

THE COUNCIL OF THE CITY OF NEW YORK

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**FOR IMMEDIATE
RELEASE**

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SEPTEMBER 4, 2020

SPEAKER, CHIN, & LEVINE CALL FOR SENIOR CENTER REOPENING PLAN

Letter to Mayor urges for robust inter-agency dialogue with providers at the table

CITY HALL – Today, Council Member Margaret Chin, Speaker Corey Johnson, and Council Member Mark Levine are leading a charge to initiate a dialogue and timeline to reopen senior centers. Older adults in New York City have been in strict confinement for more than five months now, and City Hall has not yet provided transparency on a plan to safely reopen senior centers, which vulnerable seniors depend on for nutritious and culturally sensitive meals and case management services. The New York City Council letter calls on the Mayor to provide immediate and consistent guidance on the city’s vision and stages for reopening, with detailed information on timeline, funding, and community outreach.

“Another day we leave providers in the dark about reopening senior centers is another opportunity lost to create a truly community-led reopening plan that takes the safety and needs of senior center staff and the older adults they serve into account,” said **Council Member Margaret S. Chin**. “Senior isolation has always been dangerous, and its impact is even more widely felt during this pandemic. Kicking the can down the road is not an option. This dialogue must be proactive and inclusive. We need City Hall to bring seniors and providers to the table today.”

“Many members of New York City’s aging population depend on senior centers for meals and companionship. As we continue to reopen the City, we need a comprehensive plan to reopen senior centers while prioritizing seniors’ health and safety,” said **Speaker Corey Johnson**

“There are real emotional and medical consequences to long term isolation for seniors. While recognizing the unique vulnerability of this group, it is time to begin planning for safe ways to start offering in-person services for our seniors again,” said **Council Member Mark Levine, Chair of the Committee on Health**.

Senior centers in New York City have been closed since March, pivoting their programs and operations practically overnight to ensure seniors are fed and stay connected. Since the brink of the pandemic, the City has thrown herculean tasks on nonprofit senior center providers with minimal support. In a couple of weeks, providers were forced to transition their congregate meal programs to grab-and-go, and eventually to home delivery before it was absorbed by the GetFood NYC program. With seniors having reported numerous issues with the GetFood NYC program, from missed deliveries to receiving either culturally inappropriate or nutritionally

inadequate food, and with more seniors in need of direct in-person services, senior centers are eager to resume their work to give seniors the quality meals and case services they deserve.

Many older adults have already been visiting their senior centers this summer to get relief from the heat, as certain centers have been designated as cooling centers. However, these centers were not allowed to provide any food or programming.

Community-based providers know their communities the best, yet have been left in the dark by City Hall when it comes to shaping expectations and procedures for a safe senior center reopening plan. In their letter, the Council Members are calling on City Hall to bring these providers back to the table to provide their feedback to reopen centers safely and responsibly.

“Settlement houses have been serving their communities continuously throughout the pandemic while showing enormous creativity and adaptability; and despite not being able to gather in person, senior centers are no exception. Now is the time to look forward. Senior centers need clear guidance, timelines, and support from the City as they transition back toward the new normal. We thank Council Members Chin and Levine for leading the charge on this critical issue,” said **Tara Klein, Policy Analyst at United Neighborhood Houses.**

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September 4, 2020

Mayor Bill de Blasio
City Hall
New York, NY 10007

Dear Mayor de Blasio:

Throughout the pandemic, senior centers have served as lifelines for older adults, the age group most vulnerable to contracting COVID-19. Despite remaining physically closed, senior centers have continued to respond to growing needs, helping seniors combat food and financial insecurity, mental and physical health issues, and social isolation. The New York State Office for Aging has granted localities the authority to independently make decisions about if, when, or how senior centers can reopen. Given the recent low rates of infection and that our City has reached Phase 4 of reopening, we ask City Hall to initiate a dialogue with the Department for the Aging, the Department of Health, and the Food Czar to engage with us on a process to reopen our City's senior service network safely— starting with senior centers operated by community-based organizations.

Older New Yorkers have been under strict confinement for five full months now. Since the brink of the pandemic, senior center providers have been adaptive and innovative, transitioning to virtual outreach and programming almost overnight. With congregate meal programs closed, they have been integral in the food distribution process and the emergency GetFood NYC initiative. Staff have been working hard to connect with older adults via phone and email to ensure they are getting the food and support they need.

