



**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
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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.