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**Testimony from Selfhelp Community Services
New York City Council
FY21 Executive Budget Public Testimony
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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 long standing and 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.

During the COVID-19 pandemic, Selfhelp has continued to serve our 20,000 elderly and vulnerable clients through our range of programs. Our home health aides have been provided much needed at-home care, our frontline staff have been caring for individuals in the Community Guardian Program,



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and all of our social workers from our community-based programs have been checking on their clients to ensure access to food, safe shelter, medical care, and more. We have quickly expanded our Virtual Senior Center to include members of Selfhelp's senior centers, NORCs, Case Management, and Housing in order to reduce social isolation among our clients. Our team is working every day to ensure our clients continue to live with dignity through this challenging time.

In today's testimony, I will focus on our budget priorities, additional information is included in the testimony submitted by Selfhelp for the preliminary budget.

Holocaust Survivor Initiative

This year, we are urging the City Council to renew this initiative, with continued support for Selfhelp and our Holocaust Survivor Program. As the largest provider of comprehensive services to survivors in North America, Selfhelp Community Services is uniquely positioned to assist this last generation of survivors. We are urging the City Council to renew this initiative, with continued support for Selfhelp and our Holocaust Survivor Program. This funding supports Selfhelp's direct social services to frail, isolated, and financially needy Holocaust Survivors.

The need is immense. Half of the approximately 4,800 survivors served by Selfhelp live at or below the poverty line. And though the number of survivors is declining, the needs of the remaining population are more intense and costly.

During the COVID-19 pandemic, Selfhelp social workers have been providing the specialized care that survivors deserve due to the trauma they experienced during the Holocaust. There are many unique struggles survivors face today: the isolation, the return of memories of hiding, rationing food, being away from family, as well as sickness and death. They are also among the most vulnerable and susceptible to this disease. This funding supports Selfhelp social workers who are reducing social isolation through frequent phone calls and assisting with needs such as food, bill pay, and more. Because of this funding, survivors are not alone.

This commitment allows us to turn the words "never forget" into action, and the City's investment helps us serve this population so they can continue to age with independence and dignity.

Discretionary Funding For Core Senior Services

Thank you to the New York City Council for the continued, significant investment in senior services throughout the five boroughs. Each year, the Council puts in more than \$28 million in funding for senior services initiatives, in addition to individual discretionary investments. FY21 can be no different. Now more than ever, whether held virtually or in-person, these programs are crucial to preventing isolation and supporting older adults.

We provide critical services to older adults and are concerned about the announcement made on April 21, 2020, that the City may not reimburse expenses incurred after March 22 on FY20 discretionary contracts deemed non-essential. Discretionary funding supports many Selfhelp programs, including



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senior centers, NORCs, case management, the virtual senior center, social adult day care, and our Holocaust survivor program. We understand the budget constraints the City is facing now and into next year, but discretionary funding is critical to many communities, particularly those most impacted by COVID-19. We ask that the Council works with us and the rest of the sector to preserve critical discretionary funding next year.

Initiative funding is critical for nonprofits and programs that support older New Yorkers. Cutting any amount of DFTA's budget by eliminating initiatives would have a dramatic impact to the nonprofits who receive the funding and the clients served. For example, the Elie Wiesel Holocaust Survivor Initiative provides crucial case management services to the 50% of survivors living at or below the poverty line. Through Support Our Seniors and the Digital Inclusion Initiatives, socially isolated and homebound seniors are able to connect to the world outside through our Virtual Senior Center. At our four NORC programs, initiative funding keeps the doors open, and enables thousands of older adults to age in the communities they call home, in the City they built.

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

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.



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Transportation programs have become a lifeline for older Queens residents who are responding to COVID-19 social distancing requirements by avoiding public transportation. This program ensures that older adults have affordable, accessible, and reliable transportation services to their medical appointments.

