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**Testimony from Selfhelp Community Services, Inc.
New York State Assembly Standing Committee on Aging
Honorable Donna Lupardo, Chair**

**Submitted by Sandy Myers, Vice President, External Affairs and Communications
November 14, 2018**

Thank you to Chairperson Donna Lupardo and the members of the Assembly Aging Committee for the opportunity to testify about programs and services that help older New Yorkers remain in their homes and communities as well as best practices that can enhance the quality of life for older adults.

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 human service agencies in the New York metropolitan area, with 46 programs throughout Manhattan, Brooklyn, Queens, the Bronx, and Nassau County. We provide a broad set of important services to more than 20,000 older New Yorkers and other vulnerable individuals 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 goal of helping clients to live with dignity and avoid institutional care.

All our services are rooted in the idea that all individuals deserve to age with independence and dignity. Our services include: specialized programs for Holocaust Survivors; eleven affordable senior housing complexes; four Naturally Occurring Retirement Community (NORC) programs; three case management programs; five senior centers including one of New York City's first Innovative Senior Centers; home health care and home health aide training; client centered technology programs including the Virtual Senior Center; two court-appointed guardianship programs; and the Selfhelp Alzheimer's Resource Program (SHARP).

Selfhelp believes that the best outcomes for our clients and all older adults are achieved when social services support health. Recent research into some of our programs, which is shared more thoroughly throughout my testimony, have proven this as well. Further, not only is there a positive impact on the health of our clients, but there is also a reduction in costs to the healthcare system. Community-based services are a critical network of programs that work together to improve an individual's quality of life and overall health. By bringing health and social services together in policy making and funding decisions, we can best improve the outcomes for older adults throughout New York State.

Affordable Senior Housing as a Tool for Healthcare

Selfhelp believes that the best outcomes for older adults are achieved when social services support client health.

With the support of JPMorgan Chase, we recently completed a study of the residents in our senior affordable housing program. The published research shows that residents of Selfhelp's housing are healthier than their neighbors who do not live in high-quality housing. The full report is available through the Journal for Health Affairs (the article is available upon request), and a white paper published by Selfhelp is forthcoming, and will include both Medicare and Medicaid data. We found that residents in Selfhelp's affordable housing had:

- 68% lower odds of Selfhelp residents being hospitalized
- \$1,778 average Medicaid payment per person, per hospitalization for Selfhelp residents, versus \$5,715 for the comparison group
- 53% lower odds of a Selfhelp resident visiting an emergency room compared to a non-Selfhelp resident

Selfhelp's eleven affordable residences offer seniors the opportunity to lead independent lives in a warm and supportive environment. At each building, we offer the Selfhelp Active Services for the Aging Model (SHASAM), which makes available social work services, education, and recreation, as well as access to skilled nursing and home care, if and when requested by the resident.

We know that housing plus services is the right model to ensure that seniors are able to thrive as they age in their communities. Service coordinators within affordable senior housing can reduce healthcare costs and keep seniors healthier at home. We are happy to share the results from the research study with the committee.

We continue to urge the State to pass legislation and dedicate funding to create a senior housing resident coordinator program. In coordination with LeadingAge NY, Enterprise Community Partners, LiveON NY, and other housing providers and advocates, Selfhelp supports a \$10 million allocation over five years to establish funding for social workers in new and existing affordable senior housing.

Service coordination includes an array of services that assist residents to remain independent by emphasizing wellness and healthy aging. This \$10 million would be used in conjunction with New York's historic commitment of \$125 million in senior housing, and would create a very cost-effective model for seniors to age in their own homes, avoid more costly institutional care, and result in savings for Medicaid.

Naturally Occurring Retirement Community (N/NORC) Program

Selfhelp provides social services to more than 1,300 residents at four Naturally Occurring Retirement Communities (NORCs) and Neighborhood NORCs throughout Queens. We are very appreciative of the consistent support the NORC program has received in the Legislature.

N/NORCs were founded with the ultimate goal of transforming residential complexes and neighborhoods to meet the needs of a growing cohort of older residents and enable them to remain living independently in their homes; thrive in their communities, and delay hospitalization or nursing home placement. The density of older adults and their proximity to each other further fosters creative

approaches to providing health and social services. N/NORC programs provide case management services; nursing services; recreational, social and cultural activities, and ancillary services tailored to meet the needs of each community. Programs actively encourage healthy aging by providing access to health care, promoting health and wellness activities, addressing disease prevention and responding to chronic health conditions.

The services provided by N/NORCs are crucial to the health and well-being of New York's aging communities, and we thank the State for continually funding these programs, and we support continued investments. Older adults across New York rely on N/NORC services to remain healthy and stably housed; without these services, their options for receiving appropriate community-based care would be decreased.

Utilizing Technology to Address Social Isolation

As our population ages, so too does the number of homebound individuals who are at a high risk of social isolation and depression. Social isolation is one of the most serious issues affecting the elders of our community, and Selfhelp's Virtual Senior Center is one program which has been proven to effectively and profoundly impact this problem.

Selfhelp's Virtual Senior Center (VSC) engages homebound seniors, who are no longer able to get to their local senior centers, into the larger community by using technology to connect them with other participants in a range of activities. A cornerstone activity of the program is its interactive, real-time classes where participants can hear, see and talk with each other in an interactive session. Over 35 classes are typically offered each week ranging from art history to current events to museum tours to weight training and other exercise programming. This groundbreaking program effectively reduces social isolation by creating social networks, connecting them to each other and to the outside world. Participation has been shown to break down barriers of digital literacy, reduce social isolation by up to 85% and improve participants' quality of life by 97%.

Today the program has become a lifeline for over 470 participants. To serve a broader community, the VSC is now available in multiple languages including Chinese, English, Korean and Russian.

On top of the personal relationships, the program serves as a link to the digital world. Participants gain comfort with technology, utilizing the computer to join classes, email, Skype with their family, read the news, browse the web, play games, and more.

As one of our participants said, *"The program is truly extraordinary. We're homebound. It's a gift. I live alone but I don't feel alone."* Through independent research, Selfhelp assessed the impact of the Virtual Senior Center on the health of participants, and we found:

- 85% reduction in social isolation as a result of participation in the VSC
- 51% increase in self-reported health status because of VSC participation
- 97% of participants reported that the VSC improved their quality of life

Ensuring Independence through NY Connects

As the contracted provider for Queens NY Connects Program, we know firsthand the importance of providing specialized information and assistance on long term services and support options for age 60+, individuals with physical disabilities, caregivers and providers.

The statewide media campaign was very successful in informing more individuals about this resource. By identifying a centralized service to access information on available resources and services, at no cost to the individual, the program has encouraged cross collaboration of information between community-based programs and services. Further, we are now able to better identify unmet needs that affect the health and welfare of individuals, which has a very real and direct financial impact on health care institutions.

In the last 12 months, our NY Connects program received over 5,800 calls, which is 56% more calls than the contractual goal. Individuals, caregivers, and professionals called seeking information on resources and services, most notably for affordable housing, transportation, escorting to medical appointments and how to access much needed in-home services. We appreciate the State's investment in the NY Connects program through March 2020. With the recent funding, our program was able to hire two additional NY Connects Specialists and 7.5 months into the contract year, we have received and addressed the needs of 3,217 callers.

Conclusion

Thank you for your time. For further questions, I can be reached at smyers@selfhelp.net or 212-971-7627.