



**TESTIMONY**

Presented by

**Lorraine Cortés-Vázquez  
Commissioner**

on

**Oversight:  
Protecting Seniors from the Extreme Heat and Cold**

before the

**New York City Council  
Committee on Aging**

on

**Wednesday, September 18, 2019  
10:00 A.M.**

at

**Council Chambers, City Hall  
New York, NY 10007**

Good morning, Chairwoman Chin and members of the Aging Committee. September is National Preparedness Month. So I thank you Madam Chair, Committee members, and the City Council for convening this timely hearing that sheds light on how we are prepared to ensure older New Yorker's continue to access much needed services during weather-related emergencies. Given the impact of climate change, we all undoubtedly believe extreme weather conditions will become more frequent and severe in the future.

Before I proceed with the cooling center testimony and detailing the steps taken and lessons learned this past July and August, I ask that you allow me to use this opportunity to provide an update on the air-conditioner installations, repairs, and improvements at DFTA sites. Thanks to the Mayor and advocacy from the Council, DFTA received \$4 million in baseline funding to help with these much-needed repairs. Shortly before I became Commissioner, there were approximately 34 sites that required air-conditioning improvements; by late spring that number dramatically reduced to approximately a dozen; and by July all had some work in progress. As of today, I'm pleased to report that only six remain in the final stages of repair or procurement. Interim provisions, including portable or window AC units, were made available if appropriate.

As a result of these improvements and repairs, we were better prepared to face the heat waves experienced this July and August, which serves as a great segue to DFTA's Emergency Preparedness Plan, which includes cooling centers.

For the past 12 years, DFTA has had a Bureau of Emergency Preparedness responsible for developing DFTA's Emergency Preparedness Plan—the overarching goal of which is to provide older New Yorkers, DFTA staff, and the contracted service-providers information necessary to help ensure safety before, during, and after an emergency. DFTA's Emergency Response Plan, consistent with similar protocols set forth by sister agencies, including NYPD, FDNY, et al., details procedures and protocols to be employed by each DFTA Bureau—Community Services, Long-Term Care, and Active Aging—during specific emergencies including heat, power outages, coastal storms, transportation disruptions, and winter weather. It also includes a *Provider Local Emergency Response Plan* for each contract agency.

Before I go on, it is important to note the many tools the City employs to provide information to the public. Chief among them are, Notify NYC and the NYC Emergency Management (NYCEM)-led Advance Warning System (AWS).

During an emergency, agencies work with the Mayor's Office to issue media releases, update social media, provide information to 311, and send messaging. Notify NYC, the City's free emergency notification system — has grown significantly since launching in 2007 and now has 770,000 subscribers. It has expanded to offer common notification in 13 languages, American Sign Language, and audio formats. There is a mobile application that has seen more than 80,000 downloads. Notify NYC is advertised through a variety of outlets including on bus shelters and through social media, Ready New York events, newsletters, elected officials, and other means. Registration is free and open to anyone with information provided through landline phones, mobile phones, instant message or email addresses and through social media. Having access to a computer in order to register is not required; registration is also available by calling 311 and residents who prefer to receive information through their landlines, which we know is the choice for many seniors, do have that option.

The AWS is designed to alert organizations who work with people with disabilities and/or access and functional needs to various types of hazards and emergencies in NYC that may affect people's independence and daily lives. Participating organizations receive public preparedness and emergency information intended for use by individuals with disabilities or access and functional needs. These organizations then relay this information — via email, text, or direct call — to their clients and other agencies. As such, emergency information is ultimately provided to individuals through trusted, pre-existing relationships, and specific to their need. Often, that organization will play a role in that person's emergency plan, as they provide an essential service that enables their continued independence in the community. During larger emergencies, such as snowstorms or extreme heat, NYCEM also hosts conference calls with city agencies and large service providers to give them direct information and guidance to pass on to their clients.

