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**TESTIMONY**

presented by

**Edwin Méndez-Santiago, LCSW**

**Commissioner**

at a hearing on

the November Financial plan for FY 2009 and FY 2010

before the

**New York City Council Committees on Aging,  
And Finance**

on

**Friday, November 21, 2008**

**11:30 A.M.**

at

**City Council Chambers**

**City Hall**

**New York, NY**

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Good morning. My name is Edwin Méndez-Santiago and I am the Commissioner for the New York City Department for the Aging (DFTA). Joining me today is Deputy Commissioner Angeles Pai. First, I would like to thank you Chair Arroyo and Chair Weprin and the members of the Aging and Finance Committees for holding this hearing to discuss the November plan for the FY 2009 budget.

Despite a challenging budget climate, the City's commitment to aging services remains strong. Individuals age 60 and older are the fastest growing age cohort in the City, and the population of City residents who are age 65 and older in 2030 is expected to be 44 percent greater than in the year 2000. As part of the *All Ages Project* announced earlier this year in partnership with the City Council, Mayor Bloomberg has charged each City agency with thoroughly examining their age-friendliness in order to ready themselves for this projected surge in the population of older New Yorkers. Based on the findings of these assessments, the Mayor's Office is working with DFTA, other City agencies, and the Council to develop an agenda of programs and services for older adults that will enhance New York's position as an "age-friendly" and "livable" city.

In keeping with our agency's mission to work for the empowerment, independence, dignity and quality of life of New York City's older adults, DFTA partners with community organizations to provide essential core services. These core services—case management, home delivered meals and congregate programs—are provided to thousands of older adults throughout the diverse communities of New York. Each day, approximately 17,000 homebound elderly receive a nutritious home delivered meal that assists them in safely maintaining their independence. Each year, over 8 million congregate meals are served at senior centers to thousands of older New Yorkers. Last year, DFTA-funded case managers provided approximately 400,000 hours of service to older adults to ensure that they receive all of the supports and benefits to which they are entitled.

In keeping with the Mayor's vision of enhancing New York's position as an age-friendly city, DFTA has spearheaded an ambitious agenda to modernize its case management services, home delivered meals program, and senior centers to better meet the changing needs of our City's growing population of older adults. Modernization began with the redesign of the case management system. As of July of this year, DFTA and the 23 community organizations that now provide case management services successfully completed the transfer of all case management clients. The redesign created more clearly defined service areas to reduce overlap and redundancy and build greater accountability into the system. In addition, all home delivered meals clients now benefit from a comprehensive assessment to determine potential eligibility for a myriad additional benefits and entitlements. The Department is currently working toward the transition of the home-delivered meals program in order to promote greater meal choice and delivery flexibility for clients, including a greater focus on special dietary and culturally appropriate meals. The rollout will begin in January with the Bronx and Staten Island followed by Queens, Manhattan, and Brooklyn. The transition will be complete in April 2009. Lastly, as you are aware, the Department released a request for proposals for senior centers earlier this month. DFTA aims to create a consumer-centered network of healthy aging centers where seniors can enjoy an array of activities that promote physical, social, and mental wellness. Our commitment to these three core services allows us to continue to provide a continuum of service options that support older adults with different abilities and needs, ranging from those who are healthy and leading active lives to those who are homebound and challenged by illness.

As you are aware, however, the City faces a \$4 billion cumulative budget gap for FY 2009 and FY 2010. All City agencies, including DFTA, have been called upon to make difficult choices by adopting reductions while at the same time, seeking to maintain the high quality of services to which New Yorkers are accustomed. DFTA's target for budget reductions for FY 09 is \$3,975,000

and will increase to \$6,543,000 in FY 10—which represents a 2.5% reduction in City tax levy in FY 09 and a 5% reduction for FY 10. But, even in this difficult budgetary climate, I am pleased that none of the DFTA-funded senior centers in New York City Housing Authority (NYCHA) facilities will close due to budget shortfalls. Moreover, I am pleased to report that DFTA and NYCHA are working collaboratively to develop a strategic plan for the transition of senior services funded by NYCHA.

Reducing or eliminating programs is never easy. We value and recognize the importance of our programs, which impact the lives of thousands of older New Yorkers every day. In deciding where to undertake reductions, DFTA engaged in a careful strategic planning process to ensure that our agency is able to continue to meet the needs of a wide range of older New Yorkers through programs and services that have the most far-reaching positive effects in their lives. This planning process resulted in a continued commitment to sustain the agency initiatives that serve the greatest number of seniors—DFTA's three core programs: home delivered meals, case management, and senior centers. These core services comprise almost 60% of the agency's budget and 60% of the City tax levy portion of the budget.

