



**Selfhelp Community Services, Inc.**  
520 Eighth Avenue  
New York, New York 10018  
212.971.7600  
[www.selfhelp.net](http://www.selfhelp.net)

**Testimony from Selfhelp Community Services  
New York City Council  
FY22 Executive Budget Public Testimony**

My name is Katie Foley and I am the Managing Director, External Affairs and Communications at Selfhelp Community Services. Thank you to Finance Committee Chair Daniel Dromm and the members of the committee for the opportunity to testify today on the FY22 Executive 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 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



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 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.

Our staff has continued to call, email, or video chat with our clients to ensure that they have access to food, safe shelter, medical care, distanced social programs, current public health guidelines, and more. Our programs have gone virtual and telephonic. We are offering weekly social and health classes online in an effort to reduce the extreme social isolation felt by many seniors during the pandemic. In FY22 we are prepared to continue providing our services remotely or transition to in-person programs once it is considered safe by NYC and DFTA. Our team is working every day to ensure our clients continue to live with dignity through this challenging time.

### **FY22 Budget**

Selfhelp is appreciative of the investments included in the Executive Budget to both better support older New Yorkers through programs such as Senior Centers, as well as to support the human services sector at large. More specifically, we are deeply appreciative of the decision to fully restore funding for the Indirect Cost Rate initiative; implement the \$10 million of outstanding model Senior Center budget funding promises; and include \$39.4 million towards Senior Centers and NORCs. These investments are an important step towards bolstering a system that has been critical to supporting older New Yorkers through the historically difficult fight against COVID-19.

However, given that the Department for the Aging (DFTA) budget remains at less than ½ of 1% of the City budget despite older adults representing a rapidly increasing 20% of the population, the City must go farther in its Adopted Budget to truly set the trajectory for a recovery that leaves no New Yorker behind.

Centered around the inequities made apparent during the pandemic, we support three major



investments to better address senior hunger, the digital divide, and wages for essential workers.

1. **\$16.6 million for Home-delivered Meals.** Such funding would provide \$13.6 million for weekday meals and \$3 million for weekend and holiday meals, both to increase capacity to meet new demand and bring the per-meal rate to the national average. The home-delivered meals program, which is different from GetFood, serves older New Yorkers who, due to chronic illness, mobility limitation, or disability, will remain homebound long after COVID-19 fully subsides. For many meal recipients, this meal delivery represents not only a significant source of nutrients, but the only contact they will have with the outside world that day.
2. **\$4.4 Million to address the digital divide.** \$4.4 million of this funding would allow for improved technology and service access for older adults by investing in the technology infrastructure at older adult centers, as well as directly supporting individual access to technology.
3. **\$48 Million Cost of Living Adjustment (COLA) for essential human services workers.** Throughout COVID-19, human services workers across sectors have stepped up to provide critical services in new ways, including to keep New Yorkers older New Yorkers fed, assist older adults in receiving vaccinations, and combating the life-threatening effects of social isolation. Despite this, the wages of these workers, the majority of whom are women and Black and brown individuals, are slated to remain stagnant. It is critical that the budget rectify this, allocating \$48 million in funding to ensure all human services workers can receive a 3% COLA.
  - a. \$1.7 million is needed to ensure parity for NORC Directors and Older Adult Center staff.

Recognizing the significant role that City Council discretionary plays in meeting the hyper-local needs within districts, these funds must also be restored to FY20 levels and bolstered as appropriate, including by restoring \$2,040,000 that was previously made available through the “Healthy Aging” initiative.

### **Selfhelp Budget Priorities**

In today’s testimony, I will focus on Selfhelp’s budget priorities.

### **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 5,300 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.

We are grateful for the City's ongoing commitment to this population, even in difficult budget years. For FY22, Selfhelp is seeking funding from the Initiative to support direct social services to frail, isolated and financially needy Holocaust survivors and our Holocaust education program, Witness Theater.

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.

### **Senior Transportation Program**

We are seeking to expand our established transportation program that provides free round-trip transportation to medical appointments for seniors living in Queens. With support from Council Member Paul Vallone and the Queens Delegation, Selfhelp has operated a senior transportation program that provides free transportation to and from medical appointments for five years.

Before the COVID pandemic we were seeing the need for transportation growing each year. The pandemic has significantly increased the need for safe, private transportation options for older adults. This program includes offering transportation to vaccine appointments and we expect to serve many seniors this winter and spring who need assistance getting to and from



their vaccination site. Due to the demand for accessible transportation and popularity of this program we believe that there is a need for increased funding for transportation programs.

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.

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.

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 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, the definition of homebound has changed dramatically since the COVID-19 pandemic. Suddenly we 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. Even as vaccinations increase and restrictions lift, more people and older adult communities are looking towards virtual programming as a hybrid or sole option. Our Virtual Senior Center (VSC) has truly become a lifeline. Over 850 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 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.

*Monica H., a Chinese speaking VSC member from Benjamin Rosenthal Prince Street Innovative Senior Center shares, "In the past few months, we had Open Chat every day between 6-7 pm where we can socialize and support each other. It really gives a lot of support and comfort during the challenging time."*

The VSC also offers community groups and organizations the technology and guidance needed to efficiently connect to and deliver their classes and services virtually to their populations, and to do it within an easy to manage and secure platform.

### **Older Adult Centers (Senior Centers) and Naturally Occurring Retirement Communities (NORCs) Request for Proposals**

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.

New York City is entering a critical phase of the recovery, and the senior services network is focused on vaccine outreach, continuing emergency food distribution, and engaging a senior population as they prepare to return to in-person activities, as well as the recent RFP. We support the call to:

- Further extend the Older Adult Center & NORC RFP submission date to allow providers adequate time to respond to the request
- Provide a model budget for both Older Adult Centers, Network OACs, and NORCs



- Provide greater clarity on the NORC portion of the RFP
- Include COLAs, cost escalators, greater indirect funding, and a mechanism to ensure that providers can receive more funds should they serve more people
- Release the community assessments and information gathered to inform the RFP

During COVID-19, Selfhelp's senior center and NORC social workers have been connected to their members through phone calls, emails, and video chats. 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. These activities were crucial prior to COVID-19 and have become even more important since the start of the pandemic.

Selfhelp provides social services to residents at four Naturally Occurring Retirement Communities (NORCs), including one Neighborhood NORC throughout Queens and services at five senior centers, including an innovative senior center and one located in NYCHA housing.

Thank you for your ongoing support for senior centers and NORC programs.

### **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, located in Queens, the Bronx, Brooklyn, and Long Island, which provide housing to close to 1,500 low- and moderate-income senior residents in attractive, functional apartments with social services available, 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  $\frac{1}{3}$  of individuals receiving SCIE 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.



### **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 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 maintaining contact with residents through phone and video. In partnership with LiveOn 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. 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](http://www.selfhelp.net).



## **COLA**

The human services sector stepped up to meet the need of New Yorkers in crisis and it's critical for the Adopted FY22 budget to include restoration of ICR funding as well as these two investments in the human services workers:

- The restoration of the COLA on the personnel services line of all human services contracts at a rate of 3% at a cost of \$48 million for FY22.
- A plan for the administration to promote wage equity in the public sector by correcting the pay disparities the human services workforce experience, as outlined in the City Council's FY22 Preliminary Budget Response.

## **Conclusion**

Thank you for the opportunity to testify. New York's more than 1.8 million older adults are counting on these investments to demonstrate meaningful action for aging in response to COVID-19. On behalf of the 20,000 clients we serve, I am grateful for the Council's support on so many important programs.

