIVERED MEALS FOR SENIORS**

Now, I would like to take this opportunity to talk about meals for seniors. As you are aware, DFTA normally runs both the congregate meal program at senior centers and also the Home Delivered Meals (HDM) program through our case management agencies. The City is now offering a broad suite of food services through the GetFoodNYC program run by my colleague, and NYC's COVID-19 Food Czar, Commissioner Garcia. I am working closely with the Food Czar to make sure that DFTA's congregate meals program includes feeding food insecure older New Yorkers. The COVID-19 crisis created a moment - not historically seen - which required immediately setting up new and dynamic ways to feed seniors. Despite the complexity of the task, we served over 40,000 seniors weekly while operating our direct meal delivery program, and have since then continued to support the GetFoodNYC program as it absorbed the responsibility of feeding older New Yorkers. As the situation continues to evolve, so too will our responses, and the lessons learned during this period will only help us to improve how we serve older adults going forward.

The home delivered meals program continues to be administered by DFTA. Not only do HDMs provide sustenance to homebound older adults across the five boroughs, but certain standards are required and apply to all DFTA-funded case management programs. Case management agencies help older adults with functional impairments gain access to appropriate services, benefits and entitlements needed to age safely at home and maintain their quality of life. Case management begins with identifying the client's needs and capabilities through intake, followed by a more comprehensive

strength-based in-home initial assessment and regular reassessments. Our case management program continues to operate remotely for our clients and are available for new eligible clients to sign-up.

The assessment includes financial assessment of clients who need home care, and, when permitted by the client, financial assessment to determine eligibility for city, state and federal benefits and entitlements. Prior to COVID-19, there was already an increase in homebound older adults receiving a home delivered meal. In fact, last year there was a record total of nearly 4,555,000 HDM meals delivered. Clearly, the utilization demonstrates how critical the program is for older adults throughout the city. In addition to HDM, there is also an increased demand for other in-home services such as home care and housekeeping as fewer older adults are able to perform daily living activities and needs during this crisis.

As indicated in my testimony on the FY '21 Preliminary Budget, the HDM Request for Proposal (RFP) that DFTA issued this past January intends to fund providers to address the most critical overarching goals of the HDM program, including increasing meal options for recipients, embracing the diversity of our city by increasing the availability of culturally aligned meals, and promoting uniformly high-quality meals made from healthy and nutritious food. We continue to place great emphasis on ensuring food procured meets the Good Food Purchasing guidelines set forth by the Mayor's Office of Food Policy and fosters great collaboration within the network, as well as the choice, diversity and quality of food provided.

DFTA's postponement of the HDM RFP submissions deadline was not only prudent, it was necessary, given the challenges faced not only by our providers, but by the entire citywide network of health and human services organizations due to COVID-

19. This RFP in particular is important as it allows us to improve on the quality and choice that older adults have in terms of HDM service, a key point even during this time of pandemic response. Delaying the RFP process also offered bidders the added benefit of more time to form group purchasing collaboratives and other innovative approaches that are encouraged in the RFP. Again, in light of fiscal challenges due to this public health emergency and its uncertain long-term impact, DFTA will continue to work with OMB regarding the Council’s request for increased funding for the HDM program. We have, however, committed to extending once again the proposal deadline for the RFP to June 1, 2020, which amounts to a total of 13 additional weeks from the original deadline.

## **CONCLUSION**

While we have a challenging road ahead of us and the ongoing response to this pandemic requires fiscal prudence, we will continue to provide essential services to older New Yorkers in the face of these unprecedented circumstances. We will keep adapting and employing new technologies and other modes of communication to accomplish our mission. DFTA will continue to work to eliminate ageism, ensure the dignity and quality of life for New York City’s diverse older adults, and support their caregivers through service, advocacy, and education.

We cannot accomplish any of this work without the partnership of the Council, and the effective advocacy of stakeholders, our service providers, and lastly—and most importantly—older adults themselves.