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Gale A. Brewer, Borough President

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Testimony before the NYC Council Committee on Aging
September 21, 2020
Oversight - The Future of Senior Centers (Older Adult Centers) after
COVID-19

I am Manhattan Borough President Gale Brewer. I thank Margaret Chin, Chair, Aging Committee, and committee members for the opportunity to submit testimony on the future of senior centers after COVID-19.

I hope I convey that more than ever this is the time to support the centers and not make drastic changes to their programs.

During the entire time of the pandemic, we worked with the staff of the City's senior centers, NORCs, settlement houses and advocates, especially LiveOn New York. I appreciate their dedication in the face of unprecedented challenges, and their perseverance throughout transitions and changes to senior services. I also thank Shula Warren Puder, Director of Policy, MBPO, who was in constant contact with senior advocates, and has saved lives as a result.

These organizations and their staff members are ESSENTIAL, a lifeline to basic needs, a comfort from isolation, fearless in advocacy, and innovators in engagement through technology, the arts, conversation and movement.

Consider this recent data. The 2019 American Community Survey (ACS) 1-Year Data Release, based on the 2010 Census, was released last week. According to the ACS, there are 276,603 adults who are 65 years or older in the borough of Manhattan. Citywide, the total is 1,281,194.

The New York City Department of Health confirms we have officially lost 14,104 New Yorkers 65 years and older, and probably an additional 3,481 due to COVID-19.

Despite these sobering facts, we all owe a debt of gratitude to DFTA Commissioner Lorraine Cortés-Vázquez and her staff. Now we must turn our attention to the recent Older Adult Center Concept Paper, which includes a planned fall 2020 RFP release and proposed contract period starting FY21 through FY23. There is helpful information in the paper, and I am committed to working together to ensure that New York City continues to be a healthy and great place to age. However, with so many unknowns about the pandemic remaining, I have concerns about releasing the RFP at this time.

Six months into this pandemic, even with the current infection rate at an all-time low, some issues are: 1. When will public health guidance recommend the reopening of in-person senior center programming? 2. When will older adults be comfortable in returning? 3. Are we prepared for a second wave of transmission?

There are outstanding needs that require focus now. Senior centers remain at the forefront of City initiatives to address food access and combat social isolation through wellness checks and remote programming. While the efforts to address these needs have been impressive, we know many older adults are still food insecure and others do not have access to tablet computers, affordable broadband, or lack of comfort in using digital devices and programs.

I strongly recommend that the Older Adult Center RFP be delayed. Instead we should embrace and tweak the current policies and garner the resources that are needed now by older adults, caregivers, and non-profit organizations.

Access to healthy, fresh, and local food for vulnerable and low-income populations is the most pressing nutritional issue New Yorkers face. Food access is a cornerstone of my office's age-friendly initiative. In partnership with Chair Chin and other local officials, we have worked for years to ensure that congregate and home delivered meals are fresh, delicious, healthy and offer seniors choice - including menus that are religiously and culturally appropriate. Before COVID, we sponsored the Fresh Food for Seniors program, bringing food from the GrowNYC farmers to seniors in Manhattan. This program is beloved.

During the pandemic, these efforts have included improving the City's GetFoodNYC program content, delivery, and oversight systems to better serve older and homebound adults. I am glad to see continuing improvements in the City food programs that have transitioned several times in the midst of a difficult situation. But quality control and access must be maintained so that we don't return to the chaotic stress of the spring. Older adults still need assistance and sustenance, especially with the approach of flu season and the ongoing virus health vulnerability concerns.

A pilot program allowing interested senior centers to offer Grab and Go meals should be considered if agencies are reimbursed in the same way that food service businesses are paid in the current DSNY contracts.

This point is worth emphasizing. We need to fully fund the older adult services that we know are essential today and those that are needed next year. The recent cuts by the Administration to the Indirect Cost Rate Funding Initiative are inequitable, especially to organizations serving older adults. This inaction to fulfill current financial commitments to nonprofits, coupled with the City's dim fiscal outlook, is another reason to delay the Older Adult Center RFP. I organized a letter from all 5 Borough Presidents to the Mayor demanding that this indirect cost issue be addressed immediately.

Human service agencies are actively addressing food access, housing insecurity, and use of technology and connectivity. These remote and facility-based services require a foundation of support staff and budgets that match operating costs. Yet it is my understanding that DFTA contracts are slated to receive only 60% of their indirect rate, and only for several months of their FY20 contract. While no clear guidance has been issued, many anticipate a similar funding rate

for a limited number of months of the FY21 contracts, as DFTA did not receive funds to fill the gap.

It is clear to me that with so many challenges for the centers, including uncertainty about contracts, food distribution and technology, the RFP should be delayed. We do need to fully fund the services so that New York City continues to be a great place to age.