After a careful examination of our limited portfolio of City tax levy funded programs, we identified programs other than our core services for reduction that met the following criteria: first, the number of clients served by the program were limited in scope and second, comparable services are offered by other agencies and community-based organizations. Accordingly, DFTA will no longer fund the following programs: Social Adult Day Care (\$2,360,000); Elder Abuse Prevention (\$850,000); Intergenerational Programs (\$1,000,000); the Congregate Services Initiative (\$200,000); and Non-Core Social Services (\$935,000). We will also reduce supplemental Cityfunding to the federally funded Caregiver Support Program (\$880,000). In choosing to preserve its core services and implement reductions in other programs, DFTA made a deliberate decision not to implement an across-the-board cut because we believe that this option would seriously threaten the ability of our community partners to continue to offer quality core services. For example, an across the board cut could jeopardize our senior centers' ability to remain open as cooling centers during heat-related emergencies in the summer months. This option could also result in a reduction of the days or hours of operation of community senior centers, which is not the appropriate direction for our aging network. Also, we are well aware that many DFTA-funded core programs will likely be subject to cuts from the State or Federal government. Thus, in the midst of these difficulties, I am confident in our decision to protect our core services from reductions at this time.

For each of the programs that are subject to reductions, we are working to identify appropriate alternative services for affected clients and are in the process of developing transition plans and protocols. DFTA will hold cluster meetings with each of the program sponsors to discuss which agencies will continue to operate through other funding sources and for those that will not, we will determine close out procedures and offer our assistance in re-employment of staff. Social Adult Day Services (SADS) provide group and individual activities in daycare settings to physically and cognitively impaired older adults. DFTA-funded SADS programs serve less than one-quarter of one percent of older New Yorkers. While the elimination of these services is regrettable, we believe that these clients can be served through other available options, including: State-funded SADS programs and Medicaid-funded Medical Day Care and Homecare Programs, as well as a variety of private pay options for those with appropriate income.

While DFTA-funded Elder Abuse Programs provide counseling and other assistance, these are not the only programs supported by DFTA or other City agencies that assist victims of elder abuse. DFTA's in-house Elderly Crime Victims Resource Center will continue to work with clients and

link them to appropriate resources. Additionally, there are resources for victims of elder abuse at other City Agencies, such as the Mayor's Office on Domestic Violence, which administers Family Justice Centers in two boroughs. Services are also available through community-based programs funded by the Crime Victims Board, as well as through the NYPD, District Attorney's offices, Safe Horizon, and the various court systems. And, thanks to the leadership of Councilman Vacca and the passage of Intro 737-A, all aging services professionals will now receive training in elder abuse issues and every senior center will offer educational programming regarding elder abuse.

In addition, opportunities for youth and older adults to interact will continue to exist after the proposed reductions to DFTA's intergenerational programs. Throughout the City of New York, intergenerational programs are available through the Department of Education, the Department of Youth and Community Development, and community-based organizations.

Further, the RFP for senior centers that was released by DFTA earlier this month presents an opportunity to transform the delivery of congregate services. As you know, the anticipated growth in the senior population has been marked by changing needs. Today's older adults are living healthier, independent, and active lifestyles. National research on senior centers has shown that the expectations of older adults with regard to customer service, programming, and activities differ greatly from seniors just a generation ago. There is a growing movement across the country to modernize senior centers around a mission of promoting health and wellness and consequently, making senior centers more attractive to older adults from a broad range of ages, from those who just recently turned 60 to those above age 80. The RFP for senior centers is designed to achieve these goals.

In addition to expanded health and wellness activities, the modernization of congregate services provides us with an opportunity to create a more inclusive environment in senior centers. For example, older adults with physical and cognitive impairments should be welcomed into senior center activities rather than segregated into stand-alone Social Adult Day Programs. We also encourage the inclusion of intergenerational activities and programs for the caregivers of older adults in senior center programming.

Despite these difficult fiscal times, I am confident that we can continue to work together to provide quality programs for our City's older adult population within the confines of the budget. Doing so requires creativity, innovation and a willingness to change, and I look forward to partnering with you in this endeavor. I welcome your questions.