

**TESTIMONY FROM EXECUTIVE VICE PRESIDENT FOR COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT AND
PARTNERSHIPS SIDEYA SHERMAN
SENIORS IN NYCHA HOUSING
COMMITTEE ON PUBLIC HOUSING WITH THE COMMITTEE ON AGING
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16TH FLOOR COMMITTEE ROOM, 250 BROADWAY, NEW YORK, NY**

Chairs Ritchie Torres and Margaret Chin, members of the Committees on Public Housing and Aging, and other distinguished members of the City Council: good morning. I am Sideya Sherman, NYCHA’s Executive Vice President for Community Engagement and Partnerships. Joining me today are Deborah Goddard, Executive Vice President (EVP) for Capital Projects and Acting EVP for Real Estate; Lillian Harris, Vice President for Tenancy Administration; as well as our partners at the Department for the Aging (DFTA). Thank you for this opportunity to discuss the Authority’s work to provide the nearly 80,000 seniors living in our developments across the city with safe, supportive communities and access to quality services.

The challenges confronting public housing in America today are serious and significant, from aging infrastructure to the growing deficits brought on by decades of insufficient federal funding. Mayor de Blasio and Chair Olatoye developed a long-term strategic plan, *NextGeneration NYCHA*, out of the unwavering belief that this precious affordable housing resource for 1 in 14 New Yorkers must be preserved. With NextGen as our guide, we are providing safe, clean, and connected communities for all of our residents, including the seniors who are aging in place.

NYCHA is firmly committed to our seniors and believes that all New Yorkers deserve to age in place with dignity in their homes. As the anchors of their communities, seniors contribute to the strength and vitality of their neighborhoods. But due to a loss of \$3 billion in federal operating and capital funding over the last 15 years and a \$17 billion capital need, we must rethink the way we do our work and focus on our core responsibility to be a better landlord. As part of that focus, we’ve moved away from directly providing social services to

connecting residents to best-in-class services from the vast network of social service providers throughout the city.

A Supportive Environment for Seniors

NYCHA helps our seniors thrive in a number of ways, from initiatives that positively impact all 80,000 seniors living in our developments to those that serve only our neediest residents. If you're a senior at NYCHA, you can benefit from physical improvements to our buildings, on-site services, connections to services, and age-friendly policies.

Building Improvements

As a landlord, NYCHA continues to focus on improving our buildings to enhance residents' quality of life. As part of NextGen, we updated the architectural design guidelines for the rehabilitation of our buildings, taking into account age-friendly and accessible designs, as well as DFTA's *Age-Friendly NYC* report and HPD's guidelines for senior housing. Whenever the funding is available to upgrade our buildings, these standards will better support the safety, health, and comfort of residents, including their ability to age in place gracefully.

Guided by the new architectural standards, we are investing about \$4 million to make accessibility and age-friendly improvements at 89 developments, such as more comfortable seating areas on the grounds for seniors. The new LED exterior lighting that we're installing across the city makes it easier for everyone, including our seniors, to see. We are eager to get the funding necessary to complete more of these projects in the future.

These standards apply not only to rehabilitation projects but also to the development and preservation work we're doing. The new 100 percent affordable housing we're building for seniors, which I'll discuss later in my testimony, also

incorporates age-friendly designs, such as handrails throughout corridors, grab bars and emergency pull-cords in bathrooms, and accessible apartment designs.

All the building improvements and rehabilitation we're accomplishing through the Rental Assistance Demonstration program complies with all federal and local requirements that make it easier and safer for seniors to age in place.

Thanks in part to Council Member James Vacca's common-sense suggestion, we're piloting a live-in caretaker program at Boston Road Plaza, Middletown Plaza, and Twin Parks East. This means that someone is available around the clock to assist residents. This past week, we showed off this new initiative at Boston Road Plaza.

Services and Programs for Seniors

NYCHA's newly reorganized Community Engagement and Partnerships department fulfills the NextGen goal of engaging residents and connecting them to best-in-class services. By engaging key populations, including seniors, and connecting them to critical health and social services from community-based organizations and other City agencies, seniors are supported as they age in place at NYCHA. We know we cannot do this alone – this is why we streamlined the ways that we partner with local providers, through our new “Zone Model.” And this fall we are surveying seniors to further identify the programs and services they seek.

At our 78 seniors-only buildings and 12 NORCs (retirement communities that are naturally occurring), seniors and their caregivers are supported with on-site and nearby assistance. This includes one-on-one counseling as well as recreational and cultural opportunities from DFTA and many other providers. At the 10 NORC programs sponsored by DFTA, homebound and non-homebound seniors are connected to services and get help with accessing public benefits and improving their health.

For instance, the HUD-funded Senior Resident Advisor & Service Coordinator Program provides on-site assistance to seniors in need, to help them live safely and independently in their homes. Under the supervision of licensed social workers, Senior Resident Advisors organize volunteer “floor captains” who make daily contact with other seniors on their floor.

Partnership is key to serving our seniors. NYCHA works with dedicated providers across the city to meet their needs. For example, socially isolated or homebound seniors in all five boroughs receive regular home visits through Henry Street Settlement’s Senior Companion Program. Senior Companions are healthy, older adults who help their fellow seniors live independently, by helping them go shopping, go to doctors’ appointments or other activities, and obtain services such as Access-A-Ride and Meals on Wheels. Most important, perhaps, is the friendship the companions provide.