Now, referring back to over the course of the past 12 years, key functions of the Bureau of Emergency Preparedness have been to raise awareness of possible and impending emergencies through weather-related advisories, tips and guidance before, during, and after serious weather conditions. With respect to facing an emergency, a key focus has been on the provision of alternate congregate food service,

especially in the event of a center closure, as well as protocols for provision for home-delivered meals, case management, and homecare services. Briefly, in the event of snow-related emergency activations, we advise senior centers to ask their seniors to stay at home and avoid walking in the streets. In anticipation of inclement weather and center closures, most center participants will receive an emergency food package that contains food for three days. For home-delivered meals, with ample lead time, extra food packages can be sent with the last home-delivered meal service. If we have less lead time, as is often the case with emergencies, we can help ensure seniors receive extra emergency food packages. Moreover, meal delivery drivers are asked to report on the condition of the homebound elderly: during the summer, seniors are asked if they need to be taken to a cooling center; during the winter, drivers observe home conditions and alert their agency of any safety and health concerns. Additionally, our case management agencies make direct phone calls to assess clients' conditions and needs.

We had what we believed to be a solid emergency plan in place. The plan, however, was put to the test during the sustained, multi-day extreme heat emergency of this past July. On July 13<sup>th</sup>, the City experienced a localized blackout in Manhattan that had a significant impact on a senior center in the Theatre district, Encore Neighborhood Senior Center. Initially, there was no interruption of service or food damage as power was restored. On July 16<sup>th</sup>, however, when the center opened and was in full operation, several participants and staff fell sick. It was later discovered that they were exposed to carbon monoxide stemming from a damaged exhaust system caused by the outage. Participants and staff were immediately given medical attention. The center was immediately evacuated and closed. DFTA and the center director jointly engaged FDNY and the Department of Buildings to inspect and work to reopen the premises. The outage impacted the integrity of the gas line. While the center has since reopened, the program had to use a caterer to continue meal service for an extended period of time.

Although unfortunate, this situation tested our emergency outage response capability, which prepared us for outages in parts of Brooklyn a week later. Although none of the Brooklyn providers located within the outage zones were affected, we contacted each provider to ensure their emergency plans were in place.

Also on July 16<sup>th</sup>, the Mayor declared a heat emergency for Friday, July 19<sup>th</sup> through Sunday, July 21<sup>st</sup>. Once the heat emergency was declared, New York City Emergency Management (NYCEM) began the activation process for cooling centers throughout the City. There are over 580 cooling centers identified throughout the five boroughs, of which 249 were DFTA congregate sites. The City has a public communications and messaging process to ensure that people can accurately identify their nearest cooling center. The *Cooling Center Finder* is activated the day the centers are open. Also prior to the summer months, DFTA evaluates its cooling center locations to make sure they are operational and have visible signage in advance of heat emergencies.

Upon activation of the Heat Plan, DFTA along with other cooling center partners such as NYCHA, DYCD, Salvation Army, and the public library systems worked to confirm cooling center hours of operation. It was during this process when DFTA began calling its congregate sites to request that they extend hours where possible and to prepare for activation through Sunday, July 21<sup>st</sup>. While many centers were able to adjust their schedules, some centers have certain restrictions and limitations to opening beyond regular business hours.

In theory, a cooling center should be open beyond regular service hours and be open to the public to help alleviate the hardship of excessive heat. DFTA, however, has no authority to mandate its 249 senior centers to operate beyond regular service hours. Serving as a cooling center outside of regular business hours is not a requirement under existing contracts; it is strictly voluntary. This process not only revealed the misclassification of DFTA cooling centers that were not able to extend hours, it also revealed that the partnership between DFTA, the contractors, and their commitment to serve older New Yorkers in an emergency was not as congruent as one would think or expect!

It took an enormous amount of staff time to engage and enroll a number of the service contractors to open beyond regular service hours. It was during this protracted engagement process that we were able to identify several impediments and barriers to many cooling centers opening for extended hours and weekends and holidays. These include such limitations as religious observations or lease agreements, and occupancy arrangements which ultimately precluded or barred a number of centers from opening. As a result, 49 of the 249 were unable to extend their hours and days of operation and we adjusted their schedules on the Cooling Center Finder accordingly. It was encouraging that over

100 contractors responded immediately and confirmed they would open for extended hours on Friday and would open on Saturday and Sunday.

