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**THE COUNCIL OF THE CITY OF NEW YORK**

**COMMITTEE REPORT OF THE**

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**COMMITTEE ON AGING**

*Hon. Margaret Chin, Chair*

**COMMITTEE ON PUBLIC HOUSING**

*Hon. Alicka Ampry-Samuel, Chair*

**April 7, 2021**

**OVERSIGHT: SENIORS AGING IN PLACE IN NYCHA DURING A PANDEMIC**

**Int. No. 0415**: By Council Members Chin, Levine, Ampry-Samuel and Cornegy

**Title:** A Local Law in relation to requiring the New York city housing authority to report annually on senior centers within NYCHA buildings

**Int. No. 1827**: By Council Members Ampry-Samuel, Louis, Brannan and Chin

**Title:** A Local Law to amend the New York city charter, in relation to establishing a New York city housing authority liaison within the department for the aging

**Charter:** Adds a new section 2404 to chapter 66

**I. INTRODUCTION**

On April 7, 2021, the Committee on Aging, chaired by Council Member Margaret Chin, and the Committee on Public Housing, chaired by Council Member Alicka Ampry-Samuel, will hold an oversight hearing on *Seniors Aging in Place in NYCHA During a Pandemic*. The Committees will also hear two pieces of legislation on senior services within the New York City Housing Authority (NYCHA). *Int. No. 415-2018*, sponsored by Council Member Chin, would require NYCHA to report annually on senior centers within NYCHA buildings, and *Int. No. 1827-2019*, sponsored by Council Member Ampry-Samuel, would establish a NYCHA liaison within the Department for the Aging (DFTA).

The Committees have invited representatives from the New York City Department for the Aging (DFTA), the New York City Housing Authority (NYCHA), NYCHA residents, resident associations, and various advocates, stakeholders, and the public to testify.

**II. BACKGROUND**

*New York City Housing Authority (NYCHA)*

Former New York City Mayor Fiorello La Guardia created NYCHA in 1934 in order to replace dilapidated tenements using funds from The New Deal,[[1]](#footnote-1) three years before the Housing Act of 1937 established public housing nationwide.[[2]](#footnote-2) NYCHA originally served two purposes: (1) to provide low-cost housing for middle-class, working families temporarily unemployed because of the Great Depression, and (2) to bolster the lagging economy by creating jobs for building trades.[[3]](#footnote-3) Later, NYCHA’s purpose evolved into providing safe, decent housing for families with the lowest incomes.[[4]](#footnote-4)

Currently, NYCHA has 302 developments, 2,252 residential buildings, and 169,820 units that are home to 365,506 authorized residents, making it the largest public housing authority in North America.[[5]](#footnote-5) Of the total number of NYCHA developments and buildings, 40 are senior-only developments, for a total of 58 buildings.[[6]](#footnote-6)

*NYCHA and the Department for the Aging (DFTA)*

While NYCHA deals broadly with issues of public housing, DFTA is the lead agency addressing public policy and service issues for New York City’s seniors.[[7]](#footnote-7) One of DFTA’s primary strategic goals is to ensure the provision of quality services fairly and equitably to older New Yorkers.[[8]](#footnote-8) DFTA is required by state and federal law to provide various services to seniors, including access to nutrition, benefits counseling, employment opportunities, legal assistance, and in-home services.[[9]](#footnote-9)

One of the ways in which DFTA provides these services to seniors is through DFTA-contracted senior centers. Currently, DFTA has 249 contracted senior centers within its portfolio.[[10]](#footnote-10) DFTA contracts with more than 100 nonprofit organizations[[11]](#footnote-11) to operate these senior centers, which provide seniors with meals, activities, health management resources, case management, educational programming, and socialization.[[12]](#footnote-12)

 There is some overlap between DFTA and NYCHA in providing senior services to the City’s older adult population. For example, DFTA has testified at previous City Council hearings that of the 249 DFTA-contracted senior centers, 74 senior centers are in NYCHA developments.[[13]](#footnote-13) There are also 14 senior social clubs that operate in NYCHA public housing units, and which offer smaller programs than offered by general senior centers. [[14]](#footnote-14)

*NYCHA and COVID-19*

Early into the COVID-19 pandemic, data indicated that the virus had been taking a disproportionate toll among public housing residents. The rate of death due to COVID-19 for residents of NYCHA developments has been reported as more than twice the citywide average,[[15]](#footnote-15) with neighborhoods that contained public housing developments experiencing a 30% higher rate of COVID-19 hospitalizations when compared to surrounding areas.[[16]](#footnote-16) Some residents attributed this disparity to an inadequate response by NYCHA and other government agencies.[[17]](#footnote-17)