Social isolation increases the risk of mortality, and this pandemic has limited direct access to needed physical and mental health services in ways we have never seen before. The direct and personalized support that senior centers provide is irreplaceable to the seniors they serve. Community-based providers have the experience, expertise, and agility to handle the rapid changes surrounding COVID-19, and want to be a part of safe solutions for their clients. Our city agencies must prioritize the wellbeing of older New Yorkers and work collaboratively with providers to address to create a plan for a safe reopening that addresses the following questions:

- **Communication:** How will senior center providers be part of the conversation around reopening plans? When and how will detailed guidelines be shared with providers and with the general public, including senior center participants?
- **Defining reopening:** What, if any, stages for senior center reopening are being considered?
 - For example, when does DFTA plan to allow senior centers to resume cooking for participants in their community?
 - How will meal distributions be handled, through phases of “grab and go” meals or “meals on wheels,” or modified indoor dining service? How will meal services differ for sites that cook versus those that cater?
 - What reopening phases might be put in place for senior center activities? For example, when will sites be permitted to hold individual, socially distanced meetings with clients at the center; hold socially distanced group activities in local outdoor spaces; or hold group activities in the center?
- **Timeline and metrics:** Will senior centers reopen under a specified, predetermined timeline or will the reopening of senior centers be tied to any metrics or benchmarks, such as infection rates, hospitalizations, or vaccine availability? We request details on these timelines or benchmarks. Would these metrics be citywide, by neighborhood or borough, or center-specific? What flexibility will be given to providers to adjust these timelines to meet their own specific needs? Finally, should senior center buildings remain closed, would multi-service community-based organizations be able to repurpose these spaces to promote distancing within other programs without risking funding?

- **Funding:** Due to the economic impact of the pandemic, funding has proven to be an increasingly difficult challenge, especially when providers want to preserve jobs and avoid furloughing or laying off staff. With major budget cuts to senior centers in the FY2021 budget, including a delay of \$5 million for the “model food budget,” \$4 million in COVID-related savings, and eliminating \$10 million in “model budget” funding, how will senior centers be able to experience these cuts while continuing to support their communities? Will available funding change as reopening timelines become clearer? For example, if senior centers are instructed or choose to resume cooking or catering meals in September, will they be fully reimbursed? Or, if they are closed indefinitely, will budgets continue to be cut via budget modifications? Furthermore, what spending flexibility will providers be permitted as it relates to the timeline for resuming in-person engagement? For example, if centers remain remote through FY 2021, will providers be allowed to make modifications between budget lines to purchase necessary technology for staff or older adult participants?
 - Further, the GetFood program is currently re-procuring its older adult food contracts, and the notice of solicitation states that contracts may transition back to DFTA. What will this look like, and how will this impact funding for already established food provision within DFTA?
- **Procurements:** With the recent release of the senior center concept paper, it is more urgent than ever to provide transparency on detailed plans to reopen senior centers. The budget cuts that have forced providers to alter services have made it more difficult to envision the long-term future of senior centers. At minimum, providers should be given adequate information around reopening plans and time to prepare for the upcoming procurement.

Seniors have already been visiting senior centers designated as cooling centers to get relief from the heat this summer and have asked our offices when programming or food can be offered. The pandemic has already been unimaginably disruptive, and although senior centers have valiantly responded to the crisis, they cannot adequately begin planning for the future without communication and support from the City. It’s time to chart a path forward.

Sincerely,



Margaret Chin
Chair, Committee on Aging
Council Member, District 1



Speaker Corey Johnson
New York City Council Speaker
Council Member, District 3



Mark Levine
Chair, Committee on Health
Council Member, District 7



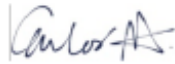
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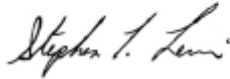
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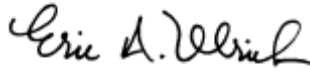
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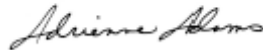
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CC:

Lorraine Cortés-Vázquez, Commissioner, NYC Department for the Aging

Dr. Dave Chokshi, Commissioner, NYC Department of Health

Kathryn Garcia, Food Czar and Commissioner, NYC Department of Sanitation