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**Testimony from Selfhelp Community Services
New York City Council
FY21 Aging Committee Hearing 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 Aging Committee Chair Margaret Chin, and the members of the committee for the opportunity to testify today.

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 provide 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.



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During the COVID-19 pandemic, Selfhelp has continued to serve our 20,000 elderly and vulnerable clients through our range of home and community-based 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, and all of our social workers from our community-based programs, including senior centers, have been checking on their clients by phone or Zoom 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. We are pleased to have the opportunity to testify about senior centers, one of the core programs that supports older New Yorkers, including many immigrant seniors.

In today's testimony, I will focus on Selfhelp's experience as a senior center provider and our innovative program the Virtual Senior Center. COVID-19 and social distancing were not in our vocabulary several years ago when Selfhelp started the Virtual Senior Center (VSC). We knew that this unique and transformational program was the first of its kind, engaging homebound older adults through interactive, real-time online classes. We knew that it was effectively reducing social isolation by creating social networks for otherwise homebound seniors, connecting them to each other and to the outside world. But what we didn't know is that it would become a lifeline during a pandemic. In only a few months, VSC participation doubled with new members joining each week. We have learned that many seniors have a new interest in virtual social interaction and community and we believe the VSC should become a permanent part of the city's infrastructure to support older adults.

While social isolation used to be something we associate with old age, it's now something affects everyone – and we all know how it feels. We have a new appreciation for the importance of virtual programming and technology to stay connected.

Just as New York City has invested in home delivered meals for homebound seniors, we believe that our Virtual Senior Center is a senior center for homebound seniors, and we are eager to work with the City as part of the new RFP process to establish this idea more broadly.

There are four areas I'll be focusing on today:

Firstly, although the senior center buildings are closed for programming, our staff has provided emotional support, virtual programs, and social services to our 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. Members of Selfhelp's five senior centers were invited to join, at no cost, our Virtual Senior Center which offers live,



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interactive online classes. Our staff made over 42,000 calls to clients while New York went on pause. Our staff quickly adapted to virtual programming providing education and socialization to hundreds of seniors.

Each Selfhelp senior center continues to conduct unique programs. Latimer Gardens senior center delivers meals to NYCHA senior residents, Austin Street senior center served as a hub for delivery of kosher packed meals. Clearview and Maspeth senior centers continued to operate a medical transportation program. All staff are working to make sure that the members will come back to thriving and inviting centers, whenever it is deemed safe to return in person.

Secondly, we believe that there safe ways to restart food services and we are ready to work with the City on establishing and implementing a new system. Our staff has been ensuring members and all seniors have access to food, through Meals-on-Wheels, DFTA food programs, and the GetFood program. While we are ready to cook and serve food to our community, we recognize that there will need to be a new system in place to distribute food, possibly grab-and-go, or another model that allows socially distancing to be enforced for the safety of members and staff.

Thirdly, although we are eager to return to the centers and to serve our members as before; we are cautious about planning for future programming. We appreciate DFTA's careful approach to re-opening, taking into consideration both members and staff. The safety and wellbeing of our staff and community is our utmost concern.

Fourth, as we have all adapted our programs virtually we can starkly see the technology disparity among seniors in terms of access to devices, Wi-Fi, and technology skills. We need a comprehensive plan to address this divide as we look at the future of services to older adults.

I'd like to turn now to how Selfhelp's unique and innovative program, the Virtual Senior Center, is addressing the needs of homebound older adults. As I mentioned, we believe that as part of the RFP process, the City should invest in a senior center for homebound older adults.

Reducing Social Isolation: 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.

Developed ten years ago, the Virtual Senior Center (VSC) has been a trailblazer in meeting the needs of homebound older adults in NYC while combating social isolation. We believe that the



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Virtual Senior Center can become a lifeline for the thousands of vulnerable older New Yorkers currently isolated at home.

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.

While the Virtual Senior Center was designed with homebound seniors in mind, suddenly we are all have a new understanding of what it means to be isolated from friends and family and only connected through a screen. Those once able to travel to their local Selfhelp senior center or participate in activities are now unable to do so. Our Virtual Senior Center (VSC) has truly become a lifeline. Over 400 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."

Participants use a personal computer or tablet to log into the VSC where they review the weekly class calendar. In each class, all participants can see, hear and speak to each other in real time. Classes are offered in English, Mandarin Chinese, Russian, Spanish, and Korean. The VSC platform has the ability to engage homebound older adults at home while increasing their social network.

Conclusion

Selfhelp is grateful to the City Council for always emphasizing the needs of older adults in policy decisions and budget allocations. 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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