



**Testimony of United Neighborhood Houses
Before the New York City Council Committee on Health
Council Member Lynn Schulman, Chair**

Intro 0998 - Cooling Centers

**Submitted by Anita Kwok, Policy Analyst
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Thank you Chair Schulman and Council Members for convening for today's Committee of Health hearing on Council Member Powers' Introduction 998 to codify the City's cooling center program. United Neighborhood Houses (UNH) is a policy and social change organization representing neighborhood settlement houses that reach over 800,000 New Yorkers from all walks of life. A progressive leader for more than 100 years, UNH is stewarding a new era for New York's settlement house movement. We mobilize our members and their communities to advocate for good public policies and promote strong organizations and practices that keep neighborhoods resilient and thriving for all New Yorkers. UNH leads advocacy and partners with our members on a broad range of issues including civic and community engagement, neighborhood affordability, healthy aging, early childhood education, adult literacy, and youth development. We also provide customized professional development and peer learning to build the skills and leadership capabilities of settlement house staff at all levels.

Settlement houses and other community based organizations provide a wide variety of services to support their neighborhoods, including operating senior centers, NYCHA Cornerstones, and other community centers. The vast majority of these spaces typically also serve as official cooling centers during the summer and are a key part of our city's response during a heatwave. These sites can serve anywhere from a few people to hundreds of people a day. As climate change worsens, increasing the likelihood of more frequent, longer, and intense heat waves in the summertime, the City must have a plan to keep people cool, especially those New Yorkers who are at risk of medical complications due to heat, including older adults and individuals with underlying medical conditions.

UNH and our members appreciate that the City understands the needs of people vulnerable to health complications during a heatwave and makes these critical cooling centers available each year. UNH supports Intro 998, as it ensures the availability and accessibility of cooling centers for vulnerable populations, including older adults, during heat-related emergencies and poor air

quality days. Additionally, the bill mandates public education, outreach, and reporting on cooling center effectiveness.

However, the Council must acknowledge the reality that settlement houses and other community-based organizations are expected to operate as cooling centers without receiving dedicated funding from the City. As one of our members bluntly puts it, "Cooling centers are critical, but we do not like being a cooling center."

Challenge: Poor Interagency Communication

UNH member sites that serve as designated cooling centers frequently work with multiple city agencies but often find interagency communication to be frustrating and unclear, with their questions going unanswered. There are too many city agencies with oversight of the initiative, making program management difficult for contractors. NYC Aging, the Department of Youth and Community Development, the Department of Health and Mental Hygiene, NYC Emergency Management, and NYCHA are all involved and are communicating different expectations to nonprofit program staff. For example, older adult centers located in NYCHA developments are designated as city cooling centers, yet city agencies frequently pass responsibility back and forth. NYC Aging tells community-based organizations that HVAC repairs fall under the landlord's responsibility—meaning NYCHA—while NYCHA insists it is NYC Aging's responsibility. NYC Emergency Management also plays a role in communicating information on cooling spaces to the public, but does not communicate directly with providers who manage the space. There is no one person or agency who has final say, making it difficult for anyone to get clear information in an emergency situation. This lack of clear accountability and interagency communication leaves providers and older adults stuck in the middle, struggling to ensure cooling centers remain functional and accessible during extreme heat.

Recommendation #1: Designate a Cooling Czar

Given these challenges, UNH recommends the City designate a "Cooling Czar," a person at DOHMH or NYCEM who will coordinate all cooling center operations while ensuring these operations remain compliant with contemporary health guidelines. This czar should control messaging and the flow of information to City agencies and community-based organizations, particularly when there is a heat emergency. That person must be empowered to have final say when there is conflicting information in the leadup to or during an emergency, and they should be charged with centralizing information and ensuring that all the agencies involved - DFTA, DOHMH, DYCD, NYCHA, and more - are coordinating. NYCEM should also have a dedicated team on hand to handle specific challenges or errors that may arise during an emergency, both at the city agency level and directly with individual programs.

During the spring, the Czar should ensure that cooling centers are prepared for when weather emergencies strikes while issuing clear, consistent directives to agencies and their contracted programs about what to do when there is a heat emergency, including information on the hours programs are expected to be open, what expenses are reimbursable, how to secure other types

of support, and contact information for the staff members who will serve as dedicated problem solvers during the emergency. This type of coordination is crucial for community-based organizations like settlement houses who operate programs that span several City agencies, as directives sometimes differ from agency to agency.

Challenge: Staffing Concerns

UNH members strongly agree that cooling centers are critical and must be accessible to New Yorkers of all walks of life. But as an already underpaid, understaffed, and overworked workforce, there are questions about how staffing and payment would work with the program codified under Intro 998. When community center sites become cooling centers, it requires additional hours for non-exempt staff. With cooling centers mandated to open seven days a week and during nights, staff are experiencing increased burnout and exhaustion from working extended hours without relief. The City has not provided additional staff support to ease this burden. CBOs do not have the financial means to pay exempt staff, and DYCD and NYC Aging refuses to pay for overtime. Staff at these sites are salaried employees who are not eligible for overtime pay and are unable to take time off other days to make up for it.

Settlement house staff question whether DOHMH could mandate them to open. UNH is seeking clarification on whether staff at community-based organizations designated as cooling centers will receive overtime pay and whether the City will provide additional staff to support the increased responsibilities these sites take on. While the city reimburses nonprofits for their additional time, they only do so at the standard hourly rate, and as a result, UNH members struggle to keep centers staffed during extended hours.

Recommendation #2: Fair Compensation

Paying cooling center staff fairly would mean offering time-and-a-half (or stipends for salaried staff) for those who are working outside of their usual hours to keep the doors open and the community cool. In addition, the City should offer staffing support through a pool of city workers who can fill in at cooling centers when they are activated. This will ensure nonprofit staff are not effectively forced to work overtime.

Challenge: Lack of Funding for Programming

Another major concern is the lack of adequate funding and reimbursements for community-based organizations that operate cooling centers. DYCD and NYC Aging does not provide its cooling centers sites with funds to provide food or snacks. Instead, sites are told to use their regular budget and only if the sites go over the budget, then NYC Aging will discuss with them, which CBOs find to be unfair.

Further, due to lack of investment, the overall experience at a cooling center may be underwhelming. When New Yorkers show up to a cooling center, depending on the time of day, there may be nothing for them to do and nothing for them to eat. Computers, TVs, and similar devices aren't standard amenities, though they may be available at select sites. Because the

City reimburses nonprofits for water but not for programming or food, community members who arrive during a heat emergency outside of normal program hours often show up only to quickly become bored or hungry and leave.

Many sites are under-utilized as a direct result of this oversight. UNH has found that settlement house cooling centers experience the most traffic, as much as 200 visitors, on weekdays when food and programming are available as part of regular program operations. In contrast, centers can see as few as two to three people visit on a Saturday or Sunday when none of these resources are available.

Recommendation #3: Investment

The City should have a policy of providing reimbursement to nonprofits for meals and activities at their cooling centers. By providing funding, the City would ensure that the people who show up stay long enough to keep cool and avoid the dangers of heat exposure. In addition, we urge the City to invest more in capital funds to repair aging and broken HVAC systems in designated cooling centers, as there are limited funds available and many centers cannot open due to aging infrastructure.

These recommendations will not only increase the utility of cooling centers, but save lives. We urge the Council to work with the Administration to advance these recommendations as it advances Intro 998.

Thank you for your time. To follow up, please contact me at akwok@unhny.org.