



THE COUNCIL OF THE CITY OF NEW YORK

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CITING RISING NUMBER OF SUICIDES AMONG SENIORS, COUNCIL MEMBER CHIN DEMANDS MORE INVESTMENT IN MENTAL HEALTH SERVICES

CITY HALL – Citing an increase in suicides among seniors – including several in one housing development in Lower Manhattan – Council Member Margaret S. Chin chaired a hearing today of the Council’s Committee on Aging to look into ways to address a growing mental health crisis.

“Far too many seniors – especially immigrant seniors – are discouraged from coming forward with their mental health challenges due to cultural stigma and shame,” said **Council Member Chin**. “Over the past year, we’ve lost too many seniors to suicides that could have been prevented. It is critical that our City provide our communities with the cultural and linguistic resources necessary to meet the mental health needs of a growing population of older adults with a diverse set of needs.”



In July, a well-known and respected community leader committed suicide at Knickerbocker Village in Council Member Chin’s Council District – where he lived and worked for decades. This community leader’s tragic death came less than a year after another prominent community leader committed suicide at the same housing complex, which is home to many seniors.

According to the Geriatric Mental Health Alliance of New York, the number of older adults with mental illness is expected to rise by 50 percent in New York State. Compounding this problem is the high number of older adults in New York who are poor and living alone. Data from an advocacy group, United Neighborhood Houses, indicates that our City has a greater percentage of seniors living alone

than in other parts of the country. Research shows that this social isolation and loneliness can have a negative impact on the physical and mental well-being of seniors.

At today's hearing, Council Member Chin called for the City to respond to the rising mental health needs of our City's seniors – including increased funding for bicultural and bilingual professionals, enhanced outreach to seniors about mental health services available to them, and successful programs such as ThriveNYC. Additionally, the Council Member advocated for Intro 1180, legislation she co-sponsored with Council Member Diana Ayala that would require caseworkers providing services at a Senior Center to complete the mental health first-aid training course for older adults and to complete a refresher training course at least once every three years.

“Mental health conditions are prevalent among the aging population and it is crucial the caseworkers they regularly interact with are trained on recognizing the symptoms of common mental illnesses, including depression, anxiety, and dementia,” said **Council Member Diana Ayala**, Chair of the Council's Committee on Mental Health, Disabilities, and Addiction. “I am proud to sponsor Introduction 1180 and I look forward to working with my colleagues, the Mayor's administration, and advocates to finalize the strongest and most responsible version of this legislation.”

“LiveOn NY thanks Committee Chairs Chin and Ayala for holding today's important hearing about how NYC can address mental health and wellness among older adults,” said **Allison Nickerson, Executive Director of LiveOn NY**. “The complexity of this issue requires that we work together to ensure older New Yorkers have information, resources and support through multiple access points citywide so that they know they are not alone. LiveOn NY also supports expanded investments in senior services and through Thrive NYC so that the aging services network has the tools and support they need to serve older New Yorkers. We look forward to working with DFTA, DOHMH, City Council and our members to make New York a better place to age.”

“We applaud the efforts by City Councilmembers Chin and Ayala to introduce legislation that increases mental services for our City's senior population,” said **Jo-Ann Yoo, Executive Director of the Asian American Foundation**. “Asian Americans are the only racial group for which suicide was consistently one of the top 10 leading causes of death in New York City from 1997 to 2015. In fact, among the senior population, Asian women ages 65 and older have the highest suicide rate across all racial and ethnic groups. Signs of mental illness are often overlooked by Asians for myriad reasons, and even when needs are identified, there is a dearth of in-language and culturally competent mental health services for the Asian community. AAF, on behalf of our member agencies, asks our city's leadership to make an initial investment of \$1 million in pan-Asian nonprofit organizations to develop community-wide capacity in mental health services.”

“The NYC veteran population is particularly vulnerable to suicide and substance abuse compared to their civilian counterparts,” said **Director of Policy and Legislative Advocacy for the NYC Veterans Alliance, Sam Molik**. “A high prevalence of substance (5.7%) and alcohol use disorders (5.4%) in older veterans were found in the elderly veteran population and according to the U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs own reporting, the suicide rate of veterans is nearly twice that of civilians in New York. At particular risk is our elder population. Currently, 53% of veterans living in New York are 65 years and older and the largest proportion of veteran suicides in New York was among veterans over the age of 55.”

While DFTA and the DOHMH both provide critical mental health services for our City's older adult population, it is unclear how many of the 1.9 million older adults in the City are reached by the programs. By 2040, older adults will make up 21 percent of New York's population. It is critical that the City prepare for the mental health needs of this growing, and increasingly diverse group of seniors.

Attached is Council Member Chin's full testimony to the Committee.

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