Virtual Senior Center

For seniors who are homebound—particularly during the current global health pandemic—Selfhelp’s Virtual Senior Center (VSC) is a vital source of face-to-face social interaction. The VSC enables homebound seniors to participate virtually in intriguing live classes, tour world famous museums, interact with peers, engage in wellness activities, and most importantly expand their social network.

Selfhelp considers it vital to address social isolation – not only because it has a dramatic impact on quality of life in older adults, but also because isolation has been linked to poorer health outcomes including higher blood pressure, greater susceptibility to the flu and other infectious diseases, earlier onset of dementia, and shorter life span.

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.

While the Virtual Senior Center was designed with homebound seniors in mind, suddenly we are all homebound. Those once able to travel to their local Selfhelp senior center or participate in their supportive housing activities are now unable to do so. Our Virtual Senior Center (VSC) has truly become a lifeline. Since March 2020, the Virtual Senior Center has increased enrollment by 55% as they’ve added members from the Selfhelp community, including members of senior centers, NORCs, housing, and case management. Now, over 300 older adults are logging on to the Virtual Senior Center for lessons, discussions, and socializing, all from the safety of their homes. Margo’s story explains the importance of the VSC:

Margo is a member of our Benjamin Rosenthal Prince Street Innovative Senior Center, who is now participating in the VSC. Though she misses her Senior Center friends and the activities she enjoyed there, including ping pong, fitness classes, and tai chi, she is grateful to be able to fill her schedule with programming from our Virtual Senior Center. Margo shared, “I look at the [VSC] calendar every day to see what’s going on...I appreciate everything Selfhelp has been doing.”

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.



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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.

During COVID-19, Selfhelp's senior center social workers have been connected to their members through phone calls and emails. Our social workers are providing essential services helping older adults access food, medicine, and resources to maintain their mental and physical health, such as Selfhelp's Virtual Senior Center. Members of Selfhelp's five senior centers were invited to join, at no cost, Selfhelp's Virtual Senior Center to join an online community of live, interactive weekly classes.

Naturally Occurring Retirement Communities (NORCs)

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.

Without the support of the City Council many NORC programs would not be able to continue to provide critical services to so many older adults in New York City. We support an investment of at least \$1.7 million to ensure salary parity for DFTA-funded NORCs. The FY 2019 and 2020 budgets included \$1 million from the Administration to support select NORC programs previously funded by the Council; however, these funds were never baselined. If this funding is not restored, the future of these NORC programs is uncertain. Finally, the FY 2020 final budget included \$5,325,325 in City Council NORC Initiative funding to support dozens of NORCs and Neighborhood NORCs. This included \$1.3 million to fill a funding gap for health and nursing services in NORCs, as well as funding to open five new NORCs. We urge the Council to restore these funds to ensure these programs can continue to provide services to NORC residents.

Throughout the COVID-19 health crisis, NORCs have provided critical response services to thousands of older New Yorkers, making continued investment in this program critical. NORC staff provide wellness checks to address mental health and social isolation; assist seniors in accessing food and other supplies, and coordinate services in residential buildings not developed specifically for seniors. These activities were crucial prior to COVID-19 and have become even more important since.

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



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healthy and stably housed; without these services, their options for receiving appropriate community-based care would be greatly diminished.

Thank you for your ongoing support for the NORC program and for your consideration.

The Need for Affordable Housing

Selfhelp 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 Lettire 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

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.

At each Selfhelp building, we offer service coordination through SHASAM, which makes available social work services, education, and recreation, as well as referrals 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



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adults to reduce their chances of being hospitalized and/or visiting an emergency room which reduced their overall Medicaid and/or Medicare costs.

During COVID-19, Selfhelp's SHASAM social workers are checking on their residents while working from home to honor appropriate social distancing measures. In partnership with Live On NY and philanthropic support, Selfhelp housing arranged meal distribution to residents who were facing food insecurity because they were not signed up for meal delivery or home care services. Over 550 meals have been delivered to residents in Selfhelp housing and this will be continuing on an ongoing basis as needed. These essential services, and more, are keeping older adults healthy and at home during this health pandemic.

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.

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.



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