

**TESTIMONY FROM NYCHA EXECUTIVE VICE PRESIDENT FOR COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT &
PARTNERSHIPS SIDEYA SHERMAN
SENIORS AGING IN PLACE IN NYCHA DURING A PANDEMIC
COMMITTEE ON PUBLIC HOUSING WITH THE COMMITTEE ON AGING
WEDNESDAY, APRIL 7, 2021 – 10:00 AM
REMOTE HEARING (VIRTUAL ROOM 2)**

Chairs Alicka Ampy-Samuel and Margaret Chin, members of the Committees on Public Housing and Aging, other distinguished members of the City Council, NYCHA residents, and members of the public: good morning. I am Sideya Sherman, NYCHA's Executive Vice President for Community Engagement & Partnerships. I am pleased to be joined by Ukah Busgith, Senior Director of NYCHA's Family Partnerships Department, as well as our partners at the NYC Department for the Aging (DFTA).

Thank you for this opportunity to discuss NYCHA's efforts to support seniors aging in place (including during the COVID-19 pandemic) – a mission that is one of our top priorities.

Collaboration During an Unprecedented Crisis

Over the past year, the coronavirus has brought immeasurable loss and disruption to our lives, sparing no spot on the planet. I'd like to take a moment to remember all those we have lost.

Every one of us has been deeply affected by the pandemic, and it has brought to light deep inequities and disparities around the globe related to health, economics, and connectivity. This extraordinary crisis has compelled us to come together – as a world, as a nation, as a city – to defeat it.

I have seen remarkable demonstrations of this cooperation, this perseverance, over the past 13 months – the resident leaders who organized food drives and PPE distribution and conducted their own informal wellness checks of neighbors; the hardworking NYCHA employees who came to work every day (when much of the city was sheltering in place) to keep the heat on and the elevators running and our buildings clean; the staff

in my department who communicated daily with residents and helped coordinate the distribution of food and other essentials and do outreach on COVID-19 testing and vaccinations; and the community and government partners who assisted with all these efforts, including members of the Council.

While the challenges are unprecedented, so too is the sense of ingenuity, strength, resiliency, and community.

Communicating Throughout the Crisis

Throughout the crisis, NYCHA has been following guidance from federal, state, and local experts to ensure our policies and procedures are thorough and responsive in the rapidly changing environment.

The pandemic has stressed the importance of timely and accurate communication. Since day one, we have been working nonstop to amplify the guidance from partners like the City of New York and the City's Health Department, to inform our residents and employees of the best health and safety practices to follow during the pandemic. As of April 2, we have delivered approximately 4.5 million COVID-19-related communications via phone calls, robocalls, emails, mailings, and rent inserts to residents and resident leaders, Section 8 residents, employees, elected officials, and advocates. To our social media reach of approximately 47 million, we posted about COVID-19 over 1,300 times between March 1, 2020, and April 2, 2021, on all our social media channels. We dedicated a page on our website to COVID-19 resources, and we've also posted important information and updates on *The NYCHA Journal*, our digital newspaper for residents. The COVID-19 safety posters we put up at all of our more than 2,200 buildings provide information in five languages, and other informational notices we distributed are available in 13 languages.

During the pandemic, the hardworking staff from our Community Engagement & Partnerships department made over 120,000 "wellness" phone calls to our most vulnerable residents, including seniors, to make sure that they understood how they

could stay safe, determine whether they had any special needs, and connect them to resources from DFTA and other partners. And we partnered with the New York Cares volunteer organization to provide seniors a “buddy” who makes routine calls to those requesting regular checks by phone – these calls are ongoing.

We send a newsletter to more than 230 resident association leaders two to five days a week to keep them informed about COVID-19, our efforts, and key NYCHA and City resources. At the height of the pandemic, we had almost daily phone calls with the Chair of the Citywide Council of Presidents (CCOP), and spoke with other resident leaders about two to three times per week, representing nearly 30,000 calls since the start of the pandemic. We also hosted 11 Resident Advisory Board meetings and are hosting monthly webinars for resident leaders with senior NYCHA and City leadership to discuss COVID-19. In November, we implemented weekly standing meetings with the CCOP and NYCHA’s executive staff, including Chair Russ.

And we provide elected officials with regular updates, including through a now-weekly newsletter specifically for elected officials and community partners. NYCHA’s Intergovernmental Relations team has held nearly 500 external meetings to date to brief elected officials, their staff, and other community partners on the Authority’s COVID-19 response and needs, and to respond to inquiries in real time. We have also co-hosted 18 tele-town hall events to provide updates and guidance to thousands of participants. And we are conducting informational webinars for advocates and addressing industry groups at their forums.

These communication efforts will continue to ensure that all our residents, including seniors, have the latest information and resources to keep themselves safe.

Reducing Financial Pressures for Residents

At the very beginning of the crisis, NYCHA suspended resident evictions for as long as the City is under a state of emergency, to help keep our families healthy and housed. In

addition, we closed our hearing offices and adjourned all cases before the Housing Court.

We also simplified our Rent Hardship Policy to make it easier for residents to apply. In only a few weeks, we amended a process that was admittedly burdensome for residents to benefit from. Now, with just a few clicks on a computer or by answering a few questions with a Customer Contact Center (CCC) rep, residents can request a rent adjustment due to a partial or full loss of income. There is no waiting period to apply, and residents can self-certify their loss of income. Our rent hardship policy is a powerful safety valve for families who lost work or income due to COVID-19, and a core feature of this stabilizing institution – because rent is generally capped at 30 percent of adjusted gross income. As of the end of March, NYCHA decreased rent for nearly 65,000 families in public housing and over 6,000 in Section 8.

