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**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: Senior Services and Centers in NYCHA

**Presented by Tara Klein, Policy Analyst
December 5, 2018**

Thank you for convening today's hearing. My name is Tara Klein, and I am a Policy Analyst at United Neighborhood Houses (UNH). UNH is New York's association of settlement houses whose membership includes 40 New York City settlement houses and two upstate affiliate members who collectively reach more than 765,000 people across all ages at over 680 sites throughout the city.

UNH members provide a wide variety of services to support older adults, including 19 members who operate 39 senior centers which serve nearly 40,000 New Yorkers annually. Many of the centers are integrated into New York City Housing Authority (NYCHA) sites, helping to build community and providing vital services to enhance the health and well-being of older residents. These senior centers serve as essential gathering spaces for older adults of varying ages and abilities, offering daily meals, a wide range of activities, and a natural antidote for social isolation.

The Need for Repairs and Renovations

Unfortunately, many of the City's senior centers located within NYCHA facilities and operated by the Department for the Aging (DFTA) are in need of serious repairs. Reports of leaking roofs, dilapidated kitchen appliances, and broken air conditioners – many also designated as official NYC cooling centers – are all too common. Internal heating, plumbing, and electrical systems often need major overhauls. Many of these centers are located in decades-old buildings, which tends to make these challenges more frequent and extreme. It was recently reported that NYCHA needs \$500 million for repairs to its senior and community centers.¹ In the context of NYCHA's broader repair needs – reportedly at \$32 billion – the upkeep of senior centers in NYCHA facilities run by community-based organizations has become a back-burner priority, leaving many centers in need of basic facilities and maintenance resources. Distressingly, conditions continue to deteriorate with no clear plan for remediation.

¹ <https://therealdeal.com/2018/09/28/add-it-to-the-list-nycha-needs-500m-for-senior-housing-community-center-repairs/>

Unsurprisingly, poor building conditions have a direct negative impact on attendance at senior centers. Older adults prefer not to spend their time in a building that is in disrepair. If the City is serious about building a robust network of senior services that supports its public housing residents, it must turn its attention to the infrastructure needs of its buildings.

Funding Challenges

Given NYCHA's capital repair backlog for its overall building stock, providers, who used to rely on the agency to make repairs, have been forced to look for other solutions to their pressing repair needs. Because funding for repairs and renovations are generally not included in DFTA senior center contracts, programs must secure funding outside of the regular contract process. This can be time-consuming and confusing, especially as many projects arise as emergencies. There is not a clear amount of money in DFTA's expense budget for repairs, as was reported during the October 2018 Aging Committee hearing on senior center repairs, so it difficult to assert whether this funding level is sufficient. As a result, in practice, many programs cover costs through their own limited budgets or private philanthropic sources, or put off repairs until the City can produce funding, which can affect a center's overall programming. DFTA can be inconsistent with their criteria for reimbursing providers for repairs they pay for out of pocket, if DFTA is willing to reimburse at all, while other agencies like DYCD have procedures for reimbursing for emergency repairs.

Approval Process

Even when the senior center providers are able to procure the necessary funding to make needed repairs, NYCHA's approval protocol can prevent them from moving forward with projects for weeks, months, or in some cases, years. Requests wind through NYCHA's approval process while capital dollars sit unused and conditions worsen. To make matters worse, there is a lack of internal coordination in NYCHA between the residential repair department and those who are responsible for repairs at senior centers. Consequently, when a leak originates from a residential apartment, UNH members spend thousands of dollars—often their own, privately-raised funds—replacing ceilings, floors, and walls only to have the same area flood again because the leak in the toilet or shower upstairs was never actually repaired.

Ultimately, programs are faced with an impossible choice: Work with the beleaguered housing authority, find the money somewhere in their own budgets, or, far too often, put off critical repairs. Providers have been known to wait more than a year for severe issues such as leaking pipes and cracked ceilings to be addressed. For example, the senior center located at Hernandez Houses, operated by University Settlement, experienced a leak that effectively caused a small waterfall to develop on a wall. While NYCHA representatives were responsive and came out to investigate the problem, and DFTA was supportive in ensuring the appropriate communication was occurring, NYCHA was very slow to provide skilled laborers to repair the problem. The program – and older adults – waited many months until plumbers arrived to break the wall and do asbestos abatement. However, the leak soon returned and the process had to begin again.

The City Fining Itself

In addition to interrupting services for older adults, waiting for repairs exposes providers to possible fines from the City's oversight authorities. A common experience is a senior center requesting a repair from NYCHA, and while awaiting the work to commence, receiving a citation or fine from a different City agency such as the Department of Health and Mental Hygiene

(DOHMH) or Fire Department of New York (FDNY). For example, the E. Roberts Moore Senior Center, operated by BronxWorks and located in a NYCHA building, submitted a ticket to NYCHA to repair a crack in the wall. While waiting for NYCHA to respond and make the repair, the DFTA program officer issued a citation for the crack, despite seeing the repair ticket. In these types of cases, the City is in effect fining itself.

Recommendations

UNH is here today with our colleagues from the Day Care Council of New York (DCCNY) and LiveOn NY to recommend reforms—including re-directing fines, improved inter-agency cooperation, and a streamlined process for repair approval—that would provide relief to the community-based organizations that operate senior centers, as well as other community facilities that face similar challenges like day care centers. We acknowledge the difficult financial position NYCHA faces after years of government divestment, and we have assembled the following recommendations that could be implemented without adding stress to NYCHA’s current financial situation:

- **Re-direct Fines** – 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, FDNY, or other City agencies due to NYCHA’s failure to make those repairs. When violations are found during inspections—if these violations have already been reported to NYCHA by the provider—the provider should not be penalized, a citation should be directed to NYCHA instead.
- **Mandate Inter-agency Cooperation** – NYCHA and the agencies that leverage their space, including DFTA, ACS, DYCD, and DOE, need a clear division of responsibilities for the maintenance and upkeep of NYCHA sites. In order to provide stability to providers, this division of responsibility, once established and agreed upon, should be standardized as appropriate across all agencies that fund providers operating out of NYCHA properties. One key strategy that should be standardized is a NYCHA liaison staff member at each agency, which DFTA has had in the past but no longer maintains.
- **Design an Approval Process for Repairs** – NYCHA must work internally and with providers to accelerate approval for repairs and renovations and must expedite processes with the residential repair division when floods, leaks, or other issues originate in apartments and require a two-pronged repair to fully address.

In addition, UNH recommends increasing the amount of money the City makes available for senior center repairs and upgrades. Senior centers should be eligible whether or not they are located in NYCHA buildings. This should happen in two key ways:

- First, DFTA should establish a dedicated fund for major capital projects at senior centers to support large-scale repairs and renovations.
- City rules for capital funding require that a project have a minimum value of \$35,000 and a period of usefulness of at least five years. While this is beneficial for major projects at senior centers, many repairs and upgrades cost less than \$35,000, and funds must be made available. To fund repairs for this large array of smaller-scale projects, the City Council should establish a separate, flexible discretionary fund for senior center repairs.

Thank you for your time. For questions, I can be contacted at 917-484-9326 or tklein@unhny.org.