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**Testimony from Selfhelp Community Services
New York City Council Aging Committee
Oversight - Repairs and Upgrades at NYC Senior Centers
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My name is Mayer Waxman and I am the Managing Director of Senior Centers at Selfhelp Community Services.

Thank you to the Aging Committee Chair Margaret Chin and the members of the committee for the opportunity to testify on repairs and upgrades at NYC senior centers.

Selfhelp was founded in 1936 to help those fleeing Nazi Germany maintain their independence and dignity as they struggled to forge new lives in America. Today, Selfhelp has grown into one of the largest and most respected not-for-profit human service agencies in the New York metropolitan area, with 26 sites throughout Manhattan, Brooklyn, Queens, the Bronx, and Nassau County. We provides a broad set of services to more than 20,000 elderly, frail, and vulnerable New Yorkers each year, while remaining the largest provider of comprehensive services to Holocaust survivors in North America. Selfhelp offers a complete network of community-based home care, social service, and senior housing programs with the overarching goal of helping clients to live with dignity and independence and avoid institutional care.

Our services are extensive and include: specialized programs for Holocaust Survivors; ten affordable senior housing complexes; four Naturally Occurring Retirement Community (NORC) programs; three intensive case management programs; five senior centers including one of New York City's first Innovative Senior Centers; home health care; client centered technology programs including the Virtual Senior Center; court-appointed guardianship; the Selfhelp Alzheimer's Resource Program (SHARP); and New York Connects, which provides seniors and people with disabilities with the information and support they need to remain living independently in their own homes.

Selfhelp operates five senior centers throughout Queens, including one of the City's first innovative senior centers. Together, our centers have over 10,000 members and we serve over 200,000 meals. We strongly believe in the role that senior centers play in providing high quality nutritious meals, engaging activities, and health and wellness programming.

We are grateful for the Council's long standing and ongoing support for senior centers and for always emphasizing the needs of older adults in policy decisions and budget allocations. In today's testimony,



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I will focus on our priorities regarding our experience with oversight, repairs, and upgrades at Selfhelp's five New York City senior centers.

Budgeting

Selfhelp appreciates DFTA's partnership regarding the realities of budgeting constraints when facing unplanned expenses and repairs. Our staff budgets for planned expenses, such as rent, and staffing and food costs. However, when an unexpected cost arises, such as when equipment breaks or there is damage to the building, we often face a challenge in covering the costs in a timely manner.

Our contract with DFTA allows us to budget for standard expenses, as well as income expected to be brought in through voluntary contributions from members to cover additional expenses. In order to raise necessary funds to cover unplanned and unexpected expenses, each center conducts fundraising campaigns. Proceeds from fundraising are used for expenses above what DFTA and the budgeted voluntary contributions cover, including repairs, additional staff, and programming.

When a senior center faces an unexpected, unbudgeted need, such as a broken refrigerator or a leak in the roof, it is often the center's responsibility to pay for the repairs out of accruals or fundraising. However, some of the budget line items are restricted in use and some accruals are not fungible. For example, a senior center cannot utilize accruals from Personnel or Food to cover building repairs. Even if the Personnel budget has an excess because a social worker was not on staff for the full year, the additional funds in that line item cannot be used for capital repairs or upgrades. This rigidity makes it a challenge to fund the most pressing needs when they arise.

As such, we support the creation of a fund to be allocated by DFTA to assist senior centers with small capital repairs and upgrades, including new ovens and repairs to ventilation and air conditioning systems. This fund would allow senior centers the flexibility they need to make unplanned small repairs and upgrades throughout as needed and with appropriate oversight by DFTA.

Security

In New York City, security is an important issue. Given this timely conversation on upgrades, an important issue to consider is security at senior centers. Our senior centers are open to all older community members and we strive to create a safe and welcoming environment for all. Currently, there is not a funding source for cameras or security guards which would allow our Directors to have oversight to who is coming and going at each center. Moving forward, it will be important to account for security needs at each center.

Senior Center within NYCHA Buildings

There are unique needs within our senior center that is located in the community center of NYCHA's Latimer Gardens complex in Flushing, which serves more than 1,700 people each year. In order to provide valuable services to the residents and to the community, NYCHA has partnered with DFTA, as well as with the Department of Youth and Community Development and their not-for-profit contractors. The partnership provides immense benefits to the community, although it does not



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provide support for necessary repairs and upgrades. When repairs are needed, such as leaks or AC or other malfunctions, the senior and youth programs need to report the repair need and obtain a ticket number through NYCHA's standard tenant repair structure. The response to such repair requests is often slow. This slow response is troubling for the individuals and families who live in NYCHA housing, and is exacerbated when there are hundreds of individuals relying on community centers.

For example, our Latimer Gardens Senior Center serves as a New York City cooling center. However, the air conditioning broke in August 2018 and therefore the senior center was not able to serve as a cooling center for at least 3 days when a heat advisory was in effect. Despite support from our local partners in NYCHA and DFTA, as well as our local elected officials, the issue has still not been resolved.

We suggest that there be some channel created between DFTA, NYCHA, DYCD, and other partner City agencies to more quickly address the communal repair needs within NYCHA buildings.

Model Senior Center Budget

We commend the Department for the Aging (DFTA), Office of Management and Budget, and the City Council for the ongoing commitment to senior centers since the beginning of the model senior center budget process. This significant funding for the City's senior centers has been, and will continue to be, a critical step towards stabilizing one of the core programs that supports older New Yorkers, including many immigrant seniors.

We are appreciative that in our experience, there has been enough flexibility within the model budget process to allow additional funding to be used for numerous upgrades to Selfhelp's senior centers. First, the investment enabled us to raise salaries for program staff, which was much needed and much appreciated. The investment in the model budget for staff helps address ongoing concerns related to salary parity that has been a concern for Selfhelp and many other providers and advocates since DFTA raised case management salaries. Second, the additional funding allows us to expand programming options. Third, the opportunity to upgrade the centers through one-time purchases, such as repairing the stoop at one center and purchasing computers, and large kitchen equipment for others. We found that some spending, especially related to building repairs, was difficult to achieve in the short timeframe between receiving the funds and the end of the fiscal year in which they had to be spent. Our relationship with DFTA is stronger because of our work together in implementing the model budget process, and we would like to thank them for a collaborative relationship.

Conclusion

Thank you for the opportunity to testify today. On behalf of the 20,000 clients we serve, I am grateful for the Council's support on so many important programs.