DFTA’s Grandparent Resource Center provides assistance, resources, and supportive services to seniors who are raising young relatives at the 15 NYCHA developments that are the focus of the Mayor’s Action Plan for Neighborhood Safety. Nearly one thousand seniors and their caregivers have attended workshops on community safety, mental health awareness, senior scams, nutrition, falls prevention, and child and elder abuse.

We partner with an innovative organization, Older Adults Technology Services (known as OATS), which is helping seniors use and make the most out of the latest technology. Through this partnership, seniors at Queensbridge Houses take classes on computer literacy, digital photography, financial management, social media, and health and fitness. Participants use technology not only to learn and grow but also to communicate and socialize with friends and family. This fall, we expanded the partnership to four new sites: the Jefferson, Melrose Mott Haven, Red Hook, and Stapleton senior centers. Three sites offer classes in multiple languages to meet the needs of NYCHA’s diverse population of seniors.

The 115 senior centers at NYCHA, including the 84 senior centers and 17 senior social clubs sponsored by DFTA, provide a range of recreational, health, and cultural activities, services, and resources that enhance the lives of NYCHA residents and other seniors in the community. On any given day, seniors participate in free exercise classes, discussion groups, or blood pressure screenings. At DFTA-funded senior centers, older New Yorkers can get free meals, counseling on social services, or assistance with benefits. Regardless of where they live, every NYCHA senior has access to a program on-site or within their community.

Last week, we launched new services for seniors at our UPACA development. Presbyterian Senior Services' (PSS) Circle of Care program provides seniors a helping hand, whether it's assistance with transportation, buying and preparing food, paying bills, getting vital benefits and entitlements, doing household chores, or other daily needs. Circle of Care also provides caregivers with guidance, training resources, and interpretation services. PSS will talk more about the good work they're doing in their testimony today.

This month, we're also conducting resource fairs for seniors and hosting Domestic Violence Awareness Month events for seniors in every borough. We organize the domestic violence awareness conferences every year to inform seniors about the signs of abuse and where they can get help.

Additionally, we're providing new ways for residents to access health services. In collaboration with Harlem Health Advocacy Partners, we launched the largest-ever NYCHA-based community health worker initiative, which helps residents in five East and Central Harlem developments improve their health through health coaching and healthcare navigation services. In the past three years, nearly 400 seniors established specific health goals and received individual and group services. The program is led by the City's Department of Health and Mental

Hygiene in partnership with NYCHA, the Community Service Society, and the NYU-CUNY Prevention Research Center.

Policies That Support Seniors

We want to make sure seniors have all the support they need from medical professionals and caregivers. For that reason, we will grant temporary permission for caregivers to join a household or other reasonable accommodations, based on the circumstances. Providing a transfer to a larger apartment with an extra bedroom for a caregiver can be a challenge, however, because of the limited number of vacant apartments available. The turnover rate at NYCHA is less than 2.7 percent, and the vacancy rate is even lower, at 0.6 percent. Today, there are only about 1,100 vacant apartments available for occupancy throughout the entire Authority, including about 430 two-bedrooms and 380 one-bedrooms – our most sought-after apartment sizes.

Through NYCHA’s reasonable accommodation policy, seniors with disabilities can request an accommodation that will make it easier for them to age in place in their apartment. That could include a move to a lower floor or an accessible apartment or an apartment modification such as the installation of a grab bar or a roll-in shower.

New Affordable Housing for Seniors

There is not enough affordable housing for seniors in our city. We’re using our land to build more. The 100 percent affordable housing we’re creating for seniors across the city will include senior centers and dedicated programming for seniors. Four projects are in progress that will provide more than 650 new affordable homes for seniors, at Ingersoll, Mill Brook, Betances V, and Sumner Houses. The new development at Ingersoll will feature a senior center offering a range of services from our partner Services and Advocacy for GLBT Elders (SAGE), to support residents and the larger community. We look forward to

partnering with stakeholders on more of these vital projects, for the benefit of New Yorkers today and tomorrow.

Conclusion

The stories of our seniors speak for themselves. Ms. Smith, a retired home health aide, moved into Glenmore Plaza when it first opened in 1968. After her husband passed away in 1972, she continued to raise her six children at Glenmore Plaza, until they married and moved out. Now retired from careers in law, city government, and the like, her children gifted her with 21 grandchildren, 31 great-grandchildren, and five great-great-grandchildren! Ms. Smith lost both of her legs due to diabetes, limiting her ability to do the things she once enjoyed. But socializing with other seniors at the Glenmore Plaza Senior Center, and participating in its programs and events, lifts her spirits and keeps her engaged.

Mr. Williams has been a resident of Brownsville Houses for 45 years. A proud father, he raised five children there, three of whom, along with a grandchild, are now working in law enforcement. Mr. Williams has been going to the Brownsville Senior Center every day for over 35 years. He likes to keep his mind and body active through pool and table games with friends; health, exercise, and nutrition classes; and socializing over lunch.

NYCHA supports seniors in a variety of ways – from senior center programming to the dedicated services available at our seniors-only buildings, from the new housing we’re creating exclusively for seniors to our policies that facilitate assistance from caregivers. That said, with more funding we could do more. We are eager to work with the Council and other partners to identify funding for building improvements, as well as additional programs and services, that will support seniors as they age in place at NYCHA.

Thank you for the opportunity to begin a dialogue on this important topic. We are happy to answer any questions you may have.