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COMMITTEE ON AGING

Hon. Margaret Chin, Chair

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OVERSIGHT: PROTECTING SENIORS FROM THE EXTREME HEAT AND COLD

INTRODUCTION

On September 18, 2019, the Committee on Aging, chaired by Council Member Margaret Chin, will hold an oversight hearing on *Protecting Seniors from the Extreme Heat and Cold*. Representatives from the New York City Department for the Aging (DFTA), aging advocates, and other members of the public have been invited to testify.

BACKGROUND

July 2019 was the hottest recorded month on Earth¹ with temperatures in New York City being the 10th hottest ever recorded in the city's history.² High temperatures have devastating implications for New Yorkers. Each year, New York City averages 450 heat-related emergency department visits, 150 heat-related hospital admissions, and 13 heat-strokes.³ While extreme heat harms individuals of all groups, research shows that older adults are more susceptible to extreme high temperatures than their younger peers, as their bodies are less able to regulate heat.⁴

In order to protect older adults and other vulnerable groups during extremely high temperatures, the City operates 500 cooling centers.⁵ Cooling centers, which are defined as public institutions available to the public during heat emergencies,⁶ allow individuals to escape the summer heat in an air-conditioned space. While critical to providing relief to the public during the grueling heat, recent reports show that these centers are unevenly distributed across

¹ Henry Fountain, *NOAA Data Confirms July Was Hottest Month Ever Recorded*, *N.Y. Times*, Aug. 15, 2019, available at <https://www.nytimes.com/2019/08/15/climate/hottest-july-noaa.html> (last visited Sep. 12, 2019).

² *Id.*

³ *Extreme Heat and Your Health*, NYC Department of Health, available at <https://www1.nyc.gov/site/doh/health/emergency-preparedness/emergencies-extreme-weather-heat.page> (last visited Sep. 12, 2019), p.8.

⁴ *Heatwave Guide for Cities*, United States Climate Resilience Toolkit, Jul. 2019, available at <https://toolkit.climate.gov/reports/heatwave-guide-cities> (last visited Sep. 12, 2019).

⁵ Matthew Schuerman, *NYC's Cooling Center Network Strands Nearly A Third Of City's Seniors*, *The Gothamist*, available at <https://gothamist.com/news/nycs-cooling-center-network-strands-nearly-a-third-of-citys-seniors> (last visited Sep. 12, 2019).

⁶ *Extreme Heat and Your Health*, NYC Department of Health, available at <https://www1.nyc.gov/site/doh/health/emergency-preparedness/emergencies-extreme-weather-heat.page> (last visited Sep. 12, 2019), p.8.

neighborhoods.⁷ An analysis of data released by Measure of America revealed that over 30%, or 353,182, of New York City’s older adult population live more than a half-mile from cooling centers.⁸ Advocates contend that, critically, these long distances discourage older adults, many of whom have mobility issues, from visiting a cooling center when in need.⁹ In addition to being located far from seniors, advocates also report that cooling centers are challenging to find.¹⁰ According to an article from WNYC, when attempting to visit three cooling center near an older adult’s home in Harlem, the news agency endured many hurdles, including discovering wrong addresses and misleading directions to the center.¹¹

New York City Cooling Centers

New York City sponsors 500 cooling centers, including cooling centers at senior centers, community rooms in public housing facilities and public libraries.¹² While these cooling centers are located in public facilities, in a 2017 report, the Mayor’s Office noted that most cooling centers are not owned, maintained, or operated by City government, and that the City is very limited in its ability to implement capital improvements of cooling centers.¹³ Moreover, according to the report, “the facilities volunteer to serve as cooling centers, and physical inspections and upgrades to the buildings in which the facilities operate are outside of the City’s purview during each heat emergency.”¹⁴ Despite this report, many DFTA-operated senior centers also operate as cooling

⁷ Julia Longoria, *Neither Ice Blocks Nor Cooling Centers Protect New Yorkers Entirely from Heat Risks*, WNYC News, AdaptNY, available at <https://www.adaptny.org/2016/09/08/neither-ice-blocks-nor-cooling-centers-protect-new-yorkers-entirely-from-heat-risks/> (last visited Sep. 12, 2019).

