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**Testimony from Selfhelp Community Services
New York City Council Committee on Cultural Affairs, Libraries, and
International Group Relations
Recognizing 1/27/19 as Holocaust Remembrance Day and the week beginning on 1/27/19 as a citywide week of
Holocaust Education in NYC
January 16, 2019**

My name is Sandy Myers and I am the Vice President of External Affairs and Communications at Selfhelp Community Services.

Thank you to Committee Chair Mathieu Eugene for holding today's hearing and Council Member Chaim Deutsch for their work and support for resolution 0673-2018, which recognizes January 27th, 2019 as Holocaust Remembrance Day and the week beginning January 27th, 2019, as a citywide week of Holocaust education in New York City.

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 46 program locations 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; eleven 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 remains committed to serving as the last surviving relative to Holocaust survivors in need of care, and in particular for the approximately 40,000 survivors living in New York City. As the largest provider of services to Holocaust survivors in North America, Selfhelp's commitment extends to educating future generations to ensure that never again remains true, and that the lessons of the Holocaust are shared. In 2012, Selfhelp brought Witness Theater to New York. This is an intergenerational program bringing together Holocaust survivors and high school students to elicit, expose and memorialize the moving stories of survival. Through a guided drama therapy process, group members explore issues of war, loss and trauma while at the same time forming deep and meaningful relationships that dissolve the barriers between generations.

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Students and survivors meet in weekly two-hour sessions over the course of the academic year with a trained drama therapist and other program staff. The project culminates in a staged production: the students portray the personal experiences of the group's survivors, while the survivors narrate their own stories. The production is performed for the community and the student body in each high school.

The program aims to involve Holocaust survivors in a therapeutic process designed to help them come to terms with their past, and at the same time to instill the memory of the Holocaust in the next generation. The public performances serve as a vehicle for the survivors' testimonies to be heard by many and to witness the special connections made between the generations.

As we see through our Witness Theater program, the Holocaust has many lessons to teach us, yet the time to learn those lessons from those who lived through it is fleeting. As we are now serving and learning from this last generation of Holocaust survivors, the number of individuals who are physically and mentally able to bear witness dwindles and the question of what happens to their stories and their experience remains.

In the last few months, Selfhelp completed the production of a documentary film, called *Witness Theater: The Film*, which documents a year of Witness Theater, including the process and final public performance. We are now working with our distributor, Menemsha Films, to distribute this film to different audiences. The film serves as an anchor by which viewers can learn about history through the individual stories told by the survivors through the intergenerational program of Witness Theater. We hope that the film will also appeal to educators, in particular those working with communities that cope with trauma, and provide a unique artistic and therapeutic model for their own work. The trailer and a few short clips can be viewed at www.witnesstheaterthefilm.com.

Beyond this documentary, Selfhelp is furthering its Holocaust education objective through a corresponding study guide for high school students and a website. This work is motivated both by the need to pass on the lessons of the Holocaust, as well as in response to a recent study by the Claims Conference, which found a significant lack of knowledge of the Holocaust in the United States.

Lastly, I want to thank the City Council for their ongoing support of the Elie Weisel Holocaust Survivor Initiative. The Council's support and increased funding has enabled Selfhelp to continue our high quality of care for Holocaust survivors. Although the overall number of Holocaust survivors is declining, the needs of survivors grow in number and complexity as they age.

- Nearly 50% of the survivors coming to Selfhelp live 150% below the federal poverty level.
- 35% of survivors are coping with serious chronic illness
- 41% require help with daily tasks
- 73% of survivors describe their health as poor or fair

Ongoing support is crucial to Selfhelp's ability to continue to serve this population.

I'm thrilled to be joined today by Gabriella Major, a past participant in Selfhelp's Witness Theater program. Gabriella will share her story, her experience in Witness Theater, and her work with younger generations to pass on her story and the lessons of the Holocaust.

Thank you for the opportunity to testify today, and for providing the opportunity to discuss the need for Holocaust awareness and education in New York City. Selfhelp looks forward to participating in NYC's citywide week of Holocaust education.

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