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**Testimony from Selfhelp Community Services, Inc.  
New York City Council Aging Committee  
FY19 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 Aging Committee Chair Margaret Chin and the members of the committee for the opportunity to testify today on the FY19 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 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 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 Centers**

We commend the Department for the Aging (DFTA) and the City Council for the ongoing commitment to senior centers since the beginning of the model budget process. We look forward to the allocation of the first phase of the investments made in FY18. 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. Further, the investment in the model budget for staff helps address an ongoing issue related to salary parity that has been a concern for Selfhelp since the case management salaries were raised. We have now seen the impact of increased salaries in the aging network, and are grateful for this important step. Additional investments in the next two years will help support additional needs that are more specific to each center, including rent and food costs.

While we are appreciative of the model budget process, we hope that additional investments in the next few years will move us toward the goal of 'right-sizing' staffing resources and expanding programming to meet client needs. Our five senior centers serve over 10,000 people and continue to be under staffed given the significant need from the community, and the high-quality programming our centers offer. Additional investment in senior center options will allow centers to be staffed to meet the capacity of each community and to expand programming to meet the diverse needs within each center.

## **Resident Advisor Service Coordinator**

Selfhelp appreciates the strong support of Mayor deBlasio and the City Council for senior affordable housing in New York City. However, when it comes to housing for older New Yorkers, it's not just the bricks and mortar that helps us achieve our joint goals. Selfhelp believes that housing plus services is the right model to ensure that seniors are able to thrive as they age in their communities, and the best outcomes for older adults are achieved when social services support client health.

Selfhelp's ten affordable residences offer seniors the opportunity to lead independent lives in their homes and communities with the additional support of the unique Selfhelp Active Services for the Aging Model (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. This model results in a savings to the Medicaid program by keeping low-income seniors out of more costly levels of care such as assisted living or nursing homes.

With the support of JPMorgan Chase, we recently conducted a study of the residents in our senior affordable housing program. We compared Medicaid data for residents in our housing in two zip codes and compared it to other seniors living in the same zip codes over two years. We found the following:

- 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 study of Selfhelp's housing-plus-services model helps to demonstrate that affordable housing for seniors, complemented by an array of services available as requested, can make a strong impact on how residents manage chronic disease and the effects of aging -- and in the process, reduce spending on health care.

We urge the City Council to advocate for the creation of a senior housing resident coordinator program, which invests in social workers within new and existing senior affordable housing. Resident assistance includes an array of services that promote healthy living by extending independence and improving quality of life. An investment by the City for service coordinators outside of the SARA program would provide support for all older New Yorkers to age with the independence and dignity they deserve.

### **Holocaust Survivor Initiative:**

For the past few years, the City Council, with the leadership and advocacy of Council Member Espinal, along with the Jewish Caucus started and expanded the Elie Wiesel Holocaust Survivor Initiative. We are urging the City Council to renew this initiative, with continued support for Selfhelp and our Holocaust Survivor Program. In FY19, Selfhelp is seeking \$350,000 to fund direct social services to frail, isolated, and financially needy Holocaust survivors. More than 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 have over 230 survivors on a waitlist in Brooklyn that we are working to address with the FY18 City Council initiative grant. Additional funds in FY19 will help not only continue to address this population of survivors in Brooklyn, but also will support direct social services to frail, isolated and financially needy Holocaust survivors. 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.

### **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 [recent 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's [recent annual summary](#) noted, loneliness and social isolation are associated with increased mortality among older adults.

The VSC has been able to expand due to the support of members of the City Council. However, in order to address the needs of this population across the City, we strongly encourage DFTA and City Council to consider creating new investments in technology services, such as the Virtual Senior Center,

that can help reduce social isolation amongst homebound older adults. As we've done in the past, we're requesting support from various Councilmembers to provide access in various districts, and we are also seeking \$25,000 from the Queens Delegation to expand the Virtual Senior Center to homebound older adults throughout the borough. Last year, the Queens delegation awarded us \$15,000 to offer the VSC, and we hope to be able to continue and grow this program with that funding. Additional investments in technology services will result in reduced social isolation and overall better health for older adults in New York City.

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 activities. A cornerstone activity of the program is its interactive, real-time classes where participants can hear, see and talk with each other in an interactive session. Over 40 classes are typically offered each week ranging from art history to current events to museum tours to weight training and other exercise programming. This groundbreaking program effectively reduces social isolation by creating social networks for otherwise homebound seniors, connecting them to each other and to the outside world.

In addition, the program has been shown to break down barriers of digital literacy, reduce social isolation by up to 85% and improve participants' quality of life by 97%. As one of our participants said, *"The program is truly extraordinary. We're homebound. It's a gift. I live alone but I don't feel alone."*

Through independent research, Selfhelp assessed the impact of the Virtual Senior Center on the health of participants, and we found:

- 85% reduction in social isolation as a result of participation in the VSC
- 51% increase in self-reported health status because of VSC participation
- 97% of participants reported that the VSC improved their quality of life

Launched in 2010 with 6 participants, today the program has become a lifeline for over 400 participants throughout New York City, Long Island, Baltimore, Chicago, Pittsburgh, and San Diego. Participants enjoy taking part in engaging live classes facilitated by dozens of instructors, chatting with friends, enjoying yoga, learning wellness tips and discussing politics, surfing the Internet and playing games all from the comfort of their own homes. To serve a broader community, the VSC is now available in multiple languages including Mandarin, English, Korean, Russian, and Spanish.

### **Senior Transportation Program**

With support from Council Member Paul Vallone and the Queens Delegation, Selfhelp has been piloting 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 expand access to this program. With funding provided by the Queens Delegation in FY18, Selfhelp provided 194 rides to 125 older adults in 12 City Council districts within Queens. As a result of the demand for accessible transportation and popularity of this program, the funding was utilized quickly, and we believe that with additional funding, Selfhelp will be able to establish a program that can serve

additional individuals. In FY19, Selfhelp has requested \$25,000 from the Queens Delegation to continue and expand the borough-wide program.

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.

### **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:

- NORCs which bring needed social services and supports to areas of dense senior populations
- 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.

### **Prompt Contracting**

As a result of the model budget process, and the Council's significant support for our programs, we are pleased to see a significant investment in programs serving older adults, especially in recent years. However, as a result of this investment, we have experienced significant delays in contracting and accessing the funding. These delays make it difficult for our programs to provide high quality, consistent services. The ability to execute contracts promptly is critical for providers and we support the City's ongoing work to look at the contracting process for nonprofits.

### **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.