⁸ *Id.*

⁹ *Id.*

¹⁰ *Id.*

¹¹ *Id.*

¹² Matthew Schuerman, *NYC’s Cooling Center Network Strands Nearly A Third Of City’s Seniors*, The Gothamist, available at <https://gothamist.com/news/nycs-cooling-center-network-strands-nearly-a-third-of-citys-seniors> (last visited Sep. 12, 2019).

¹³ *Cool Neighborhoods NYC*, Office of the Mayor, 2017, available at https://www1.nyc.gov/assets/orr/pdf/Cool_Neighborhoods_NYC_Report_FINAL.pdf (last visited Sep. 12, 2019) at p. 31.

¹⁴ *Id.*

centers.¹⁵ As DFTA has some responsibilities toward facilitating these senior centers, DFTA arguably has some role in helping maintain the cooling centers located there.

Winter Challenges

Like the summer, winter is also a challenging season for older adults. Seniors are susceptible to low temperatures because they have less efficient circulation, less body fat, and a slower metabolism rate.¹⁶ Moreover, annually, 50% of Americans who die from hypothermia are age 65 years old or older.¹⁷ According to a 2018 Public Health Post report,¹⁸ during each New York City winter season between 2005 and 2014 there were, on average, 180 treat-and-release emergency department visits, 240 hospital admissions for cold-related illnesses, and 15 cold-related fatalities.¹⁹ Furthermore, adults aged 85 and older accounted for the highest rates of cold-related hospital admissions, and while 25% of individuals who died from cold exposure were exposed to cold in homes without heat, all of these individuals were age 60 or older.²⁰ Thus, it is as important to help keep seniors warm during the cold, winter months as it is vital to help them access functioning cooling centers during the hot, summer months.

DFTA'S ROLE

Although not all cooling centers or heat sources for seniors are operated by DFTA, a majority of DFTA-contracted senior centers are classified as cooling centers, and each senior center provides heat during the winter months.²¹ While DFTA's involvement in the official

¹⁵ *Extreme Heat and Your Health*, NYC Department of Health, available at <https://www1.nyc.gov/site/doh/health/emergency-preparedness/emergencies-extreme-weather-heat.page> (last visited Sep. 12, 2019).

¹⁶ Anne-Marie Botek, *How to Protect Elders from Frigid Winter Weather*, *Aging Care*, Nov. 19, 2018, available at <https://www.agingcare.com/articles/cold-weather-protection-for-seniors-148625.htm> (last visited Sep. 12, 2019).

¹⁷ *Id.*

¹⁸ Kathryn Lane, *The Dangers of Cold Weather*, *Public Health Post*, Nov. 14, 2018 available at <https://www.publichealthpost.org/research/counting-cold-related-deaths-new-york-city/> (last visited Sep. 12, 2019).

¹⁹ *Id.*

²⁰ *Id.*

²¹ Information from the Department for the Aging to Council, Sept. 2019.

designation of cooling centers and its specific responsibilities to seniors during times of extreme weather are unclear, the agency is at least responsible for facilitating repairs to senior centers experiencing cooling or heating system malfunctions during these times²² and for helping transport seniors to cooling centers if their senior center's air conditioning is not working.²³

Cooling and Heating Repairs and Budget

Senior centers experiencing cooling and heating system outages should be repaired as quickly and efficiently as possible because of the population they serve. To this point, the Council asked DFTA to testify as to its involvement in repair work at senior centers during an October 2018 Aging Committee meeting for *Repairs and Upgrades at NYC Centers*.²⁴ DFTA testified that it works closely with senior centers to obtain critical repairs and emergency issues, such as flooding, plumbing leaks, and malfunctions of heating or cooling systems.²⁵ When asked specifically by the Council about the current status of cooling centers, DFTA provided information that as of May 1, 2019, there were 15 sites where cooling was insufficient or out of service, 10 of which were located in NYCHA buildings.²⁶ At the time, DFTA reported that it was working toward full completion by the end of summer 2019.²⁷ No update has been given about whether these repairs were completed for the summer heat.

