

THE COUNCIL OF THE CITY OF NEW YORK

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****FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE****

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CM CHIN CALLS ON DFTA TO DELAY SENIOR CENTER RFP UNTIL FY23

Seniors centers have been closed for 7 months, but providers have been asked to blindly agree to redesign the system for the next 3 years to a decade

NEW YORK – Today, Council Member Margaret S. Chin released the following statement to affirm her call on the Department for the Aging to revise the Senior Center Concept Paper and delay the Request for Proposals until FY23, which starts on July 1st, 2022:

“Senior centers have been at the forefront of serving the most vulnerable and at-risk New Yorkers during this pandemic. Over the course of a few weeks, providers quickly navigated obstacles in order to fit programming with the necessary health and safety guidelines. In the midst of ongoing uncertainty, DFTA is now unreasonably asking providers to submit RFPs that will dramatically restructure the system for years to come. Senior center providers cannot efficiently complete an RFP about the future, when DFTA has failed to address concerns about senior centers of the present. The recent turmoil of DOE school reopening should provide an example to DFTA of the result of lacking transparency and coordination. In order to avoid an instance like this from happening with senior centers, I urge DFTA and the administration to revise the concept paper and delay the RFP until FY23.”

The concept paper fails to address a number of issues, including rising food insecurity, the need for funding, and the necessary distribution of data. Although over 43,000 seniors are in need of meals, the concept paper does not acknowledge the critical role senior centers play in combatting food insecurity. Until DFTA addresses these issues and outlines clear steps on reopening, providers will not be able to accurately complete an RFP.

On October 5th, Council Member Chin sent a letter to DFTA, attached, urging for a revision of the concept paper and a delay to the senior center RFP until FY23. In this letter, Council Member Chin also urged for a pause on other upcoming RFPs. DFTA has not yet issued a response but has already moved forward in issuing the Elder Justice Program Concept Paper.

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THE COUNCIL OF
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SANITATION AND SOLID WASTE MANAGEMENT
IMMIGRATION

October 5, 2020

Commissioner Lorraine Cortés-Vázquez
New York City Department for the Aging
2 Lafayette St.
New York, NY 10007

Mary Graine
Contract Manager, NYC Department for the Aging
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New York, NY 10007

Dear Commissioner Vázquez and Ms. Biondi:

I am writing this letter to express my deep concerns with the Older Adult Centers Concept Paper, as published on August 21, 2020. Given DFTA's failure to address a multitude of concerns in the concept paper, including rising food insecurity, lack of technology, funding, and distribution of data, I am formally calling upon DFTA to extend current contracts for one year, with new contracts to commence July 1, 2022. **In order to allow senior centers to meet the growing needs of older New Yorkers, DFTA must revise the concept paper or provide an addendum that explicitly addresses these concerns and outlines the expansion of the senior center network.**

DFTA has failed to present senior centers with the funding and critical guidance needed to appropriately serve older New Yorkers while navigating this pandemic. **The disarray caused by DOE school reopening should warn us of the result of failed clarity and coordination.** Planning out the reopening of critical services should be an interagency effort, developed step-by-step with DOH and other public health authorities to ensure safety for all those involved. Yet, these plans remain unclear. How can case assistance, grab and go meals, and other functions return to centers, while other activities, including congregate meals and indoor singing classes, stay closed? For senior centers to avoid a situation similar to that of school reopening, I am asking DFTA to be safe, deliberate, and inclusive in a revised concept paper.

Despite the ongoing challenges the COVID-19 pandemic has presented, senior centers continue to serve the most vulnerable and at-risk New Yorkers by dramatically adjusting programs to fit the guidelines of social distancing. As of late September, New Yorkers aged 75 and older made up 48.9 percent of fatal COVID-19 cases, and those aged 65-74 constituted 24.7 percent. Although senior centers have proven their commitment to serving our oldest residents, they are still waiting on DFTA to outline how the department will support providers in combating food insecurity, transportation deserts, and inaccessibility of technology.

