



**Testimony of United Neighborhood Houses
Before the New York City Council
Committee on Aging
Council Member Margaret Chin, Chair**

Oversight: Repairs and Upgrades at NYC Senior Centers

**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. UNH members provide a wide variety of services to support older adults, including senior centers, Naturally Occurring Retirement Communities (NORCs), home delivered meals, and others.

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. These programs are vital to the health and well-being of older New Yorkers. We are pleased that today's hearing provides an opportunity to discuss the infrastructure challenges facing the City's senior centers and ways in which the City Council and the Department for the Aging (DFTA) can best address them, to ensure our senior centers remain strong community anchors.

It is not a secret that many of the City's senior centers are in need of serious repairs. Reports of leaking roofs, dilapidated kitchen appliances, and broken air conditioners – many within official NYC cooling centers – are all too common. Internal heating, plumbing, and electrical systems often need major overhauls. Many centers are located in decades-old – or even centuries-old – buildings, which tends to make these challenges more frequent and extreme. Beyond basic repair needs, senior centers also struggle with updating their buildings to be modern and competitive. In an age where computers and tablets are becoming a necessity for older adults, many centers have outdated equipment and are slow to install basic needs like WiFi.

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, it must turn its attention to the infrastructure needs of its buildings.

Funding Process and Availability

Repairs and renovations are generally not included in DFTA senior center contracts. Consequently, programs must secure funding outside of the regular contract process. This can be time-consuming and confusing, especially because many such projects arise as emergencies. In

practice many programs are forced to cover costs through their own limited budgets or to put off repairs until the City can produce funding, which can affect a center's overall programming.

NYCHA

These problems are even more acute for those senior centers that are located in NYCHA facilities, where it is NYCHA's responsibility to maintain the building. 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.

Neither NYCHA nor DFTA are able to consistently provide the funding or labor needed to maintain the aging infrastructure in public housing. Programs often must make a difficult choice between working with the beleaguered housing authority, finding the money somewhere in their own budgets, or, far too often, waiting. 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.

Accessibility

Another challenge for many older buildings that house senior centers is compliance with the federal Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) Accessible Design standards, which were first issued in the 1990s – long after many NYC buildings were constructed. These standards are clearly very important for senior centers, where attendees are very likely to face mobility challenges, but compliance must be balanced against the reality of capital budgets. For example, the senior center operated by Lincoln Square Neighborhood Center, located in NYCHA's Amsterdam Houses, has bathrooms that are not wheelchair-accessible. The building was constructed before the passage of the ADA, and there has been no capital funding to make needed repairs to ensure accessibility. As a result, older adults who use wheelchairs and attend the senior center require assistance from aides to simply use the bathroom.

Red Tape

Senior center staff have also expressed concerns over bureaucratic challenges for both small and large repairs. A common experience is a senior center requesting a repair, getting referred to the appropriate City agency to make the repairs, and while awaiting the work to commence, receiving a citation or fine from a different City agency. 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

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

repair, the DFTA program officer issued a citation for the crack, despite seeing the repair ticket. In these types of cases, citations or fines may be issued by FDNY, the Department of Health and Mental Hygiene, or the Department of Buildings, resulting in a phenomenon of the City fining itself. In a case of larger-scale renovations, the Sirovich Innovative Senior Center, operated by Educational Alliance, has been working with DFTA to secure much-needed major renovations to its interior space since 2014, consistently delayed by administrative challenge after administrative challenge. These all-too-common anecdotes could be resolved by stronger agency coordination and a streamlined repair process.

Recommendations

To address these and related challenges, UNH recommends increasing the amount of money the City makes available for senior center repairs and streamlining the funding process. Specifically:

- Overall funding should be increased for senior center repairs and upgrades. 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. Senior centers located in NYCHA buildings should be eligible for this funding.
- There should be a clear process for how to apply for funding for repairs or upgrades, whether through DFTA or NYCHA, with swift and appropriate responses. Once repairs have been requested, DFTA should facilitate stronger communication between senior centers and the various government agencies responsible for repairs, such as the Department of Buildings. This will help troubleshoot any contradicting or inaccurate information and avoid the phenomenon of the City fining itself.

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