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CALLING ON THE MAYOR TO BUILD A FAIRER CITY FOR ALL AGES, CM CHIN HOLDS HEARING ON UNDERFUNDED SENIOR CENTERS & KITCHEN STAFF

NEW YORK -In a packed model budget hearing, **Council Member Margaret S. Chin, Chair of the Aging Committee**, joined advocates and senior service providers to call for desperately-needed funding for senior center meals and kitchen staff.

“The meals senior centers serve have an enormous impact on the wellbeing of our older adult population,” said **Council Member Chin**. “No less important are the kitchen staffers who prepare and serve these meals to our older adults throughout this City. They remain grossly underpaid and overworked, often having to balance several hats and serving as not only the cook – but also as the food delivery driver and even the dishwasher. Without immediate action, we cannot begin a process that provides critical support to kitchen center staff workers who have been left out of the model budget process and deserve a living wage. A model budget process that excludes this core need is not a model budget at all.”



Nearly 250 senior centers operated by DFTA provide close to 30,000 seniors a meal per day. Despite the clear high-demand for these meals, kitchen staff and food costs were omitted from the model budget funding process. The result is a workforce with high turnover rates and senior centers left struggling to fill badly-needed vacancies. According to testimony from United

Neighborhood Houses, one senior center went six months with a job vacancy for a kitchen employee.

Unfortunately, DFTA and the City Office of Budget and Management (OMB) have yet to provide a commitment for increased funding for congregate and home-delivered meals or senior center kitchen staff in Fiscal Year 2020. Without solid funding numbers and a comprehensive meal analysis, it is difficult for advocates and elected officials to determine the precise budgetary needs to fix the problem.

During the hearing, Council Member Chin questioned acting DFTA Commissioner Caryn Resnick about the delay, noting that the agency promised the data would be made available by December 2018. Testimony from those who operate senior centers have made it clear that as they wait for the full disbursement of funding through the model budget, food prices increase and the struggle to pay kitchen staff has only grown more urgent.

According to the National Council on Aging, seniors who attend senior centers experience improvements in their social, mental, and economic wellbeing. Studies also show that seniors who go to senior centers can learn to manage and even postpone the beginning of a chronic illness. With such benefits, it is vital that New York's senior centers are financially equipped at every level to support their older adult participants.

“Senior center kitchen staff play a critical role in ensuring our city’s older adult population is adequately fed. Unfortunately, these workers are underpaid, which makes retention difficult for various senior center providers – especially those in my district,” said **Council Member Diana Ayala**. “I hope that DFTA’s Fiscal Year 2020 budget is expanded to pay kitchen staffers the wages they deserve.”

“Advocates, seniors, kitchen staffers, and experts all provided stirring testimony laying out the need for increased funding to feed New York’s seniors and it is critical that New York City make investments in the system that serves more than 7 million meals in Senior Centers each year,” stated **Allison Nickerson, Executive Director, LiveOn NY**. “LiveOn NY believes that every senior deserves access to a quality, nutritious meal and that the chefs, kitchen staff and senior center directors responsible for ensuring the availability of these meals are paid a competitive, livable wage. As New Yorkers, we know this is a challenge this city can certainly rise to meet to ensure the dignity and wellbeing of New York's front line staff members and our older adult neighbors. Investing in seniors and the people who serve them will build stronger communities and will make NYC a fair city for all ages.”

“Older adults are the fastest-growing segment of the population,” **AARP New York Executive Council Member Rocky Chin** testified at today’s hearing. “There are now more New Yorkers ages 65 and older statewide than there are children under the age of 13. Also, in New York City, the older immigrant population has grown 42 percent over the past decade. Our congregate and home-delivered meal programs are on the front line of ensuring older adults in NYC receive a well-balanced meal every day. Moreover, access to nutritious meals is a key factor in successfully aging in place. Isn’t it time that New York City strives to ensure that no older adult goes without a nutritious meal?”

By 2040, older adults will make up roughly 21 percent of the City's population making them one of the fastest growing groups in New York. A healthier and happier older adult population means fewer individuals need to use various locally- and federally-funded services. A report from Fordham University makes clear that if New York makes investments in its senior population now; both the City and the Federal government could save hundreds of millions of dollars in the future.

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