



TESTIMONY

Presented by

**Lorraine Cortés-Vázquez
Commissioner**

on

FY 2022 Executive Budget

before the

**New York City Council
Committee on Aging**

on

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10:00 A.M.**

Good morning, Chair Chin, Chair Dromm, and members of the Aging and Finance Committees. I am Lorraine Cortés-Vázquez, Commissioner of the New York City Department for the Aging (DFTA). I am joined this morning by Jose Mercado our Chief Financial Officer, and Michael Ognibene our Chief Operating Officer. Thank you for this opportunity to discuss DFTA's Executive Budget for Fiscal Year 2022.

Budget Overview

In addition to working to eliminate ageism and ensuring the dignity and quality of life of older New Yorkers, providing high quality services and resources are among the Department's top priorities. To support this important work, our FY 2022 Executive Budget projects \$439.9 million in funding, of which \$285.6 million is in City funds; which includes allocations of \$230.3 million to support older adult centers (this incorporates \$8 million in NORC funding), \$41.8 million for home delivered meals, \$38 million for case management, \$34.4 million to support home care for homebound seniors who are not Medicaid eligible, and \$8.1 million for caregiver services. There is also \$6.2 million indirect rate cost funding. In addition to supporting these services, the Administration has invested heavily in responding to the continued pandemic.

This Administration has consistently made major investments in aging services, including an overall increase of \$150 million in baseline funding. In this Executive Budget, an additional \$10M in the senior center model budget was included; fulfilling a promise to right-size many contracts. Additionally, the \$39.4M in funding for Older Adult Centers and NORC contracts, to be allocated through an RFP, is the largest investment in aging services in 20 years.

The FY 2022 Executive Budget adds \$115.4 m in Coronavirus State and Local recovery funds over three years. These funds are allocated to the community care investment, indirect cost rate and the senior model budget phase II.

We're also incredibly grateful for the ongoing support of the City Council, which in FY 2021 awarded DFTA with over \$38.1 million in discretionary funding, allowing us to make even greater investments in often unserved or underserved communities.

Community Care Investments

We know that older adults overwhelmingly prefer to age in their homes and communities if given the choice. To achieve this, many need a full range of high-quality critical services, resources and opportunities that will support them with their daily living activities. With this in mind, we have released a 5-year community care plan which promotes universal access to the continuum of services and supports in the community to help prevent unnecessary institutional care.

The current administration's investments have reversed losses, and further enhanced funding from previous administrations—as we focus on keeping pace with the growth, diversification, and financial pressures facing older adults. Additionally, DFTA aims to increase the diversity in its portfolio of providers to address historical funding inequities. We know that roughly half of the older adults use centers in their districts, while the other half travel to other centers. We also hope to tap into technologies that have come online in recent years that can reach isolated older people, connect people with their communities, and help address a variety of presenting issues.

A critical next step of this plan is to reimagine Older Adult Centers (OACs; “senior centers”) and Naturally Occurring Retirement Communities (NORCs) to promote collaborations, innovations and synergies between these two core DFTA programs. This will be accomplished through the current Request for Proposals (RFP).

To start to achieve these goals, the budget includes \$39.4 million to fund 25 additional OAC or NORC sites and supports to ensure full utilization. This includes better marketing and outreach to inform the community about the rich array of community care services available to them. It also encompasses expanded transportation to reach those who are geographically isolated in transportation deserts which will be funded in FY23.

Model Budget

This Executive Budget also includes \$10 million of the non-food model budget funding which focuses on programming and program staff. As you may recall, the model budget exercise aimed to achieve two goals: (1) to increase resources and ensure strong programming in our network of congregate centers; and (2) to make more uniform the funding level of each center to support equity in staffing structure and salary.

In FY18, the first phase of this process, which focused on programming and program staff, resulted in the significant investment of \$10 million of baseline funding in our network of older adult centers. This allowed centers to right-size salaries, hire more staff, and expand and enrich center programming. We appreciate the Council's continued advocacy for these funds, and the Mayor's commitment to them.

