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**Testimony from Selfhelp Community Services, Inc.  
New York City Council Aging Committee  
FY21 Preliminary Budget Hearing  
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My name is Katie Foley and I am the Director of Public Affairs at Selfhelp Community Services. Thank you to Finance Committee Chair Daniel Dromm, Aging Committee Chair Margaret Chin, and the members of both committees for the opportunity to testify today on the FY21 Preliminary Budget.

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.

We are grateful for the Council's ongoing support for so many important senior programs and for always emphasizing the needs of older adults in policy decisions and budget allocations. With strong community based programs, we are confident that older New Yorkers will be able to access the care and support they deserve and need to be able to age in their own homes and communities.

Today I will focus on a few of Selfhelp's priorities that we hope that Council will highlight over the next few months and in budget negotiations.

**Senior Center 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.

The model budget process included funding to be allocated in FY21, including \$10 million for senior centers and \$5 million for congregate meals and kitchen staff. We are requesting that the Council support a request for the Administration to restore and baseline \$9.7 million to restore and baseline previous one-time funding that supported senior centers, home delivered meals, NORCs, and NYCHA community spaces.

### **The Need for Affordable Housing**

Since 1963, Selfhelp has been building affordable housing. Today, Selfhelp Community Services is a major provider of affordable housing for seniors in New York City and on Long Island. Our housing portfolio includes twelve affordable apartment developments, comprising of 14 buildings located in Queens, the Bronx, Brooklyn, and Long Island, which house over 1,400 low- and moderate-income senior residents in attractive, functional apartments with supportive services as needed.

Selfhelp appreciates the strong support of Mayor de Blasio and the City Council for senior affordable housing in New York City. The need for affordable senior housing with services remains as or more significant today as it was in 2016, when LiveOn NY first reported their findings that an estimated 200,000 seniors were on waiting lists for housing through the HUD202 program in New York City. In fact, housing challenges continue to plague older adults, as many seniors live on fixed incomes that cannot keep pace with rising rents; experience mobility challenges that limit housing options within an aging rental-stock; and are found to have high rates of rent burden, with 1/3 of individuals receiving SCRIE paying more than 70% of their income on rent. Given the current need for senior affordable housing, Selfhelp recommends that the City ensure that senior housing is prioritized in its overall development pipeline.

Selfhelp has been pleased to see the Administration's recognition of the need for senior specific housing as demonstrated through the investments and commitments included in the Seniors First Initiative, which has brought about historic commitments to the production and preservation of affordable senior housing. Through this initiative and the Senior Affordable Rental Assistance (SARA) program in particular, Selfhelp was awarded land by the New York City Housing Authority (NYCHA) to develop a senior building on one of its existing public housing properties, Sumner Houses, in Brooklyn. We are partnering with the RiseBoro, Urban Builders Collaborative and Lettice Construction on this development, with Daniel Libeskind as the architect. The building will have approximately 200 units and will have a community facility open to the entire Sumner complex.

### **Affordable Senior Housing as a Tool for Healthcare: SHASAM**

In a budget year where the Medicaid deficit is front and center, it is important to remember programs that serve older adults on relatively small budgets while helping defer more substantial costs to the Medicaid system. An investment in the SHASAM (Selfhelp's Active Services for Aging Model) would

result in savings to the State's Medicaid program by preventing or lowering costs of emergency room visits and keeping low-income seniors out of costlier levels of care, such as assisted living or nursing homes.

Selfhelp's unique real estate model brings together safe and affordable apartments with our legacy of quality social services. At each Selfhelp building, we offer service coordination through 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. The goal of SHASAM is to provide the appropriate level of assistance to allow older adults to remain in their apartments and not move to more costly settings such as assisted living or nursing homes. Recent research shows that access to SHASAM allows older adults to reduce their chances of being hospitalized and/or visiting an emergency room which reduced their overall Medicaid and/or Medicare costs.

