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**Testimony from Selfhelp Community Services
New York City Council
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My name is Katie Foley and I am the Managing Director of External Affairs and Communications at Selfhelp Community Services. Thank you to Aging Committee Chair Margaret Chin and Technology Committee Chair Bob Holden, and the members of the committees 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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COVID Response

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 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 have been checking on their clients by phone or Zoom to ensure access to food, safe shelter, medical care, and more. We have expanded and enhanced our Virtual Senior Center to include members of Selfhelp's community-based programs and Holocaust Survivor Program in order to reduce social isolation among our clients. Now that we are in the vaccine distribution phase of the pandemic, the importance of access to technology is a necessity. When a client doesn't have internet access, it's often our social workers or the client's family who are working with the client by phone to schedule an appointment. Our team is working every day to ensure our clients continue to live with dignity through this challenging time.

Access to Technology

As we have adapted our programs to be virtual 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.

The COVID pandemic has widened the technology gap among our clients. Thousands of older New Yorkers need access to stable and affordable internet, computers or laptops, and computer skills classes. 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 related technology needed to stay connected.

We strongly support closing the technology gap among older adults. Older adults deserve access to the same technology that many of us take for granted. They need smart phones to plan their safe and reliable transportation around the city, to communicate with health care workers and social workers, and more recently to navigate the COVID vaccine system with QR codes.

As our staff began remote work at the start of the COVID pandemic, we could see how the technology gap was often the most visible for the clients who needed the most help. Those without family or neighbor support, those who are low income, non-English speakers who needed to navigate English-only websites, and the frail elderly in need of extra services to live safely at home during quarantine. When possible, our workers creatively helped our clients learn how to use zoom or Facetime on their smart phones and how to take photos of important documents needed to sign up for services that allowed them to stay safely at home while the pandemic continued.

Sometimes we hear the myth that older adults are not interested or capable of using current technology. We know this is false from many years of experience with our Virtual Senior Center. With hundreds of older participants over ten years, we've seen participants from 60-101 years old learn to use the computer, access email, join video chats, and become active members of an online community. We know that access to interactive virtual programming reduces social isolation and helps people feel better, but the



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programming needs to be coupled with skills classes for older adult learners and computer technical support.

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 by allowing participants to join interactive live classes and peer-to-peer chats. With the ongoing recommendation for older adults to remain at home except for essential errands, 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.

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 both during and after the COVID pandemic.

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. Older adults are able to log 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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