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

Oversight: Senior Center Model Food Budgets

**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 the membership organization of New York's settlement houses. We mobilize our members and their communities to advocate for good public policies, and we promote strong organizations and practices that keep neighborhoods resilient and thriving for all. Our goal is to strengthen and sustain settlement houses' contribution to the economic vitality, health, and cultures of their communities and New York City.

Today, UNH's membership includes 40 settlement houses in New York City and two in upstate New York. The work we do strengthens the capacity of more than 30,000 employees and volunteers working across 680 locations to continue providing necessary services for people of multiple generations with programs that provide skills, education, social services, health, arts, and connection to community and civic engagement opportunities for over 765,000 New Yorkers who visit settlement houses each year. UNH members provide a wide variety of services to support older adults, including operating 41 senior centers and 8 home delivered meals programs.

To adequately support senior nutrition, UNH recommends adding \$20 million into senior center congregate meal programs and \$15 million into home delivered meals programs, for a total of \$35 million in new investments in the FY 2020 City budget.

Importance of Meal Programs for Older New Yorkers

Meal programs are critical for older adults, as good nutrition is a key determinant of health outcomes as people age. Unfortunately, hunger among older adults in New York City remains high, with approximately 11% percent of New York City residents over age 60 experiencing food insecurity. This figure is even more striking in the Bronx, where 24% of older residents experience food insecurity.¹

Access to congregate and home delivered meals are a key part of the strategy to decrease food insecurity among older people:

¹https://www.hungerfreeamerica.org/sites/default/files/atoms/files/NYC%20and%20NYS%20Hunger%20Report%202018_0.pdf (2018 report)

- **Congregate Meals** - Both neighborhood and innovative senior centers typically offer daily lunch meals to their participants, with some centers also offering a breakfast or dinner option. Many older adults rely on senior centers as their main or only meal of the day, and they value their daily social interactions with the kitchen staff and other seniors.
- **Home Delivered Meals** - For those individuals who have difficulties leaving their homes and struggle to cook meals for themselves, they can receive home-delivered meals either five days per week (a hot meal) or two days per week (a frozen meal that is then reheated). Citymeals on Wheels partners with home delivered meal programs to provide weekend and holiday meals. In addition to providing nutritious meals, home delivered meal programs have the added benefit of acting as a regular wellness-check on an older individual who might be homebound and socially isolated. According to Citymeals on Wheels, over half of home delivered meal recipients live alone. UNH's *Aging in the Shadows* report identifies living alone as a significant risk factor for experiencing social isolation, which has its own health risks for older adults.²

Settlement houses that operate senior centers and home delivered meal programs in the UNH network strive to offer the highest quality meal options while being responsive to the needs and preferences of older adults. In recent years, programs have seen a greater need for variety in their meal offerings, mainly around providing culturally appropriate meals, including Kosher and halal meals, and meals that are culturally relevant such as Chinese meals or Korean meals. Individuals with diabetes, food allergies, and other chronic health conditions also need meals that address their unique nutritional needs.

Meal Costs and Reimbursement Rates

Unfortunately, providers face a major barrier in serving meals to seniors due to cost and low DFTA reimbursement rates. True meal costs for programs include raw food, disposables, supplies, kitchen maintenance, equipment, emergency repairs, exterminations, inspections, and staff, and for home delivered meals also include vehicle maintenance, gas, and heating/cooling systems, and parking costs and tickets. Costs also include OTPS and indirect such as rent, utilities, and organizational needs like human resources.

DFTA contracts do not cover the full cost of providing meals, making it difficult for providers to run effective programs that adequately support their populations. Organizations will often incur deficits to meet the needs of their communities and ensure seniors receive meals. Daily attendance at senior centers tend to fluctuate, which also has an impact. One UNH member has said they are contracted to provide 65 daily lunches at their senior center but regularly provide over 90 due to increased attendance. They are not reimbursed by DFTA for those additional incurred costs. There is an outsized impact on programs that serve culturally appropriate or relevant meals or therapeutic meals, as these often cost more than standard meals. According to Hunger Free America's most recent annual report, 34 percent of food pantries and kitchens in New York City were forced to turn people away, reduce their portion sizes, and/or limit their hours of operation due to a lack of resources.³

² [http://www.unhny.org/literature_239781/UNH Aging in the Shadows](http://www.unhny.org/literature_239781/UNH_Aging_in_the_Shadows)

³ https://www.hungerfreeamerica.org/sites/default/files/atoms/files/NYC%20and%20NYS%20Hunger%20Report%202018_0.pdf

