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**Testimony from Selfhelp Community Services, Inc.
New York City Department for the Aging
Hearing on the Model Senior Center Food Budget
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My name is Katie Foley and I am the Director, Public Affairs 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 the model senior center food budget 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; 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 each year. 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, I will focus on our priorities on meals at Selfhelp's five New York City senior centers.

Model 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 budget process. Funding for the City's senior centers is a critical step to stabilizing one of the core programs that supports older New Yorkers, including many immigrant seniors.

Selfhelp is requesting that the remaining \$10 million that has been committed to the model budget process be allocated this year, instead of FY21. Allocating the remaining funding will have a very positive impact on the operations of our programs, and is critical before the next RFP for senior centers to be released in calendar year 2020.

We remain concerned that other costs beyond salaries were not included in the model budget process, in particular for food, which is a significant cost for senior centers. We hope that the allocations in the subsequent years will focus on food, rent, OTPS, and other associated costs.

We know that there continues to be a need for accessible and nutritious meals for older adults in all boroughs. We serve over 200,000 meals each year at our five senior centers and request for additional funding. We request \$20 million in additional funding to increase funding for the reimbursement rate for meals (which is currently 20% below the national average), adequately fund staffing, and address the unfunded costs of running senior center kitchens so that seniors can eat nutritious, culturally competent meals. This funding is particularly important for culturally-competent meals, such as the kosher meals provided at our Austin Street Senior Center in Forest Hills. Since these meals are catered, we have less flexibility preparing the kosher meals, and rising food costs were not included in the model budget process.

Overall, we are appreciative of past investment in senior center staffing through the model budget process. The investment helped address an ongoing issue related to salary parity that had been a challenge for Selfhelp since the case management salaries were raised. We hope that additional investments in the next few years will move us toward the goal of 'right-sizing' staffing resources within all DFTA-funded programs, including NORCs. Our four NORC programs serve more than 1,300 people. It is difficult to recruit and retain highly trained staff without salary parity across all DFTA-funded programs.

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. When a senior center faces an unexpected, unbudgeted need, such as a broken refrigerator, 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. This rigidity makes it a challenge to fund the most pressing needs when they arise.

As such, we support the creation and expansion 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.

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.