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**Testimony from Selfhelp Community Services, Inc.  
New York City Department for the Aging  
Annual Plan Summary Public Hearing  
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Manhattan**

My name is Katie Foley and I am the Director of Public Affairs at Selfhelp Community Services. Thank you to Commissioner Donna Corrado and the staff at the Department for the Aging (DFTA) for the opportunity to testify today about the 2019-2020 Annual Plan Summary.

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 human service agencies in the New York metropolitan area, with 46 programs throughout Manhattan, Brooklyn, Queens, the Bronx, and Nassau County. Selfhelp provides a broad set of services to more than 20,000 older New Yorkers and other vulnerable individuals 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 goal of helping clients to live with dignity 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 case management programs; five senior centers including one of New York City's first Innovative Senior Centers; home health care and home health aide training; client centered technology programs including the Virtual Senior Center; court-appointed guardianship programs; and the Selfhelp Alzheimer's Resource Program (SHARP).

Selfhelp is grateful for DFTA's ongoing support for many important senior programs, including senior centers, NORCs, case management, affordable housing and social adult day programs. We are appreciative of the focus in this year's Annual Plan on strengthening existing services as well as supporting new initiatives while maintaining a commitment to the key priority service areas. Today I will focus on a few of Selfhelp's priorities that we hope that DFTA will expand in the implementation of the Annual Plan.

**Affording Housing + Social Services**

We strongly support DFTA's goal of encouraging the state to expand affordable older adult housing units and financing for the development of new housing for older New Yorkers. Selfhelp's eleven affordable residences offer seniors the opportunity to lead independent lives in a warm and supportive environment. At each building, we offer the 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.

Recently published research shows that residents of Selfhelp's housing are healthier than their neighbors who do not live in high-quality housing. The full report is available through the Journal for Health Affairs, and a white paper published by Selfhelp is forthcoming, and will include results that include both Medicare and Medicaid data. We found 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

We know that housing plus services is the right model to ensure that seniors are able to thrive as they age in their communities. Service coordinators within affordable senior housing can reduce healthcare costs and keep seniors healthier at home. We are happy to share the results from the research study with DFTA.

### **Senior Transportation Program**

With support from Speaker Corey Johnson, Council Member Paul Vallone, and the Queens Delegation, Selfhelp has been running a senior transportation program to provide free transportation to and from medical appointments. Due to the success of the program and continued demand from individuals, we are seeking to expand access to this program and use this model to supplement DFTA's current transportation program. For FY19, Selfhelp has received \$35,000 from the Speaker and Queens Delegation to continue and expand this borough-wide program.

Based on feedback received by individuals who benefitted from the program, as well as the demand for services, we know that a free transportation 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 this program removed a significant barrier for older adults in caring for their health.

### **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.

Selfhelp is requesting that the remaining \$10 million that has been committed to this process be allocated in FY20, instead of FY21. Allocating the remaining funding in this next fiscal year will have a very positive impact on the operations of our programs, and is critical before the next RFP for senior centers to be released in calendar year 2020.

We remain concerned that other costs beyond salaries were not included in the model budget process, in particular for food, which is a significant cost for senior centers. We hope that the allocations in the subsequent years will focus on food, rent, OTPS, and other associated costs.

We know that there continues to be a need for accessible and nutritious meals for older adults in all boroughs. We serve over 200,000 meals each year at our five senior centers and request for additional funding for congregate and home delivered meals to be baselined to increase the reimbursement rates, especially since food costs were excluded from the model budget process. This funding is particularly important for culturally-competent meals, such as the kosher meals provided at our Austin Street Senior Center in Forest Hills. Since these meals are catered, we have less flexibility preparing the kosher meals, and rising food costs were not included in the model budget process.

We are appreciative of investment in senior center staffing through the model budget process. The investment helped address an ongoing issue related to salary parity that had been a concern for Selfhelp since the case management salaries were raised. We hope that additional investments in the next few years will move us toward the goal of 'right-sizing' staffing resources within all DFTA-funded programs, including NORCs. Our four NORC programs serve more than 1,300 people. It is difficult to recruit and retain highly trained staff without salary parity across all programs.

### **Virtual Senior Center**

Selfhelp is at the forefront of using technology to reduce social isolation and feelings of loneliness among older adults. I want to highlight Selfhelp's Virtual Senior Center since this program addresses multiple priority service areas within DFTA's annual plan. Selfhelp's Virtual Senior Center has proven to effectively and profoundly reduce social isolation. Participation 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%.

The Virtual Senior Center (VSC) engages homebound seniors by using technology to connect them with other participants in a range of online 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 35 classes are 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, connecting them to each other and to the outside world.

Today the program has become a lifeline for over 350 participants. To serve a broader community, the VSC is now available in multiple languages including Chinese, English, Korean and Russian. We strongly encourage DFTA to consider creating new investments in technology services, such as the Virtual Senior Center, that can help reduce social isolation among homebound older adults.

### **Conclusion**

Thank you for the opportunity to testify today. On behalf of the 20,000 individuals we serve, I am grateful for DFTA's support on so many important programs.