A national evaluation of Administration on Aging (AOA) Nutrition Programs in 2015 found that the average true cost of a congregate meal was \$10.69 and the average cost of a home delivered meal was \$11.06.⁴ However, across DFTA meal programs, while there is great variation in reimbursement rates across programs, the average reimbursement rate per meal is about 20% lower than the national average, and those rates are even lower for programs in UNH’s network:

	National Average Reimbursement Rate (2015)	DFTA Network Average Reimbursement Rate (2018)	UNH Network Average Reimbursement Rate (2018)
Congregate Meals	\$10.69	\$9.06	\$7.98
Home Delivered Meals	\$11.06	\$8.42	\$8.12

The differences are even more urgent when considering that the cost of living is higher in New York City, and the U.S. Consumer Price Index for food has increased each year since 2015.⁵

Thanks to the Council’s support, in FY 2019 an additional \$2.84 million was added to the home delivered meal program, which helped bring reimbursement rates up system-wide by about 46 cents per meal. Unfortunately, this money was not baselined and was not included in the preliminary FY 2020 budget.

And while we are appreciative of the infusion of \$20 million in baselined funds into senior centers under the City’s “model budget” process, the first \$10 million round of this funding stipulated that meals and kitchens were ineligible for funding. The second \$10 million has yet to be allocated and is urgently needed, outside of this conversation on meals, and must be allocated immediately.

Kitchen Staff

While these numbers on their own offer clear justification of the need for additional funding, there are stories and people behind the numbers, in the older New Yorkers who rely on meal programs for nutrition and socialization, and in the cooks and kitchen staff who provide the meals.

Kitchen staff work very hard at very low pay. They are expected to do more than just prepare and serve food. Kitchen staff are administrators, working to complete inventory, order supplies, create menus that cover nutritional requirements, supervise volunteers who help in the kitchen, and complete other mandatory paperwork. At the same time, many cooks lack these administrative job skills, do not have a high school diploma, or cannot read in English. Programs fill this need by having directors and other senior center staff fill in on an ad-hoc basis. Cooks must also be customer service representatives to serve meals to senior center attendees.

While some senior centers have several staff members in the kitchen to share these responsibilities, small senior centers often have just one cook running the entire kitchen. If that cook is out sick or is taking personal time there is no substitute – the senior center director (who is not a cook) will often fill in.

⁴ <https://www.acl.gov/sites/default/files/programs/2016-11/NSP-Meal-Cost-Analysis.pdf>

⁵ <https://www.usinflationcalculator.com/inflation/food-inflation-in-the-united-states/>

For kitchens that prepare both congregate and home-delivered meals, staff often cook 3 meals per day and will work more than 12 hour days. Programs have expressed having to make a difficult financial choice between hiring more staff for low pay or overworking existing staff.

Meal programs in the UNH network report paying kitchen staff around the minimum wage, with raises only given when DFTA provides funding for a COLA or the minimum wage increase. One UNH member expressed anger over feeling “forced to reinforce poverty” due to these low reimbursement rates and consequential low salaries.

This low pay has led to high turnover rates, with many staff opting to work at higher-paying institutions like schools and colleges or at restaurants (some UNH programs mentioned recent turnover at restaurants due to an uptick in fears of deportation for undocumented immigrants). Hiring is difficult, with one program reporting a job posting for an assistant cook that was unfilled for 6 months.

City Budget Concerns and Procurements

We understand the City budget is constrained by a \$750 million Program to Eliminate the Gap (PEG) this year. While we certainly understand the City’s fiscal constraints, it is urgent that DFTA not face cuts under the PEG. DFTA programs have been underfunded for many years. Only recently have DFTA and the Council begun to address these long-standing deficiencies through new funding and looking to redesign programs. DFTA is currently preparing to re-procure the home delivered meal system, to be followed by senior centers. To build a system that adequately addresses the growing older adult population, and with programs that are currently very financially strained, we cannot afford to lose any funding.

Recommendations

In order to meet the nutritional needs of New York City’s growing older adult population, support a decently-paid workforce, and ensure programs are paid for the true costs of running a meal program, **UNH recommends the FY 2020 budget include an additional \$20 million for senior center congregate meal programs and \$15 million for home delivered meal programs, for a total of \$35 million in new investments.**

Further, contracts should have regular cost adjustors to account for rising food costs and inflation, and should be adjusted regularly as the number of older New Yorkers increases. The City should also explore supporting job training programs to support kitchen staff in their administrative responsibilities.

Finally, the FY 2020 must also **include the second round of \$10 million in senior center model budget money** that was previously promised.

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