To address the widespread repairs and system needs, the Council's Fiscal 2020 Preliminary Budget Response called for fully funding \$500 million of capital needs across 255 senior centers

²² Testimony from the Department for the Aging at the Oct. 2018 hearing on *Repairs and Upgrades at NYC Senior Centers*.

²³ Christine DeRosa, *Cooling center site that serves seniors without air conditioning for a week*, *Staten Island Live*, July 31, 2019, available at <https://www.silive.com/news/2019/07/cooling-center-site-that-serves-seniors-without-air-conditioning-for-a-week.html>.

²⁴ Testimony from the Department for the Aging at the Oct. 2018 hearing on *Repairs and Upgrades at NYC Senior Centers*.

²⁵ *Id.*

²⁶ Information from the Department for the Aging to Council, May 2019.

²⁷ *Id.*

and community centers in NYCHA’s portfolio.²⁸ The Council also called for a dedicated new expense funding stream of \$1 million to ensure rapid completion of emergency repairs to cooling and heating systems at senior centers located within NYCHA developments and elsewhere.²⁹

In response, the Fiscal 2020 budget baselined \$4 million in new expense funding at DFTA, and doubled a previous \$2 million fund at the NYC Department of Youth and Community Development, to begin to address this gap.³⁰ The funding will address immediate needs, including air conditioning.³¹ The NYC Mayor’s Office of Management and Budget (OMB) informed centers that they will be given permission to make necessary air conditioning repairs now, to prepare senior centers for use as cooling centers during the next summer.³² The \$4 million expense funding at DFTA will also assist with roof leaks or smaller repairs.³³ It remains unclear, however, what the repairs protocol is between providers, DFTA, NYCHA, and OMB and what timeline providers can expect for repairs.³⁴ Funding could, for example, go directly to NYCHA for its facilities team to make repairs; DFTA could procure a repair service; or a provider’s contract could be amended so it could directly coordinate the repair. Finally, OMB has committed to conducting an assessment on the total cost of air conditioning repairs.³⁵

Given the above information, the Committee seeks to better learn the process DFTA, NYCHA, and OMB use to intake and execute repair orders during extreme weather, how long the process takes, and how such protocols can be expedited during such weather emergencies.

²⁸ *New York City Council Report to the Committee on Finance and the Committee on Aging on the Fiscal 2020 Executive Plan, the Ten-Year Strategy for Fiscal 2020-2029, and Fiscal 2020 Executive Capital Commitment Plan*, Department for the Aging, May 7, 2019, available at <https://council.nyc.gov/budget/wp-content/uploads/sites/54/2019/05/DFTA.pdf>.

²⁹ Id.

³⁰ Id.

³¹ Id.

³² Id.

³³ Id.

³⁴ Id.

³⁵ Id.

Additionally, the Committee would like to learn what alternatives and equipment DFTA provides, if any, to senior centers experiencing cooling or heating malfunctions during extreme weather and what protections and services it provides to seniors during that time.

CONCLUSION

During this hearing, the Committee seeks to learn more about DFTA's role in protecting seniors during times of extreme weather, including what role DFTA plays in repairing centers experiencing problems cooling or heating; what alternatives DFTA offers to seniors impacted by cooling center and heating problems; what, if any, role DFTA plays in protecting homebound seniors during extreme weathers; and how DFTA can help better serve seniors who live in cooling and heating deserts. The Committee also hopes to hear from seniors about the challenges they face, if any, in accessing cooling centers and centers that provide heating, and from advocates about challenges they face in providing cooling and heating during extreme weather.