It is an unconscionable request to ask providers to blindly prepare for the future of senior centers when they have not yet been given guidance on programming in the present and recent past. During the September 21st City Council Aging Oversight Hearing, multiple providers voiced their support for a delay to the RFP. DFTA

and the City Council heard many providers convey their concerns about the many unknowns, and the need for clarity on what senior centers will look like in order to accurately complete an RFP.

By following the proposed timeline, DFTA will only further exacerbate the uncertainty caused by the COVID-19 pandemic. Instead, DFTA must amend the concept paper in order to strengthen coordination efforts, which will allow for wider support from the Council and key stakeholders. In a revised concept paper, DFTA must address these concerns:

- **Meal Services:** DFTA must provide guidance on the future of senior center meal services. Although there are more than 43,000 seniors in need of meals, DFTA's concept paper fails to acknowledge the critical role senior centers play in providing food and combating rising food insecurity for older New Yorkers. More specifically, centers need to be provided with information on the future of GetFood and grab and go meals, with specifications about what role, if any, senior volunteers can play to assist with meal service.
- **Transportation:** Many seniors travel across boroughs to visit their centers. The current concept paper does not address how safe transportation alternatives will be provided for those that may need one-on-one services and in-person service as the pandemic continues.
- **Technology:** It is shameful that DFTA brings up virtual programming in the concept paper without addressing how to bridge the digital divide, which prevents many from accessing virtual programs provided by senior centers. In New York City, over 330,000 seniors live below the poverty line, and 38% of low-income households are without internet. Hundreds of thousands of older New Yorkers cannot access the technology needed to partake in virtual programming. This discrepancy can severely affect senior isolation. Shifting resources and focus from the RFP to fighting technological inequity will likely allow DFTA to stimulate the extension of services to younger cohorts.
- **Growth:** I am especially concerned that the concept paper does not address how to serve New York's rapidly growing senior population. As of 2019, 220 centers were at 100 percent facility utilization. This number makes up 88 percent of all 249 DFTA senior centers. The data clearly demonstrates the small remaining capacity of the current system. As a result, DFTA must acknowledge this underlying issue, and outline how and where expected future growth will be accommodated in a revision of the concept paper.

It is clear that DFTA has not provided the adequate resources and guidelines to solve existing issues that seniors centers face. As a result, the city must revise the concept paper and push back the RFP. In a revised concept paper, DFTA must include clear data to help guide senior center providers through this pandemic. Providers and I look forward to reviewing DFTA's Community Needs Assessment together, which I hope will illuminate shifts in older populations, transportation deserts, growth projection across boroughs, and where to find higher need across Council Districts.

In addition, DFTA must follow through with administering an older adult survey, and ensure the results are made available to all stakeholders. In revising the concept paper, DFTA must also provide data about the older adults who have signed up for GetFood. To ensure full transparency, providers and the Council need an analysis and breakdown of these statistics based on Council District and borough. **I urge DFTA to provide an updated concept paper that is inclusive of the above data, along with a framework for DFTA's proposed expansion and the existing senior service deserts.**

Another unique concern to the concept paper is the types and number of models in the senior center network. DFTA is proposing to move away from the distinction between neighborhood (NSC) and innovative (ISC) centers, which was launched in the 2011 procurement. It is questionable that DFTA is reversing itself on a core

achievement, “a vision of the future of center programming,” according to the concept paper. These centers are robustly funded and include a more diverse range of activities and services. Given the low amount of funding in the concept paper, it can only be assumed that ISCs will see their funding reduced in the upcoming RFP, losing the innovation they have dramatically developed in the past decade. The concept paper does not present rationale for this decision, or explain what ISCs can work on to improve, which would provide an opportunity for stakeholders to respond to DFTA’s conclusions.