That said, as we got closer to Friday, I was dismayed that some providers had not responded to our calls or emails. I then wrote a letter to all contractors asking that they reconsider and inform us of the limitations that prevented them from opening and that we would work with them to mitigate some of those impediments such as staff overtime costs, limited staff, refreshment costs. In the same letter, I reminded them of their professional obligations and commitment to the quality of life of New York's older adult population. After sending the letter I also reached out to some of our umbrella organizations, including LiveOn NY and United Neighborhood Houses, to assist us in our outreach efforts and encourage their respective members to open beyond regular service hours and through the weekend. Both responded immediately and engaged several members. It is worth noting also that NYCEM proved to be an incredible partner, offering and deploying Community Emergency Response Teams (CERTs) in the cases for which center staff shortage was the underlying cause which prevented a center from opening. Moreover, NYCEM has graciously agreed to review and offer suggestions to our emergency plan revisions.

All that to say, we are extremely grateful for all of our partners, including those service provider contractors that recognized the heat emergency of July 19<sup>th</sup> through the 21<sup>st</sup>. Yet, I was surprised and disappointed by the service providers who were reluctant to open and required a call from me, our Chief Operating Officer, or senior staff to get them to reconsider. This is not what was expected from a network that so often is vocal when they perceive the needs older New Yorkers are not being met!

By Friday afternoon—the first day of the excessive heat emergency—we had activated 138 DFTA cooling centers who agreed to extend hours, 114 were activated for Saturday, and 101 for Sunday. DFTA senior staff were dispatched to survey and monitor progress throughout the weekend. It was gratifying to see how well those cooling centers took on the charge; they were well attended and active. In East Harlem, I was invited to join a karaoke group which I declined in order to prevent a mass exodus! In the Bronx, seniors were watching a Medea Family movie, which we were also loath to interrupt with greetings!

Despite the initial challenges to get the DFTA cooling centers open, we were informed by NYCEM that the DFTA cooling centers that offered extended hours and days of operation housed more than 50% of the New Yorker's seeking comfort during extended operational periods. On Friday, 3,093 individuals attended DFTA cooling centers; on Saturday 4,688 attended and Sunday 4,064. The DFTA cooling centers as expected welcomed older New Yorkers and also gave respite to NYC families and children.

In closing, we are all well aware that extreme weather can disproportionately impact vulnerable New Yorkers, including older adults, far greater than other communities. This is why emergency preparedness and adaptability remain among DFTA's priorities. Emergencies are by definition unexpected and each vary in extensiveness and severity. Lessons continue to be learned during each occurrence and plans are adjusted accordingly. And because current and future risks in light of our changing climate are significant, strategic adaptation to heat emergencies is a key priority for Mayor de Blasio. We look forward to our continued work with all of our partners, including the City Council, to review and adapt our protocols to adjust to this "new normal."

Again, I thank you for your interest and partnership in addressing this growing and ongoing concern.



**New York City Council  
Committee on Aging, Chair, Council Member Chin  
September 18, 2019  
Oversight - Protecting Seniors from the Extreme Heat & Cold**

Thank you, Chair Chin, and the full Aging Committee for the opportunity to testify on protecting seniors from the extreme heat and cold.

With a base of more than 100 community-based organizations, LiveOn NY's members provide core services that allow older adults to thrive in their communities, including senior centers, congregate and home-delivered meals, affordable senior housing, caregiver supports, NORCs and case management.

In the event of a heat wave or extreme winter weather, the City has designated a number of havens to which older New Yorkers can escape, including NYCHA community centers and senior centers throughout the five boroughs. Many of LiveOn NY's members operate these sites, providing heat or air conditioning to some of New York's most vulnerable populations. The community organizations are often asked to operate outside their normal business hours, such as on weekends, in order to ensure that older New Yorker's without access to cool spaces are kept safe. These organizations work hard daily to serve their respective communities; during bouts of extreme weather, their dedication does not waver, which is critical given that older adults are especially affected by extremely hot or cold temperatures.

