



**Testimony of United Neighborhood Houses
Before the New York City Council
Committees on Aging and Mental Health, Disabilities and Addiction**

**Council Member Margaret Chin, Chair, Aging
Council Member Diana Ayala, Chair, Mental Health**

Oversight: Mental Wellness in Older Adults

**Presented by Tara Klein, Policy Analyst
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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. Settlement houses provide a broad range of services in a neighborhood-based, multi-generational setting ranging from early childhood education, afterschool, adult literacy, homelessness prevention, services for older adults, and mental health and substance abuse services. UNH members deliver a wide variety of services to support older adults as they age in their homes and in the community, including senior centers, Naturally Occurring Retirement Communities (NORCs), home delivered meals, and others.

We appreciate City Council Members Chin and Ayala and the City Council's attention to the mental health challenges facing the older adult population in New York City. Older adults have an escalated risk for depression and suicide, brought on in part by high levels of social isolation. With a growing older adult population in New York, it is more important than ever to focus on the mental health needs of this population.

UNH supports Intro 1180, which would require mental health first aid training for caseworkers in senior centers, and we would like to share some implementation concerns about the legislation. We also support and appreciate the Council's Geriatric Mental Health Initiative, and encourage the Council to expand the program in FY 2020 to more communities.

Intro 1180: Mental Health First Aid Training

UNH supports Intro 1180 by Council Member Ayala, which would require mental health first aid training for caseworkers working within senior centers. Many of our members' staff already receive this training from the Department of Health and Mental Hygiene (DOHMH) and speak highly of its usefulness. Refreshing the training every three years is also an important component of the bill, as the mental health field evolves quickly and staff can use a refresher.

While the bill is straightforward and positive, there are several factors that will strengthen its implementation. First, DOHMH should continue to be flexible in where and when they offer these trainings. For example, they should provide the trainings both directly at senior centers and periodically at their own centralized office space. They should also consider an option where the training, which currently lasts 8 hours, is spread out over several weeks, and at different times of the day. The trainings should continue being offered in English, Spanish, and Mandarin with options available for other languages upon request. These options will provide flexibility for staff to ensure they can easily participate in the trainings.

Additionally, the City needs to be cognizant to ensure the training does not detract from caseworkers' work responsibilities in any significant way. While a one-day training is not a major new work demand, leaving seniors unattended during the training could have consequences for them in the case of an emergency, like a deadline for a benefits application or mental health crisis. The City should work with senior centers to ensure there are no such unintended consequences or costs to the program.

Geriatric Mental Health Initiative

UNH is a long-time supporter of the Geriatric Mental Health Initiative (GMHI) and we appreciate the City Council for consistently supporting this program.

GMHI funds mental health services in community spaces where older adults gather, such as senior centers, and also supports in-home services for homebound seniors. GMHI increases the capacity of community-based organizations serving older adults to identify mental health needs, provide immediate mental health interventions, and refer clients for further psychiatric treatment when necessary. By placing mental health services in "non-clinical" settings, GMHI providers are able improve access to mental health services in the community, and providers can adapt their programs to meet the needs of the community they serve without stigma.

Staff within these programs are often the best resource for detecting mental health issues in seniors, as they work with seniors on a regular, even daily, basis. Symptoms of depression and anxiety in older adults frequently coincide with other illnesses and life events such as mourning the loss of loved ones, or coping with the onset of disabilities, which can cause these mental health issues to go undetected.¹ Increasing awareness and access to services within the places that seniors frequently attend ensures that people are receiving depression and substance abuse screenings, and are being connected to appropriate interventions as needed.

The City Council should ensure that at a minimum, GMHI is restored at \$1.9 million in the FY2020 budget cycle to continue these services for older adults. Additionally, the Council should consider a higher investment to expand this crucial program to additional sites.

As the City Council works to support older adults with mental health challenges, it must prioritize expanding funding for successful senior programs like GMHI.

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

¹ National Alliance on Mental Illness. *Depression in Older Persons Fact Sheet*. 2009.