As seniors have been disproportionately impacted by COVID-19 generally,[[18]](#footnote-18) NYCHA seniors have been particularly hard hit by the virus. In October 2020, it was reported that seniors in NYCHA buildings with poor ventilation were being “slammed” by COVID-19.[[19]](#footnote-19) At the time, the infection rates in 22 NYCHA senior developments were much higher than the rates for the rest of the city.[[20]](#footnote-20) A NYCHA development in the Bronx occupied primarily by seniors, for example, logged a 9% infection rate at the time, while a seniors-only development in Upper Manhattan logged 8%, and a seniors-only housing development in Brooklyn showed a rate of 5%, each significantly higher than the city’s average infection rate of 2.9%.[[21]](#footnote-21) Experts stated that poor indoor airflow due to inadequate ventilations systems, along with crowded conditions caused by other NYCHA problems such as broken elevators, contributed to the spread of COVID-19 in NYCHA housing.[[22]](#footnote-22)

**III. NYCHA EXPENDITURES AND OPERATIONS DURING COVID-19**

In order to respond to the heightened sanitation and safety needs required by the COVID-19 pandemic, NYCHA has needed to adapt its protocols, capital projects, and expenditures accordingly. According to NYCHA’s preliminary 2020 year-end estimates,[[23]](#footnote-23) the Authority expended about $88 million on COVID-19 related expenses in 2020.[[24]](#footnote-24) This included $45 million for third-party contracts to sanitize all NYCHA developments, $20 million for additional staffing costs (including temporary frontline workers, overtime, and paid sick and expanded family leave), $7 million for Personal Protective Equipment (PPE) for staff, $6 million to provide air conditioners for vulnerable residents, and $10.5 million in other related expenses, including IT equipment for remote work, playground fencing, and other miscellaneous expenses.[[25]](#footnote-25)

Further, in April 2020, due to the economic consequences of the pandemic, the City instituted a 6-month funding moratorium that resulted in delays of 6 to 10 months for City-funded capital projects.[[26]](#footnote-26) Approximately 230 projects in NYCHA’s City capital portfolio were put on hold, although NYCHA was able to shift a substantial portion of those to federal funding to keep the work going. [[27]](#footnote-27) Since the moratorium was lifted in November 2020, NYCHA has been working with OMB, and other partners such as the Comptroller’s office, to assess and restart the projects.[[28]](#footnote-28)

Operationally, NYCHA has also had to adjust its sanitation protocols to provide safer residences. During the start of the pandemic, NYCHA was sanitizing non-senior buildings three times per week, and senior-only buildings five times per week.[[29]](#footnote-29) Currently, based on a change in guidance issued by New York State, all buildings are disinfected once per day at high touch point areas, including: doors, lobby, mailboxes, and elevator buttons.[[30]](#footnote-30)

**IV. SENIORS IN NYCHA DEVELOPMENTS**

As mentioned above, NYCHA has 302 developments, 2,252 buildings, and 169,820 units with 356,506 authorized residents, making it the largest public housing authority in North America.[[31]](#footnote-31) Of the total number of NYCHA developments and buildings, there are 40 senior-only developments, and 11 Naturally Occurring Retirement Communities (NORCs).[[32]](#footnote-32) According to NYCHA, approximately 21.8 percent of its population is age 62 or older, and 40.3 percent of NYCHA households are headed by individuals age 62 and older.[[33]](#footnote-33)

There are various services available for seniors in NYCHA developments, including senior social clubs.[[34]](#footnote-34) There are 29 senior social clubs that provide recreational, health, cultural activities, and resources for NYCHA residents and other seniors in the community, but have fewer services (such as congregate meals) that are regularly offered at senior centers.[[35]](#footnote-35) Ten social clubs rely on one-time funding, and 19 are baselined; all are contracted with DFTA, but prior to Fiscal 2020, fourteen were managed by NYCHA.[[36]](#footnote-36)

In addition to 29 social clubs, there are 74 senior centers located specifically in NYCHA developments; these include Neighborhood Senior Centers, which are operated by DFTA-contracted service providers.[[37]](#footnote-37) Senior centers offer congregate meals, health promotion activities, cultural activities, and information about benefits.[[38]](#footnote-38) While there is limited publicly available information pertaining to how many seniors visit senior centers in NYCHA, nearly 30,000 seniors visited DFTA’s 249 senior centers daily while they were still physically in operation. [[39]](#footnote-39)

