



**UNITED
NEIGHBORHOOD
HOUSES**

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**Testimony of United Neighborhood Houses
Before the New York City Council**

**Committee on Aging Oversight - NYC Department for the Aging Meal Programming
Council Member Crystal Hudson, Chair**

**Submitted by Anita Kwok, Policy Analyst
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Thank you for convening today's Oversight hearing on NYC Aging's meal programming. 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.

UNH members provide a wide variety of services to over 80,000 older New Yorkers each year by operating programs such as older adult centers (OACs), Naturally Occurring Retirement Communities (NORCs), home delivered meal (HDM) programs, Geriatric Mental Health, case management programs, and others, often funded and contracted by NYC Aging and the City Council. UNH and its settlement house members employ the philosophy that older adults are valued members of our neighborhoods, whose wisdom and experience are important to the fabric of our communities.

Settlement houses indicate that food insecurity is one of the top community concerns in 2025, and that those needs are growing rapidly. Similarly, hunger emerged as a top community need at settlement houses during the pandemic, and during the recent wave of asylum seekers in New York City. Today, demand for emergency food remains at higher levels than ever before, with many New Yorkers who are grappling with meeting their basic needs. At the same time, federal funding threats and cuts to programs like SNAP and FEMA's Emergency Food and Shelter Program are leaving settlement houses without the necessary tools to respond, while placing greater strain on other emergency food programs. Settlement houses address hunger through benefits enrollment, pantry services, community outreach, and referrals, along with offering meals for older adults at OACs and through HDM programs. Unfortunately, resources and government support have not kept up with the exorbitant level of need. Food is a basic human

right and our City leaders must act swiftly to ensure all New Yorkers have consistent, equitable access to nutritious food.

Federal Funding Threats

With New Yorkers already facing record levels of food insecurity, federal funding cuts are eliminating essential social safety nets that families, children, and especially seniors, depend on to survive. FEMA Emergency Food and Shelter Program funding has not resumed since the January funding freeze, which significantly reduces community-based organizations' ability to provide food assistance and eviction prevention services. This loss comes at a time of growing need. In March, one settlement house food pantry received 90 new registrations, above the 520 community members they typically serve. Without FEMA funding, that organization has been forced to reduce their food pantry days and pause their tenant rental assistance program, which is sometimes required by the city in order to receive a larger rental assistance grant to prevent eviction. These cuts leave families at risk of eviction, homelessness, and hunger.

Settlement house programs and participants will suffer greatly when SNAP is cut. Of 1.8 million SNAP recipients in New York City, one-third are children and another third are seniors. Thousands of individuals will lose SNAP eligibility due to changing eligibility rules related to their immigration status, and hundreds of thousands of people across the State are expected to be impacted by stricter restrictions around work requirements to access SNAP. While the full impact of SNAP cuts is still not fully known, NYC Department of Social Services Commissioner Molly Park has estimated that SNAP cuts would cost the City \$900 million. Hunger Free America, a food justice advocacy organization, asserts that if anything close to this magnitude of cuts is actually implemented, it would lead to the greatest hunger and food insecurity crisis since the Great Depression.

Settlement houses and other community-based organizations were already struggling to meet the growing need for food, health care, and housing assistance. A 2023 survey of more than 1,000 settlement house families within the UNH network found that nearly one in four respondents reported that they were "sometimes unable to afford food for their children," with an additional 10 percent reporting they were "often" or "always" unable to do so. These federal cuts and threats don't just affect programs—they harm the children, seniors, and families who rely on them. The City must take action to protect residents by ensuring our local food and rental assistance programs remain fully funded, accessible, and able to meet growing needs.

These cuts from the federal government threaten the health and stability of New Yorkers. Food insecurity goes deeper than hunger: it is linked to higher rates of diabetes, heart disease, anxiety, and depression — all of which older adults are particularly vulnerable to and lack resources to mitigate. Without stable meal programs, they risk declining health, isolation, and loss of independence. Older adults have high rates of late-onset mental health conditions, yet low rates of assessment and treatment, according to the Mayor's Office of Community Mental Health (OCMH).¹

At the same time, not only are food pantries already over capacity, but they cannot be a replacement for SNAP. Settlement houses warn that we will see longer lines at food distribution

¹ [Fiscal 2025 Mayor's Management Report - Department for the Aging](#)

sites, more older adults requesting meals at OACs, and an even bigger strain on staff at community-based organizations.