Indirect Rates

As you know, the Council, Mayor and service providers have been working collaboratively to address indirect rate costs. These are a portion of provider costs that are not directly attributed to service delivery, but are necessary for operations like accounting, human resources, rent, general operations, and other eligible costs. DFTA contracts will receive \$6.2 million in funding to cover these indirect costs. This funding will help stabilize contracts for social service providers across the city.

Technology Access

We know that many older adults lack access to technology, which has been a lifeline especially during the pandemic. In addition to a device itself, reliable internet and digital literacy training are fundamental components of access.

As you know, last summer, through a program led by the Mayor's Office of the Chief Technology Officer, with support from New York City Housing Authority (NYCHA) and DFTA, the City delivered 10,000 free Wi-Fi-equipped tablets to older NYCHA residents. The program included one year of free internet, which was set to expire this month. We are thrilled the City has extended the free Wi-Fi along with the contract with the Older Adults Technology Services (OATS) to provide training, education and technology support.

We have continued to invest in planning for increased access and support in this area. This is a fundamental component of our community care plan as well and we continue to explore ways to not only ensure access to technology, but also innovate our use of technology to make access to services easier.

Mental Health Supports

The pandemic has been a strain on all of us, especially older adults who are most vulnerable and isolated. Since the start of the pandemic, we have increased supports to address isolation. In March 2020, we started with wellness calls to all older adults in our programs and to date have conducted over 4 million calls. These calls serve an essential purpose not only to check-in on the older adults to reduce isolation, but to provide referrals to services – like food, Friendly Visiting, elder abuse programs, mental health, and other services.

In addition to DFTA's Geriatric Mental Health (DGMH) programs, Friendly Visiting also serves as a mental health intervention program. It focuses on isolated, largely homebound seniors who are connected with DFTA's contracted case management programs. The program matches older adults facing the negative effects of social isolation with well trained, matched volunteers who spend time with them to provide social interaction. The program expands the older adult's connection to their community and helps prevent the isolated older adults from declining into depression and loneliness. During the last year, these visits have continued and been conducted virtually and telephonically.

To expand support and address the social isolation and loneliness of a broader range of older adults, DFTA also launched the Friendly VOICES program in October 2020. This program was established to open eligibility to a wider range of older adults and will remain virtual. Friendly VOICES offers older adults the opportunity to be matched with a volunteer, a peer or a small virtual group. The Friendly VOICES program currently has openings for older adults to join. To sign up as a volunteer or an older adult, individuals can call Aging Connect at 212-244-6469.

Anti-Ageism Campaign

I'm so proud of DFTA's recently launched anti-ageism campaign, Ageless New York, which focuses on the pervasive thoughts and attitudes New Yorkers have on aging and older adults, and the negative impact ageism has on personal lives, self-esteem, the workplace, health industry, and our economy. The campaign highlights real older New Yorkers who are active and defy the stereotypes about older adults. The messaging focuses on aging not stopping individual's uniqueness, gifts, and/or contributions. The anti-ageism campaign consists of both visual and video PSAs which are running in bus shelters, LinkNYC boards, Facebook and Google ads, and a website, nyc.gov/agelessnewyork, and NYC Media assets, including NYC TV and NYC taxi video monitors.

Conclusion

The COVID pandemic has challenged us to do more with our limited resources, while underscoring the critical importance of community care. The community care 5-year plan will achieve the City's long-term vision of providing universal access to appropriate, high-quality community care services and supports to a growing older population. This includes a continued investment in virtual programming, as well as the support for older adults to accessing a device, connectivity, and technology literacy training. We look forward to continuing to advance these goals.

I continue to be proud of the work that DFTA has done and look forward to the influx of additional resources and investment in the community care plan. As always, we are grateful to the Chairs and the Committees for your advocacy and continued partnership to support our older New Yorkers. Thank you.