As mentioned above, NYCHA also operates 11 NORCs which provide support services to many older residents who are aging in place.[[40]](#footnote-40) The services provided at NORCs include: case management; healthcare assistance such as nursing, health screenings, physician services, and medication management; information and referral services; assistance with Activities of Daily Living (“ADL”); transportation; housekeeping; support groups; and financial management.[[41]](#footnote-41) NYCHA NORCs operate through the support of contracts with DFTA, the New York State Office for the Aging, and the United Hospital Fund.[[42]](#footnote-42)

**V. NYCHA’S SENIOR SERVICES DURING COVID-19**

 Given the multitude of senior centers, social clubs, and senior housing within NYCHA developments, the Authority has traditionally offered a variety of senior services to serve NYCHA’s older adult population. Some of these programs include: the Elderly Safe at Home Program, which provides crime prevention and social service assistance to seniors and physically disabled persons at certain NYCHA developments in the Bronx; the Senior Resident Advisor and Service Coordinator Programs, which serve seniors through on-site services at NYCHA developments citywide; the Senior Companion Program; and Naturally Occurring Retirement Communities within NYCHA developments.[[43]](#footnote-43)

*NYCHA Senior Centers*

Over the past year, many such senior services and other NYCHA services aimed at seniors have been adapted and changed due to the realities of COVID-19. NYCHA has also provided the following new and additional services to help address the unique issues that NYCHA seniors have had to face because of the pandemic. For example, in March 2020, pursuant to the Governor’s shelter at home executive order, all DFTA senior centers and NYCHA social clubs physically closed their doors.[[44]](#footnote-44) Although these centers and clubs have remained physically closed since then, providers have not stopped providing services to the City’s older adult population. At the end of April 2020, DFTA announced that it was transitioning its services and programming to remote and virtual services during the pandemic.[[45]](#footnote-45) All senior center providers, including those providing services in NYCHA senior centers, have been holding remote services since that time. As of April 2021, DFTA still has not announced when senior centers will be resuming in-person programming.

*Communicating with Tenants*

While property management offices in NYCHA are open, social distancing practices have reduced staff levels and tenants are no longer able to have direct contact with property managers.[[46]](#footnote-46) Instead, tenants, including senior tenants, can communicate with management office staff by contacting them via telephone, email, or through scheduled appointments where staff speak from behind the reception desk.[[47]](#footnote-47) Residents can also contact the Customer Contact Center (CCC) or the MY NYCHA App to request emergency repairs at any time.[[48]](#footnote-48)

*NYCHA Tablets and Access to Technology*

As NYCHA and DFTA have needed to shift so many in-person services online, the need for updated technology, internet connectivity, and stable internet connections, as well the need to address the technological divide that seniors face, have all become pressing issues. In response to the shift to virtual services, and as part of the Mayor’s Equity Action Plan, the City—through the Mayor’s Office of the Chief Technology Officer (MOCTO)—initially partnered with T-Mobile, LG Electronics USA, and Older Adults Technology Services (OATS), to provide 10,000 internet-connected tablets to older adults living in NYCHA developments.[[49]](#footnote-49) Residents aged 62 and older were prioritized for distribution.[[50]](#footnote-50) The tablets were 10” devices that came with 12 months of mobile internet connectivity paid for by the City of New York.[[51]](#footnote-51)

Tablets were distributed in May 2020, with participants receiving free support from DFTA and OATS to aid participants in setting up their devices, learning how to use them, accessing free classes and resources, and connecting with friends and family.[[52]](#footnote-52) The City prioritized NYCHA developments in communities where broadband is not available in NYC, such as developments in Central Brooklyn, South Brooklyn, the South Bronx, Eastern Queens, and Upper Manhattan.[[53]](#footnote-53) Nearly a year later, it is unclear whether more tablets will be distributed.