A New York-based study, conducted by Dr. Michael Gusmano of Rutgers University, compared Selfhelp residents with access to service coordination to a comparison group of seniors in the same zip codes without this support. The published research shows that residents of Selfhelp's housing are healthier than their neighbors who do not live in high-quality housing.

Research shows 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

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 available at [www.selfhelp.net](http://www.selfhelp.net).

Selfhelp sees the SARA program as a success for the City. However, in recognition of the significant continued need and to continue to improve upon current efforts, a \$1.8 million investment that would allow for expanded services to an initial cohort of 700 SARA units to receive service coordination. The Senior Affordable Rental Assistance Program (SARA) administered by HRA currently does not provide service coordination funds for seniors being referred to the program for the general lottery system.

### **Holocaust Survivor Initiative**

For the past few years, the City Council, with the advocacy of former Council Member Espinal, along with the Jewish Caucus, started and expanded the Elie Wiesel Holocaust Survivor Initiative. This investment demonstrates the commitment of the City to ensure that some of our City's most vulnerable receive the care and services they need. This year, we are urging the City Council to renew this initiative, with continued support for Selfhelp and our Holocaust Survivor Program. In FY21, Selfhelp is seeking \$400,000 to support services frail, isolated, and financially needy Holocaust survivors.

Selfhelp's services honor a sacred pledge: to serve as the last surviving relative to victims of Nazi persecution. Selfhelp operates the oldest and largest program serving Holocaust survivors in North America, caring for nearly 4,800 elderly and frail individuals. This funding will support direct social services to frail, isolated, and financially needy Holocaust Survivors. \$275,000 of the funding will provide case management services to keep clients living safe in the community with dignity and independence, and support for clients in the Holocaust Financial Management Unit and Guardianship programs.

Approximately 50% of the survivors served by Selfhelp are living at or below the poverty line, while 80% of survivors from the former Soviet Union are living in poverty. As the largest provider of comprehensive services to survivors, Selfhelp is uniquely positioned to assist this last generation of survivors, especially as their needs grow more intense and more costly.

We continue to have over 300 survivors on a waitlist in Brooklyn that we are working to address with the FY20 City Council initiative grant. Additional funds in FY21 will help to address this population of survivors in Brooklyn, as well as direct social services to frail, isolated and financially needy Holocaust survivors across the City. Services include case management to assist in assessing and developing a mutual agreed upon care plan that will be implemented to keep the client safe in the community with dignity and independence.

An additional \$125,000 of funding provides support for Witness Theater, an innovative inter-generational education program that brings together Holocaust survivors and high school students to elicit, expose, and memorialize survivors' moving stories of survival. New and innovative educational programs, such as Witness Theater, are especially important now, given the fact that New York City is seeing a rise in anti-Semitic hate crimes. Witness Theater involves Holocaust survivors in a therapeutic process designed to help them come to terms with their past and instill their memories of the Holocaust in the next generation. The program culminates in free public performances (also available for free online through Facebook live streaming) that serve as a vehicle for the survivors' testimonies to be heard by many and to witness the special connections made between the generations. Council funding helps us bring Witness Theater to broad and diverse audiences who can bear witness to the Holocaust survivors' stories of resilience and strength.

Access to social services keeps frail, isolated, and financially needy Holocaust survivors living in their communities with dignity and independence. Using Person Centered Trauma Informed (PCTI) principles, social workers sensitively meet the needs of this unique population and help to prevent them from entering crisis and/or being placed in an institutional settings such as hospitals and nursing homes. Witness Theater is an educational initiative that benefits the participants and the community-at-large through free public performances. The free 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. Council funding helps these performances reach a broad and diverse audience to bear witness to the Holocaust survivors' stories of resilience and strength.

