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**Testimony from Selfhelp Community Services
New York City Council Aging Committee
Oversight – Senior Services and Centers in NYCHA
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My name is Mayer Waxman and I am the Managing Director of Senior Centers at Selfhelp Community Services.

Thank you to the Aging Committee Chair Margaret Chin and the Public Housing Chair Alicka Ampry-Samuel and the members of the committees for the opportunity to testify on senior services and senior centers in NYCHA.

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 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; 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.

Selfhelp operates five senior centers throughout Queens, including one located in the community center of NYCHA's Latimer Gardens complex in Flushing. There are unique needs within our Latimer Gardens senior center, which serves more than 1,700 people each year. Together, our centers have over 10,000 members and we serve over 200,000 meals each year. We strongly believe in the role that senior centers play in providing high quality nutritious meals, engaging activities, and health and wellness programming. In order to provide valuable services to the residents and to the community, NYCHA's Latimer Gardens has partnered with DFTA, as well as with the Department of Youth and Community



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Development and their not-for-profit contractors to offer senior services and youth programs to the community. This partnership provides immense benefits to the local community.

We are grateful for the Council's long standing and ongoing support for senior centers and for always emphasizing the needs of older adults in policy decisions and budget allocations. In today's testimony, I will focus on our experience operating a senior center in NYCHA's Latimer Gardens complex.

Infrastructure Repair and Maintenance

We are fortunate to have a collaborative relationship with the local NYCHA office. Our senior center staff has regularly scheduled meetings with NYCHA and has found the local office to be responsive and responsible. This partnership provides immense benefits to the community, although it does not always provide support for necessary repairs and upgrades.

When a repair is needed, the senior and youth programs need to report the repair and obtain a ticket number through NYCHA's standard tenant repair structure. The response to such repair requests is often slow. This slow response is troubling for the individuals and families who live in NYCHA housing and is exacerbated when there are hundreds of individuals relying on community centers. Recently, our team needed to file three NYCHA repair tickets for a bathroom stall door that fell off the hinges. Our team needed to file three tickets because the repair system closed the first two tickets without notice or resolution. We understand that the ticketing system is meant to ensure accountability and transparency, but the system needs to be updated so tickets are not closed arbitrarily and repairs are able to be resolved within a timely manner. We also advocate for the local NYCHA offices to be empowered to resolve small issues in a timely manner, such as bathroom stall doors or broken locks. A challenge for our team is maintaining our high standards of service while working within the NYCHA repair and maintenance system and waiting for each ticket to be resolved. We are responsible for the care of the community room during our hours of operation and we continue to be held accountable for issues that are in the NYCHA ticketing system and have not yet been repaired, such as the bathroom stall door or air ventilation.

Latimer Gardens Community Center operated without functional AC, heat, or air ventilation from late August through November 2018. We are deeply grateful for the assistance from Councilmember Koo's office and DFTA to resolve this issue this week. Unfortunately, we had to operate through hot summer days and cold winter weather without adequate temperature control in the senior center. Recently, 20 members of our Chinese opera group and ping-pong group had relocated to another space within the center or stopped coming because of lack of heat. We were concerned that if we continued to have cold rooms we would be unable to meet the needs of the seniors in the Latimer Gardens community. We are grateful that the issue has been resolved and our center can continue to provide high-quality programming with adequate heat.

We suggest that there be some channel created between DFTA, NYCHA, DYCD, and other partner City agencies to more quickly address the communal repair needs within NYCHA buildings.



Custodial Care

The community space is shared among the senior center, DYCD's contracted after-school program, and the Residents Association. Given the regular use of this space, we have found that the level of custodial care provided by NYCHA is not sufficient. Recently, the community center was used as a voting site for Election Day so the senior center was closed. The following day, our senior center staff and program maintenance staff were responsible for cleaning the community center so our programs could function properly. We advocate for additional funding to accommodate custodial needs within the community center.

Security

In New York City, security is an important issue, especially at programs serving vulnerable populations. Our senior center is open to all older community members and we strive to create a safe and welcoming environment for all. Currently, there is very limited access to funding for additional cameras or security guards which would allow our Director to have oversight of who is coming and going. Recently there was an attempted break-in at our office door and within our kitchen. Our team works closely with local police to report issues as they arise. We are grateful for Councilmember Koo's past investment in security in the residential areas of Latimer Gardens and advocate for additional funding to make cameras and security systems available for the community center.

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.



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