Additionally, OATS partnered with MOCTO over a five-week period and held six virtual sessions of a digital literacy class for seniors using City-provided tablets, including one session in Spanish.[[54]](#footnote-54) These sessions were part of a new course created by OATS titled “Android Essentials” and was made specifically for NYCHA seniors to help them learn how to use their devices.[[55]](#footnote-55)

Despite the offered session, however, only 89 NYCHA seniors participated in the first class.[[56]](#footnote-56) Further, OATS also held one-day workshops on different topics, including “Getting to Know Your Tablet,” “Intro to Zoom,” “Intro to Spotify,” and “Morning Stretch,” with a total of 798 NYCHA seniors participating in these workshops.[[57]](#footnote-57) According to NYCHA, OATS continues to provide the “Android Essentials” course to NYCHA seniors.[[58]](#footnote-58)

*NYCHA Vaccine Sites*

 Finally, as the COVID-19 vaccination roll out has progressed, the City has designated certain NYCHA facilities as vaccine centers for seniors.[[59]](#footnote-59) These on-site vaccination clinics are meant to make vaccine access easier for NYCHA seniors and are open to residents aged 65 and older.[[60]](#footnote-60) Since January 2021, the sites have included such NYCHA developments as the Van Dyke I & II Houses in Brooklyn, Cassidy Lafayette Houses in Staten Island, and Polo Grounds Towers in Manhattan.[[61]](#footnote-61) As of March 30, 2021, the City has also partnered with Google and the Hudson Guild to open a new vaccination site at the Fulton Community Center in Manhattan, which will prioritize vaccination appointments for nearby NYCHA residents.[[62]](#footnote-62)

**VI. ISSUES AND CONCERNS**

*Vaccinations*

The City has stated it will conduct outreach to available NYCHA residents to help them get the facts about the vaccine, answer questions, and sign them up for appointments.[[63]](#footnote-63) While this is an important step in vaccine equity, it is currently unclear whether the City is gathering data on how many NYCHA residents in particular have received and are receiving the vaccination, how many of those residents are NYCHA seniors in particular, and whether NYCHA seniors who are homebound are receiving the same information and access to vaccination.

As vaccine access and equity are critical to reaching herd immunity and staunching the pandemic, the Committees are concerned about access to and distribution of vaccines to NYCHA residents. In particular, the Committees are concerned about making sure NYCHA seniors, both those who are mobile and those who are homebound, know where to get the vaccines, how to get the vaccines, and are being connected to vaccines quickly and easily, even if they are unable to go on-site to do so.

*Public Safety*

Safety and security have remained an ongoing concern at NYCHA’s senior developments. On February 24, 2021, the Committee on Public Housing held an oversight hearing to examine public safety issues at NYCHA.[[64]](#footnote-64) Among other issues, the Committee asked NYCHA and the New York City Police Department (NYPD) to provide an update on the lack of adequate safety and security equipment and personnel at Woodson Houses, where an alleged serial killer had recently been apprehended in connection to the murder of three senior women in that NYCHA senior development.[[65]](#footnote-65)

Given that many seniors, a high-risk group for contracting COVID-19, were sheltering at home in compliance with state and local COVID-19 safety measures, the Committees are particularly concerned to hear about whether NYCHA took adequate steps to ensure that safety and security were prioritized specifically at NYCHA senior developments.

*Memorandum of Understanding Between NYCHA and DFTA*

Finally, previously, on December 5, 2018, the Committees on Aging and Public Housing held a joint oversight hearing on “Senior Services and Centers in NYCHA.”[[66]](#footnote-66) At that hearing, the Committees learned that NYCHA was in discussion with the Office of Management and Budget and with DFTA regarding a memorandum of understanding (“MOU”) to improve the way NYCHA conducted repairs at senior centers.[[67]](#footnote-67) At the time of the hearing, the MOU had yet to be finalized, though NYCHA testified that the final MOU would more clearly delineate responsibilities between NYCHA and DFTA.[[68]](#footnote-68) The Committees remain unaware of the contents of any finalized MOU.

**VII. CONCLUSION**

Given the unique challenges presented by the COVID-19 pandemic, the Committees expect to hear testimony from DFTA and NYCHA regarding their efforts to reach seniors and provide them with essential services, and now to provide them with vaccines, over the course of the pandemic. The Committees are also interested to learn about the measures NYCHA, DFTA, and other relevant agencies took to improve safety and security in NYCHA’s senior developments, particularly given that many seniors were forced to shelter at home to comply with New York State COVID-19 safety protocols.

Additionally, the Committees expect to hear about how NYCHA and DFTA have been meeting the various needs of NYCHA’s aging population, including updates on conditions at senior centers and social clubs, plans to expand senior centers to developments that do not yet have them, and how the agencies have been maintaining and repairing these developments during the pandemic.