Ironically, the focus on “innovation” has made centers fearful of being asked to innovate without the proper funding or support from DFTA, leading to unstable nonprofits and a strained system. Rather than defunding ISCs, DFTA should be pushing to increase funding for NSCs. In addition, it is crucial that DFTA complete the model budget process that was abandoned in the Fiscal 2021 budget by restoring the \$10 million commitment for staffing and programming, and adding back the \$5 million for kitchen staff and meals. This will truly help raise the level of NSCs, and open the door for genuine innovation within available funding.

The concept paper also falls short of indicating how providers could select more limited service models while meeting the requirements under the Older Americans Act (OAA), which asks all centers to offer nutritional support, health promotion, social engagement, and information and assistance. DFTA should consider utilizing Senior Tracking, Analysis and Reporting System (STARS), Census data, the Community Needs Assessment, older adult surveys, and other pertinent sources to propose catchment areas or zones where certain services or models could be prioritized based on needs. A citywide zone could cover virtual programming with course and class offerings. These genuine “models” could then be filled out by realistic sample budgets and staffing patterns, while fulfilling OAA requirements. Currently, providers are still blindly navigating to understand senior services in the COVID-19 era.

The concept paper emphasizes the importance of attracting and identifying healthy, younger seniors. DFTA even specifies intriguing options for this cohort, such as classes in retirement savings, book clubs, yoga, and motorcycle clubs. Yet, older seniors, including many who attend the mushrooming private social adult day care (SADC) network outside DFTA, do not receive a similar level of attention. Truly, our city’s most vulnerable, low-income, and oldest New Yorkers need our support. Given the importance of senior services to this group, DFTA should further outline programs that are aimed towards our eldest communities. Among these could be co-locating SADC programs as step-up service for when seniors need additional support beyond what a regular center can provide.

On the less paramount issue of the branding of centers, which I have heard a range of differing views on, one strong suggestion was to let local senior center members name their own clubs -- as JASA’s Club 76 has.

Funding

Senior centers are not receiving the adequate funding they need, and the proposed overall amount of funding, \$170 million, is too small. As mentioned earlier, the system is missing \$15 million in previously promised and budgeted funds. To fight rising financial insecurity, these funds should be added into the system prior to the new RFP. The \$1.7 million reduction in the Indirect Cost Rate initiative, removing over a third of the \$4.6 million investment baselined in the November 2019 Financial Plan, has caused duress for providers who have worked diligently to align budgets to the City’s Cost Manual in hopes of receiving fairer funding.

Simultaneously, there is no mention of regular cost of living adjustments (COLAs) for staff, or cost escalators for raw food within approximately \$85 million spent on congregate food services, which have been particularly unpredictable due to COVID-19. The 10,000 tablets distributed to NYCHA seniors, funded with \$4.4 million in federal Community Development Block Grant (CDBG) funding, was a good first step toward closing the digital

divide. However, there has still not been discussion on how additional technology will be funded for hundreds of thousands of seniors. We cannot leave these seniors behind as we plan for the future. These funding gaps exemplify the need for a delay to the RFP.

In addition, the concept paper requires that each center set aside adequate funds in its budget for at least one experienced database manager, along with possible marketing and outreach corrective action plans that may not correspond to increased funding for staff to complete the work. These and other unfunded mandates and suggestions are extremely worrying.

It is admirable for DFTA to point towards new connections between centers and cultural institutions, libraries, universities, and health providers. However, these suggestions further require additional staffing resources, or the assistance of the Department. Before jumping ahead of the needs seniors have now, DFTA must pause and evaluate the large number of seniors who are food insecure and in the GetFoodNYC program. This number of over 43,000 seniors cannot be served within DFTA's existing 30,000-person congregate meal capacity. How will the city meet this need? And before that, how will DFTA safely return meal service to the centers? As these questions remain unanswered, an additional year will allow DFTA to begin crafting stronger, more collaborative plans.

Similarly, while fundraising and private philanthropy have always played a role in the senior center network, no cost tied to contractual obligations should rely on fundraising for support. A program's ability to fundraise should not be scored in the RFP. This is as a matter of equity for smaller centers operating in low-income communities and communities with a high density of centers competing for the same local dollars.