Connecting Residents to Vital Services and Resources

COVID-19 Vaccinations

Since day one, we have been working with City agencies and community partners to connect residents to food, medication, and essential health and social services during this crisis – including COVID testing – to help keep residents safe, healthy, and informed. As we now embark on an unprecedented vaccination effort, NYCHA has worked hand-in-hand with the City to ensure NYCHA seniors have access to crucial information and locally available vaccine.

In January 2021, NYCHA and the City opened weekend vaccination clinics at three initial NYCHA developments, through which more than 2,000 seniors were vaccinated. Since then, NYCHA continues to help operate roving pop-up vaccination clinics at developments throughout the city, reaching a total of over 60 NYCHA sites so far. I have visited many of these vaccination clinics, and I am proud to say that they are real signs of hope and renewal after what has been a long and difficult year. NYCHA works closely

with the onsite DFTA senior center providers to host and help enroll residents for appointments.

These efforts are a key part of the City's work to ensure equitable distribution of the COVID-19 vaccine, including by making the vaccine accessible in neighborhoods hit hardest by the virus and addressing vaccine hesitancy at the community level. As of April 1, 2021, we have launched 7 of 11 long-term NYCHA vaccination clinics that will serve communities with a high concentration of NYCHA housing. These clinics will serve all eligible NYCHA residents, staying open for at least 4 to 18 weeks.

To spread awareness about vaccine clinics and help residents make appointments, NYCHA continues to promote the City's Vaccine for All campaign through all communication channels. Our outreach efforts are robust and include fliers, robocalls, thousands of person-to-person calls, emails to residents, and social media promotion. NYCHA has also trained key Community Engagement & Partnerships staff to be vaccine navigators – integrating vaccine messaging and resource navigation into routine outreach work. In partnership with the NYC Health Department, we are hosting community conversations for NYCHA residents to learn more and ask questions about the COVID-19 vaccine and on-site vaccination clinics; interpretation services are available at these virtual sessions.

We also work with our City and community partners to get the word out and assist our older and vulnerable residents. NYC Health + Hospitals Test & Trace staff and our Community Engagement & Partnerships staff organize door-knocking campaigns at developments and enroll eligible residents for vaccination appointments through direct phone calls.

Food Access

At the height of the pandemic, NYCHA and the City worked to enroll all eligible residents in GetFoodNYC. We also instituted bulk food delivery at many of our senior buildings and hired residents to assist with the delivery process. NYCHA also worked

with a variety of partners to help organize pop-up food distribution events and other targeted meal delivery programs. We would like to thank all of our partners, including members of the Council, for your assistance with these vital efforts.

Additional Support for Residents

Early in the pandemic, we installed hand sanitizer dispensers at all of our senior buildings.

To help our seniors stay cool and safe at home, NYCHA provided air conditioners to more than 16,300 households last summer, through Mayor de Blasio's Heat Wave Plan to protect vulnerable New Yorkers.

And the City has provided free tablets and internet service to more than 10,300 NYCHA seniors to help them stay connected to their friends and family as well as critical online resources. Thanks to DFTA and Older Adults Technology Services (OATS), NYCHA seniors can contact the Senior Planet hotline – which is staffed by OATS-certified, multi-lingual trainers – for assistance with technology and accessing beneficial virtual resources, such as how to participate in exercise classes or City Council hearings, order medication or food, or socialize with friends and family online. And nearly 3,000 seniors have participated in virtual trainings, workshops, and activities from OATS on topics ranging from how to use Zoom and Android to bilingual game nights.

Connecting Seniors to Supportive Services and Programs

Through partnership, NYCHA connects seniors to a range of supportive and other services. Our goal is to ensure seniors have access to quality programs and services so they can age in place safely and gracefully. This has always been our mission, and it has continued during the pandemic.

Across our portfolio, NYCHA seniors have access to 108 senior centers and 11 naturally occurring retirement communities (NORC) programs operated by settlement houses

and other long-standing community-based organizations. The senior centers provide one-on-one counseling as well as recreational and cultural opportunities from DFTA and many other providers. At 11 NORC sites, homebound and non-homebound seniors are connected to services and get help with accessing public benefits and improving their health. Throughout the pandemic, many providers converted to virtual services and person-to-person calls to keep seniors engaged.

To enhance services, we have continued to formalize referral partnerships with local service providers to offer direct case management and other assistance to NYCHA residents citywide. Through our HUD-funded Elderly Safe-At-Home (ESAH) program, NYCHA Family Partnerships staff offer on-site assistance to senior residents, at 17 distinct seniors-only properties, to support them to live safely and independently in their homes. Through the ESAH program, staff provide home visits and connections to services and crime prevention and other workshops, and they organize volunteer “floor captains” to facilitate neighbor-to-neighbor support. Citywide, our Family Partnerships team responds to referrals submitted by property management and other NYCHA departments for vulnerable residents with social, financial, behavioral, and/or mental health concerns that place their tenancy at risk.

Serving the Community

Throughout this universally challenging experience, we remain guided by our top priority: promoting the health, safety, and quality of life of our residents, including seniors. We will continue to share the latest guidance and information with our residents and do all we can to connect them to lifesaving resources and services.

I would again like to thank the Council, the City, the State, and our community partners for their support, which is enabling us to overcome this pandemic and continue to transform this agency. I would also like to express our thanks to our resident leaders and residents who are also out on the front lines of the pandemic, helping to keep their neighbors safe. When this chapter in New York City’s history is written, it will show that

community and resolve made an incredible difference in how we surmounted this extraordinary challenge. We are all in this together and we are overcoming it together.

I would also like to note that our DFTA partners, who are with us today, are best positioned to comment on the two pieces of legislation that are being considered as part of this hearing.

Thank you. We look forward to continuing to update you on our work and are happy to answer any questions you may have.