**VIII. LEGISLATION ANALYSIS**

Below is a brief summary of the legislation being heard today by the Committees. This summary is intended for informational purposes only and does not substitute for legal counsel. For more detailed information, you should review the full text of the bill, which is attached below.

**Int. No. 415, A Local Law in relation to requiring the New York city housing authority to report annually on senior centers within NYCHA buildings**

Int. No. 415 would require NYCHA to annually submit to the Mayor and the City Council a report on senior centers in NYCHA developments. The report would include, among other things, the number of senior centers in NYCHA developments, the location of each senior center, the number of complaints associated with each senior center, and the programs provided at each senior center. The reports would be made publicly available.

 This local law would take effect immediately.

**Int. No. 1827, A Local Law to amend the New York city charter, in relation to establishing a New York city housing authority liaison within the department for the aging**

Int. No. 1827 would establish a liaison position within DFTA for the purpose of coordinating with NYCHA about matters impacting older adults residing in public housing.

This local law would take effect 180 days after enactment.

Int. No. 415

By Council Members Chin, Levine, Ampry-Samuel and Cornegy

..Title

A Local Law in relation to requiring the New York city housing authority to report annually on senior centers within NYCHA buildings

..Body

Be it enacted by the Council as follows:

Section 1. a. The New York city housing authority shall submit to the mayor and the council, and make publicly available online, annual reports beginning on June 1, 2017, related to senior centers in New York city housing authority developments. Such reports shall include, at a minimum, the following:

1. The number of senior centers in New York city housing authority developments disaggregated by whether the center is operated by the New York city housing authority, the department for the aging, or another entity;

2. The location of each senior center disaggregated by development, community district and community board;

3. The number of complaints filed with the New York city housing authority regarding each senior center;

4. Actions taken by the New York city housing authority to address such complaints;

5. The amount of rent charged to each senior center;

6. The number of people served by each senior center disaggregated by New York city housing authority residents and non-New York city housing authority residents;

7. The number of people turned away annually by each senior center because of lack of capacity, if any; and

8. The programs provided by each senior center.

b. Such information shall be made publicly available in a non-proprietary format that permits automated processing.

§ 2. This local law takes effect immediately.

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Int. No. 1827

By Council Member Ampry-Samuel, Louis, Brannan and Chin

..Title

A Local Law to amend the New York city charter, in relation to establishing a New York city housing authority liaison within the department for the aging

..Body

Be it enacted by the Council as follows:

Section 1. Chapter 66 of the New York city charter is amended by adding a new section 2404 to read as follows:

§ 2404. New York city housing authority liaison. There shall be in the department the position of New York city housing authority liaison whose duties shall include, but not be limited to the following:

1. Delineating the roles and responsibilities of the department and the New York city housing authority regarding repairs at senior centers sponsored by the department and located at the New York city housing authority;

2.  Establishing a system to receive comments and complaints with respect to programs and facilities sponsored by the department and located at a New York city housing authority location;

3. Making recommendations to the commissioner with respect to improving programs and facilities that receive funding from the department to serve older adult public housing residents; and

4. Coordinating with the New York city housing authority about any other matters impacting older adult public housing residents.

§ 2. This local law takes effect 180 days after enactment, except that the department may take such measures as are necessary for its implementation prior to its effective date.

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..Title

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3. Marcuse, 353-54; J.A. Stoloff, A Brief History of Public Housing, Paper presented at August 14 meeting of the American Sociological Association, at 3 (2004). [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
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5. *See* NYCHA Fact Sheet, *available at* <https://www1.nyc.gov/assets/nycha/downloads/pdf/NYCHA-Fact-Sheet_2020_Final.pdf>. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. *Id.* [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
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10. “Annual Plan Summary”, N.Y.C Department for the Aging, Sept. 2017, *available at*

<http://www1.nyc.gov/assets/dfta/downloads/pdf/reports/DFTAAnnualPlanSummary2017.pdf> at p. 25. [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
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20. *Id.* [↑](#footnote-ref-20)
21. *Id.* [↑](#footnote-ref-21)
22. *Id.* [↑](#footnote-ref-22)
23. *Fiscal 2022 Preliminary Plan*, New York City Council Department of Finance, available on file. [↑](#footnote-ref-23)
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31. *See* NYCHA 2020 Fact Sheet, *available at* <https://www1.nyc.gov/assets/nycha/downloads/pdf/NYCHA-Fact-Sheet_2020_Final.pdf>. [↑](#footnote-ref-31)
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