Moreover, it is alarming for the concept paper to claim that "NYC Aging fully funds each center." For example, after the first tranche of model budgeting was added in FY18, DFTA informed the Council that only 5 of over 50 discretionary senior centers had any overlap between the work they conducted with discretionary funds and the infusion of funds from model budgeting. The Council continues to support social workers, transportation services, and much more. Clearly, there is not a shared understanding of what full funding means. This could have been addressed if DFTA included sample budgets in the concept paper for any of its eight proposed models, with model staffing patterns, salary ranges, and limits on fixed costs.

In addition, while the concept paper states that DFTA will utilize a cost reimbursement method of payment, other options should still be considered. Other agencies, such as the Department of Youth and Community Development (DYCD) use a per capita rate, which could be useful for certain types of senior centers or models. For instance, an innovative grab and go, pantry, or "meals on heels" program might benefit from clear per diem rates that transparently fund actual costs. Surprisingly, among the eight models listed in the concept paper, only one is focused on food access, which is the "Café" model with restaurant-like settings, which fails to consider the uncertainty of the present environment. DFTA should focus more on how to return meal service to the community, and create a strong foundation for a competitive RFP that expands the senior network's cultural competency and meets the growing need for food security.

Similarly on meals, the Council's review of Local Law 140 data shows that between FY18 and FY19, catered food options increased by 55 percent (while meals prepared on-site decreased eight percent), and the median cost of a single meal increased 178 percent, from around \$4 to \$10. It would be helpful for DFTA to provide senior centers with a roadmap to meet the growing need for meals, and shed light on how to increase quality, control prices, and serve more meals. With rising competition from private SADCs with "free" meals, it is important for DFTA to meet the challenge presented by the new period. After all, food is a key part of the senior center experience, and the OAA had explicit goals of ameliorating poverty and hunger among the elderly.

Before moving ahead by planning for the next three to nine years, DFTA must first develop and share their plans to resolve meal service today and for the next six months. **With COVID-19 cases back on the rise, there are too many unknowns to restructure the system right now, especially on the unsteady terms outlined in the concept paper.**

If DFTA is to go ahead with a cost reimbursement model, it should recognize the benefits of creating a distinction between fully reimbursed fixed costs (such as rent, insurance, staff, etc.) and variable costs (food, etc...) based on the distance above or below contracted deliverables due to factors beyond a center's immediate control. The Community Needs Assessment might help us understand more clearly the number and range of centers, which is at least 17, and likely many more, centers above the current 249 older adult centers and 38 affiliates and clubs.

Lastly, there are many points the Council's Committee on Aging has raised over the years with you directly that remain absent from the concept paper. Among these are:

- Fully funding real cooling center operations with programming, overtime for staff, and special cleanings;
- Adding funding to baseline the immigrant centers into the portfolio, and expanding immigrant access to centers with properly paid multilingual staff;
- Transportation, which the concept paper does not raise, except in reference to emergency plans; and
- Geriatric mental health, which should be expanded into every center in a meaningful way.

There is much more that could be said about this Concept Paper. Instead of ploughing ahead, DFTA should pause and reflect on the many issues outlined above. I urge you to listen to the feedback from providers, as they encompass the essential workers that serve our most vulnerable population. Similar restraint should be taken with DFTA's other upcoming RFPs, particularly those for home care services, NORCs, and transportation services, all of which have been jolted by the still-unfolding pandemic.

In the midst of the pandemic, senior center providers need our support and strong leadership. The administration must allow for transparency and collaboration between providers and DFTA by addressing the issues raised above in a rewrite or modification of the Concept Paper. Moving forward, DFTA must delay the RFP so that new awards begin one year later, in FY23. The Council would be pleased to be your partner in this critically important matter. If you have any questions, please email Gigi Li, my Chief of Staff, at GLi@council.nyc.gov.

Sincerely,

Margaret S. Chin



Council Member, District 1
Chair, Committee on Aging