



**UNITED
NEIGHBORHOOD
HOUSES**

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

The Future of Senior Centers after COVID-19

**Submitted by Tara Klein, Policy Analyst
September 21, 2020**

Thank you for the opportunity to testify to the City Council Committee on Aging on the Future of Senior Centers after COVID-19. United Neighborhood Houses (UNH) is a policy and social change organization representing 43 neighborhood settlement houses that reach 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.

The COVID-19 pandemic has ravaged New York City's economy and safety net and has underscored the significant racial and economic disparities that have impacted New York City's neighborhoods for decades. Just as they did through other crises our City has faced, settlement houses have been on the frontlines of the COVID-19 emergency response by continuing to deliver essential services to New Yorkers, providing emergency food, counseling, shelter, youth and family supports, and more.

Older adults have been hit especially hard by COVID-19, and senior centers have served as crucial supports for them throughout the pandemic. Settlement houses operate 46 senior centers across City, serving over 53,000 older adults in these centers. Senior centers have been enormously creative and adaptive in meeting the evolving needs on the ground during the pandemic. While buildings have remained physically closed, no senior center has ceased operation, and in fact many have been working overtime to serve older adults remotely. Activities have included wellness calls, case management services, enrolling people in the GetFood NYC program, virtual social activities, and more. While not being permitted to serve food, many cooks have transitioned to help senior centers make wellness calls to check in on older adults at home. As we now think about reopening senior centers, many providers in the UNH network have insisted we use a different word than "reopening," because they have been virtually open and serving older adults continuously. Instead, we encourage the City to talk about transitioning and returning back to in-person activities, with health and safety standards being our primary guide in that process.

UNH thanks Council Members Chin and Levine, Speaker Johnson, and all the other Council Members who signed on to the September 4, 2020 letter to the Mayor asking for City Hall to initiate a dialogue with the Department for the Aging, Department of Health, and the Food Czar team about a process to restart in-person programming in the senior services network safely. UNH echoes all of the outstanding questions and concerns written in that letter: providers and older adults need clear communication around plans and expectations, and providers need to know those plans well in advance in order to prepare. We need to consider any stages or phases for returning, such as how meal distribution will

return without encouraging congregating. There needs to be clarity on whether timelines and metrics will guide the process, such as the same way the City's schools and restaurants consider thresholds for reopening and potentially closing back down again.

UNH has heard clearly from our members that they are ready for certain limited in-person activities, such as one-on-one case management, outdoor activities held safely in small groups, and bringing back meal service through grab and go or another mechanism. Older adults are eager to get back as well, with reports of many showing up and knocking on the doors of senior center buildings. Food distribution, in particular, urgently needs to return to the nonprofit senior centers where providers know their communities best. The older adult feeding program under GetFood NYC continues to face major barriers to service delivery under the private vendor model, and recently many older adults have been unsubscribing to these meals. Providers report that as they begin to see older adults who switched to these meals in person again, they appear weaker and frailer than before. By contrast, senior centers are experts at serving nutritious, delicious, and culturally-competent meals to older adults and are eager to safely serve their neighbors once again.

DFTA's reopening task force with select providers is an important step in addressing some of these issues, and having dialogue with providers is crucial as they are the ones who understand on-the-ground realities. However, DFTA has not yet communicated any future transition plans with providers more broadly, leaving them and the older adults they serve in a state of limbo with no sense of what the future might look like. As UNH has seen in other areas like youth services and early childhood education, clear guidelines and communication, flexible start times, and adequate PPE supplies are all essential components of restarting any in-person programming during COVID-19. We also encourage DFTA and other City agencies to host webinars and other briefing opportunities so that providers are up to speed on all guidelines and have the opportunity to ask questions of DFTA.

It is critical to underscore the harm of recent budget cuts to senior centers in thinking about their post-COVID-19 future. FY 2021 was a difficult budget year all-around, but senior centers were hit especially hard with the delay of the \$5 million in model food budget funding until FY 2022, the failure to include the remaining \$10 million in original "model budget" funding, \$4 million in COVID-related cuts, and major cuts to the City's Indirect Cost Rate Initiative. These cuts have led senior centers to make difficult decisions around staffing, salaries, and programming. Unfortunately, there may be a disconnect between City Hall's perception that senior centers have been closed during COVID-19 and the reality that they have all pivoted to remote work. As we approach future budget decisions and the potential for more across-the-board cuts, we must protect senior center funds as they continue remote work and move toward in-person activities.

Finally, we are acutely aware that DFTA has issued a Concept Paper for senior centers, or as they may soon be called, Older Adult Centers. We have many serious questions and concerns around this Concept Paper, especially around funding needs and programmatic issues. For instance, the Concept Paper does not mention the overall number of contracts or what a typical budget should be for a center, despite previous model budgeting exercises conducted by the City. It fails to address needed expenses including cost escalators, capital needs, new technology needs, and the growing number of older adults in New York City. Given the current uncertainty around the reopening transition, and the fact that this procurement envisions the system for the next three years with an option to extend for three additional years, we encourage DFTA to clarify their overall vision for serving older adults in a post-COVID world and how senior centers fit into that plan. As our community struggles to get through this pandemic, UNH believes we need more flexibility and support to meet the needs of our communities. We anticipate sharing our formal comments on the Concept Paper with DFTA by their deadline of October 5th, and will be sure to copy the Council on those recommendations.

Thank you for your time. For questions or follow-up, you can contact me at tklein@unhny.org.