### **Senior Transportation Program**

With support from Council Member Paul Vallone and the Queens Delegation, Selfhelp has been operating a senior transportation program to provide free transportation to and from medical appointments. Due to the success of the program and high demand from individuals, we are seeking to continue this program across Queens. With funding provided by the delegation for this year, Selfhelp has so far provided over 350 rides across multiple City Council districts in the borough. Due to the demand for accessible transportation and popularity of this program we believe that with this funding, Selfhelp will be able to continue to serve the Queens seniors that in need.

Based on feedback received by individuals who benefitted from the program, as well as the demand for services, we know that the program improves quality of life for older New Yorkers, as it eliminates concerns about transportation costs, traveling alone, and navigating public transit. Further, in transportation deserts in parts of NYC and Queens in particular, this program removed a significant barrier for older adults in caring for their health.

### **Naturally Occurring Retirement Communities (NORCs)**

Naturally Occurring Retirement Communities, or NORCs, are multi-age housing developments or neighborhoods that were not originally designed for older adults, but are now home to a significant number of older people. NORCs help thousands of older adults remain healthy, stable, and able to age in place by offering health care, social services, and socialization opportunities right at home.

Thank you to the Council for supporting a major investment in the City's Naturally Occurring Retirement Communities (NORCs) last year, particularly to support nursing services. 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 City Council. Because of your enthusiasm for this program, we have been able to bring resources and attention to the needs of a large and rapidly growing senior population served by Selfhelp's NORCs.

Selfhelp's mission directly supports the purpose of NORCs: meet the needs of older adults and enable them to remain living independently in their homes; thrive in their communities, and delay hospitalization or nursing home placement. N/NORC programs provide case management services; health and 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.

We support an investment of at least \$1.7 million to ensure salary parity for DFTA-funded NORCs. Additionally, each year the Administration adds \$1 million for NORCs into the City Budget, but these funds are not included in the Preliminary Budget proposal. We request that these funds are restored and baselined to ensure programmatic stability. Finally, we request that the Council restores the NORC Initiative at last year's level of \$5.3 million, which includes \$1.3 million in support for nursing.

A key component of the N/NORC program model is health care management and assistance. Nurses provide services to N/NORC residents that might not otherwise exist in the community, such as medication education, diabetes testing, flu shots, mobility and balance screenings, and helping clients get in touch with doctors. Older adults across New York City rely on N/NORC services to remain healthy and stably housed; without these services, their options for receiving appropriate community-based care would be greatly diminished.

### **Virtual Senior Center**

As the aging population grows, so too does the number of homebound elders 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. Selfhelp's Virtual Senior Center is one program which has been proven to effectively and profoundly impact this problem. A [study](#) conducted by the AARP Public Policy Institute and Stanford University found that a lack of social contacts among older adults is associated with an estimated \$6.7 billion in additional federal Medicare spending annually. As DFTA has noted in the past, loneliness and social isolation are associated with increased mortality among older adults.

The 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 online, interactive, real-time classes where participants can hear, see and talk with each other. We have submitted a number of requests to various City Council members to support the continuation of this program.

### **Discretionary Funding For Core Senior Services**

In order to create a robust aging services network to meet the needs of today's seniors and those turning 60 each day, Selfhelp supports the priorities of our partner organizations, including continued investment in all the Council initiatives that support aging programs, found in Schedule C. A few examples include:

- Support our Seniors provides diverse services across the City
- SU-CASA programs are creative aging art programs at senior centers
- Senior Centers for Immigrant Populations support New York City's diverse older adults with culturally competent services
- Healthy Aging Initiative provides support for various health-promotion programs
- Social Adult Day offers additional support for seniors with high levels of need, including for Selfhelp's Alzheimer's Resource Program

We appreciate the City Council for consistent support of these program and all senior services.

### **COLA**

The Mayor and City Council have taken important steps to undo decades of underfunding in human services wages with multi-year cost-of-living investments. Investing in this workforce is essential to addressing the gender wage gap and uplifting thousands of New Yorkers close to the poverty line. We support the Human Services Council by requesting a 3% cost-of-living adjustment which is needed to ensure human services workers can thrive in NYC.

## 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.