We Need New York City Leaders to Continue to Speak Out For New Yorkers and Support Trusted Community Organizations

Federal funding cuts attack New Yorkers and reveal the administration's rejection of policies and programs that support the most vulnerable. Community-based organizations are experiencing the daily impact of cuts and funding freezes to Head Start, food and housing assistance, and other federal programs, and have a deep understanding of the risks to New York City residents. Given the level of retribution we have seen from this administration, settlement houses are concerned that they will be retaliated against if they speak out, putting their communities at even greater risk. UNH needs you to speak out, share these stories, and urge federal lawmakers to oppose these funding cuts.

We urge City leaders to support their community-based organizations that provide housing, food, education, child care, and services for older adults. Settlement houses are places that people go during a crisis. To continue to protect our communities and our neighbors, we must protect the institutions New Yorkers count on. Reliable, flexible funding for settlement houses and other CBOs will go far to ensure that communities have access to comprehensive, holistic supports and wraparound services that they need in order to thrive.

It's critical that the City Council use the tools at its disposal to help protect older New Yorkers and directly address food insecurity amongst older adults. These measures not only fight hunger, but also strengthen nutrition security and help older New Yorkers stay healthy, independent, and connected to their communities.

Congregate Meals

Older adult centers (OACs) are crucial supports for older New Yorkers, offering both in-person and virtual activities, congregate meals, and other essential supports. Settlement houses in UNH's network operate 42 standalone OACs and two network OACs, serving tens of thousands of older adults in these centers.

Rising inflation rates have affected senior meals programs, especially food costs for congregate meals. There has not been an increase to the congregate meals budget in years, since at least the last RFP in 2021 which predated a period of abnormally high inflation. Food costs have reached record highs, placing an immense strain on an already chronically underfunded meal program. And this year, despite eggs being a cost-effective source of protein, the food staple has been experiencing shortages and record high costs that are not expected to go down any time soon. Rising food costs have made it increasingly difficult for providers to provide culturally-competent and nutritious meals.

At the same time, federal cuts to SNAP will likely drive more older New Yorkers to older adult centers to utilize their meal programming. This will place an even greater strain on meal programs at Older Adult Centers across the City, most of which are already stretched thin and lack the resources to accommodate the growing number of participants. The time is now to plan for expanded units at OACs and ensure additional funding to support expected growth in food needs, including ensuring that culturally competent, nutritious meals remain consistently

available.

The City must ensure inflation costs are included annually in future budgets for congregate meals at OACs. We reiterate our call from the FY26 budget cycle for the City to **increase food budgets at older adult centers with a \$57 million investment in FY27 to meet inflation demands for congregate meal services**. This \$57 million figure is consistent with an analysis of the on-the-ground needs from UNH and our advocacy partners. **We also urge contract flexibility and additional funding to meet the expected growing demand for congregate meals in light of federal SNAP cuts**. Food insecurity remains high among older adults, and anything the City can do to address these needs should be embraced.

Grab-And-Go Meals and Intro 237

Grab and go meals were a tremendous innovation during the COVID-19 pandemic, initially serving as an interim solution before the Get Food program was set up and later serving as an option for older adults who were ready to go outside but not to spend time eating indoors in a crowd. We were disappointed to hear NYC Aging ended the grab and go option in 2022, unless providers included grab and go meals in their most recent OAC contracts. Since then, many centers continue to report that grab and go remains a popular option, with some older adults still hesitant to be unmasked and eating congregate meals indoors. Providers report that older adults are still concerned about COVID and this is affecting their utilization numbers for congregate meals. At the same time, food insecurity remains high among older adults, and anything the City can do to address these needs should be embraced. The City must ensure grab and go meals continue to be a viable option at all older adult centers that offer them – and not only those that had the foresight to include grab and go in their contracts.