LiveOn NY would like to respectfully submit several recommendations to continue improving the way ways in which we protect older New Yorkers from extreme heat and cold:

LiveOn NY would first and foremost like to express our thanks to the Administration and City Council for baselining funds in the FY20 budget to ensure expense repairs in NYCHA community spaces can be made, with particular emphasis on addressing needed HVAC repairs. Given that many of these spaces are designated cooling centers, these funds were critical to ensuring the sites could remain a refuge for older adults by restoring or replacing many HVAC systems that had fallen into disrepair. As these funds are baselined, we expect that they will continue to address needed repairs in the future.

Unfortunately, however, LiveOn NY is unsure if the amount of funds allocated will be enough to meet demand in the coming years and to what extent capital needs will become a factor as HVAC systems come to the end of their useful life, for example. **To this end, we recommend that the Department for the Aging (DFTA) publicly report on projected infrastructure-related expense and capital needs over the next 10 years.** While this in some ways is reflected in the DFTA capital plan, more could be done to survey, outline, articulate, and prepare for expected needs. Too often, repairs are only made after a crisis, when an HVAC or boiler breaks entirely, leaving centers and therefore older adults in the cold for days, or entire seasons, without needed supports. By creating a publicly produced outline and plan to address expected infrastructure needs, senior centers will be less at-risk to such circumstances.

Additionally, as we know that climate change will continue to produce an increasing number of days with extreme weather, LiveOn NY encourages continued efforts by DFTA and the Mayor's Office of Emergency Management to coordinate communications and support warming and cooling centers.





Making New York a better place to age

**Finally, the agencies must consider and clearly indicate in advance of these emergency situations what additional supports are reimbursable for organizations acting as cooling centers, especially when acting outside of the normal course of business hours.** For example, organizations must be made clearly aware of if the following are reimbursable at the outset of the cooling season: staff overtime, and additional meals or food served.

In closing, LiveOn NY would like to emphasize our appreciation of the Administration and City Council's prioritization of warming and cooling centers, and we look forward to continuing to work together to improve the accessibility and functionality of these spaces for years to come.

As we all grow old, and as New York experiences increasing climate change and cases of extreme weather, LiveOn NY remains committed to working with our city partners to make New York a better, safer place to age. Thank you for the opportunity to testify.

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*LiveOn NY's members provide the core, community-based services that allow older adults to thrive in their communities. With a base of more than 100 community-based organizations serving at least 300,000 older New Yorkers annually. Our members provide services ranging from senior centers, congregate and home-delivered meals, affordable senior housing with services, elder abuse prevention services, caregiver supports, case management, transportation, and NORCs. LiveOn NY advocates for increased funding for these vital services to improve both the solvency of the system and the overall capacity of community-based service providers.*

*LiveOn NY also administers a citywide outreach program and staffs a hotline that educates, screens and helps with benefit enrollment including SNAP, SCRIE and others, and also administers the Rights and Information for Senior Empowerment (RISE) program to bring critical information directly to seniors on important topics to help them age well in their communities.*



**New York City Council  
Committee on Aging, Chair, Council Member Chin  
September 18, 2019  
Oversight Hearing: Protecting Seniors from the Extreme Heat and Cold**

Thank you Council Member Chin for chairing today's Aging Committee Oversight Hearing on Protecting Seniors from the Extreme Heat and Cold.

JASA is a not-for-profit agency serving the needs of older adults in the greater New York area. Its mission is to sustain and enrich the lives of the aging in the New York metropolitan area so that they can remain in the community with dignity and independence. JASA has developed a comprehensive, integrated network of services that provides a continuum of community care. Programming promotes independence, safety, wellness, community participation, and an enhanced quality of life for New York City's older adults. These programs reach over 40,000 clients and include home care, case management services, senior centers, NORC supportive services, home delivered meals, caregiver support, continuing education, licensed mental health, housing, advocacy, legal services, adult protective services, and guardianship services.