UNH members are interested in this bill and agree there is a need for grab-and-go meals, but at the same time have concerns about implementation. One of our members reported NYC Aging being inconsistent with telling some providers that they could budget for grab-and-go meals and other providers that they couldn't. Another UNH member similarly indicated strong interest, but would need another staff person. Several of our members note that older adults sometimes will go around to various older adult centers looking for grab-and-go meals or an additional lunch to pack up because of how high food insecurity is among older adults.

We continue to support Intro 237 by Council Member Hudson to allow all OACs to provide grab and go meals if they want to, which would help alleviate food insecurity while providing flexible options for older adults who do not feel comfortable eating in public due to public health concerns.

Home Delivered Meals and Intro 770

Nonprofit home delivered meals (HDM) providers deliver a daily nutritious meal to homebound older adults who are unable to prepare their own food, while also providing case management and regular in-person wellness checks for those at risk of social isolation. Eight UNH members currently provide home delivered meals in their communities, either as lead contractors or subcontractors. The HDM program recently underwent a new procurement that began last fall. Several private vendors were selected to carry out this work for the first time instead of nonprofits, and we are monitoring the impact of this change and whether meal reimbursement rates are appropriate. We deeply appreciate the Council's support over the last few years in

securing funding for a higher reimbursement rate for the HDM program. Since 2021, the per-meal reimbursement rate has increased from \$9.58 to \$14.78 per meal. This is a significant and essential improvement.

Older adult hunger is at a crisis level. For many homebound older adults, the HDM program is the only food they are receiving for all of their nutritional needs, and they will stretch the meal to last all day. We need to look toward expanding this system and providing more meals to those who need them. We continue to call for a **\$27 million investment to operationalize Council Member Lee's Intro 770, which requires the City to pay for meals 7 days a week.** Currently, weekend and holiday home-delivered meals are provided through a public-private partnership with Citymeals on Wheels. Intro 770 shifts the responsibility from Citymeals on Wheels to regular NYC Aging home-delivered meal contracts, allowing Citymeals to provide additional meals per day. Expanding home delivered meals is critical to addressing food insecurity among older adults and ensuring homebound seniors receive nutritious meals.'

Procurements

Today's hearing was initially framed around NYC Aging requests for proposals (RFPs), though the oversight topic was changed to food insecurity. In the last week or so, new information has arisen about the intention of NYC Aging to conduct several procurements in the next three months. A new procurement for the Caregiver Program has been anticipated for some time. Most recently, NYC Aging has shared in meetings with providers that they intend to release concept papers in advance of a procurement for Older Adult Centers, NORCs, and Transportation contracts by around November 2025, with an intention to issue RFPs for these programs in December 2025, so that new awards could start on July 1, 2026. Although these contracts are beginning to approach the end of their three-year term, NYC Aging has the option to renew these contracts, which they have typically exercised in the past.

While procurements serve an important function in New York City to ensure programs offer competitive services that best reflect changing communities, the bundling of these four RFPs in such a compressed timeline runs the risk of creating programs that do not truly reflect community needs. The Concept Paper process is an important opportunity for older adults, providers, advocates, and other stakeholders to share input into potential program design, and for the City agency to refine its procurement based on that feedback. For example, during the last OAC RFP process, the idea for Network OACs was born from community feedback about the need for organizations with multiple centers to better coordinate their services and programming. This idea was only able to come to fruition because the concept paper allowed time for providers to consider carefully their service offerings, the needs of their clients, and their organizational abilities, and then share formal, thoughtful feedback. It is essential not to rush this process for programming that makes up the core of New York City's community-based programming for older adults.

In addition, completing RFPs are time- and labor-intensive for nonprofits, and our members have expressed deep concerns around having to complete multiple procurements at the same time (note that the Department of Youth and Community Development are close to releasing a RFP for COMPASS afterschool services, and has several others pending). For settlement houses who also run programs under contract with other City agencies, there are additional procurements planned in the coming months, placing even more stress on development staff.

We urge NYC Aging to reconsider the timeline to reprocure these four programs and exercise their option to renew current contracts.

Thank you for your time. If you have any questions, please email me at akwok@unhny.org.