I would like to thank the New York City Council for recognizing the need for today's hearing, as we finish the summer and inch closer to the winter season. JASA holds contracts for 22 senior centers, five case management programs, and 14 NORC-SSPs throughout New York City, putting us in a unique position to serve many neighborhoods and communities.

Over the years, the Administration has turned to senior centers to provide a respite from high summer heat. This is a laudable action; too many older adults are vulnerable in heat waves. In preparation for these challenging weather conditions, there are often announcements shared by the New York City Department for the Aging (DFTA) through the media stating that there will be senior centers open and people are encouraged to go to these sites, rather than suffer the weather at home.

While many of JASA's sites are open for extended hours on these special days, not all sites have the ability to provide emergency relief. For example:

- A number of JASA senior centers are located in New York City Housing Authority facilities. Currently, two of JASA's NYCHA based centers have HVAC problems that are being

evaluated and hopefully replaced. On extremely hot days, JASA has used stationary air conditioning units and offered programs in smaller rooms (when available) in order to provide a safe environment to participants.

- JASA also has a senior center co-located in a synagogue which has inadequate air conditioning, and cannot serve as a cooling center. There is no funding to fix the antiquated AC system and JASA does not have control of the facilities. For regular programming, JASA has similarly used alternate rooms with temporary air conditioning and fans.

## **Communication**

When DFTA issues a warning and suggests that older adults attend a cooling center, many older adults assume that all senior centers are open. It would make sense to have DFTA confirm the status of cooling at participating senior centers to ensure that listed centers are still able to provide relief from the heat. An annual survey is inadequate to verify real time situations.

Often the decision to activate cooling centers is made by DFTA with very short notice to programs. Early DFTA communication would be appreciated to enable coordination of after-hours staff and site. An improved alert system to agency administrators will ensure that programs are adequately staffed during extended hours.

## **Utilization issues**

It was JASA's experience this summer that more individuals used the cooling centers on the week-ends than after hours on week-days. We believe that this may be related to an interest in socializing with peers, rather than heat alleviation. We suggest that DFTA prepare, distribute and analyze the findings of a survey that would help clarify needs and preferences and inform expanded program planning.

Another issue worth exploring is whether clients of case management programs would use cooling centers if transportation and/or escort were available.

Thank you for the opportunity to testify today.

Molly Krakowski  
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**THE COUNCIL  
THE CITY OF NEW YORK**

**Appearance Card**

I intend to appear and speak on Int. No. \_\_\_\_\_ Res. No. \_\_\_\_\_

☐ in favor ☐ in opposition

Date: \_\_\_\_\_

**(PLEASE PRINT)**

Name: Johanna Conroy

Address: NYC Department of Emergency Mgmt.

I represent: Executive Director of Human

Address: Services

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Name: Katelyn Andrews

Address: \_\_\_\_\_

I represent: Live On NY

Address: 49 W. 45<sup>th</sup> St., Apt 4C

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**(PLEASE PRINT)**

Name: Molly Kralcowski

Address: JASH

I represent: \_\_\_\_\_

Address: \_\_\_\_\_

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Date: 9/18

(PLEASE PRINT)

Name: J.T. FALCONE

Address: 45 BROADWAY

I represent: UNITED NEIGHBORHOOD HOUSES

Address: \_\_\_\_\_

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Date: 9/18/2019

(PLEASE PRINT)

Name: Eileen MULLAKEY

Address: 2 LAFAYETTE ST.

I represent: DFTA

Address: 2 LAFAYETTE ST.

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Date: \_\_\_\_\_

**(PLEASE PRINT)**

Name: Lorraine Cortes Vazquez

Address: \_\_\_\_\_

I represent: Commissioner Dept for the Aging

Address: \_\_\_\_\_

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☐ in favor ☐ in opposition

Date: 9/18/2019

**(PLEASE PRINT)**

Name: PO - LING NG

Address: 168 GRAND STREET N.Y NY 10013

I represent: CPC OPEN DOOR SENIOR CENTER

Address: 168 GRAND STREET N.Y NY 10013

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