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Gale A. Brewer, Borough President

October 5, 2020

Lorraine Cortés-Vázquez
Commissioner
NYC Department for the Aging
2 Lafayette Street
New York, NY 10007

Dear Commissioner Cortés-Vázquez:

Thank you for the opportunity to submit comments on the future of the City's senior centers or "Older Adult Centers" as described in the agency's Concept Paper.

I hope I convey that this is the time to support the centers and not make drastic changes to their programs.

The New York City Department of Health confirms we have officially lost 14,104 New Yorkers 65 years and older, and probably an additional 3,481 due to COVID-19.

Despite these sobering facts, we all owe a debt of gratitude to you and your staff. There is helpful information in the Older Adult Center Concept Paper, which includes a planned fall 2020 RFP release and proposed contract period starting FY21 through FY23. I am committed to working together to ensure that New York City continues to be a healthy and great place to age. However, with so many unknowns about the pandemic remaining, I have concerns about releasing the RFP at this time.

During the entire time of the pandemic, we worked with the staff of the City's senior centers, NORCs, settlement houses and advocates, especially LiveOn New York. I appreciate their dedication in the face of unprecedented challenges, and their perseverance throughout transitions and changes to senior services.

These organizations and their staff members are ESSENTIAL, a lifeline to basic needs, a comfort from isolation, fearless in advocacy, and innovators in engagement through technology, the arts, conversation and movement.

Six months into this pandemic, even with the current infection rate at an all-time low, some issues are: 1. When will public health guidance recommend the reopening of in-person senior center programming? 2. When will older adults be comfortable in returning? 3. Are we prepared for a second wave of transmission?

There are outstanding needs that require focus now. Senior centers remain at the forefront of City initiatives to address food access and combat social isolation through wellness checks and remote

programming. While the efforts to address these needs have been impressive, we know many older adults are still food insecure and others do not have access to tablet computers, affordable broadband, or lack comfort in using digital devices and programs.

I strongly recommend that the Older Adult Center RFP be delayed. Instead we should embrace and tweak the current policies and garner the resources that are needed now by older adults, caregivers, and non-profit organizations.

Access to healthy, fresh, and local food for vulnerable and low-income populations is the most pressing nutritional issue New Yorkers face. Food access is a cornerstone of my office's age-friendly initiative. In partnership with Council Member Margaret Chin and other local officials, we have worked for years to ensure that congregate and home delivered meals are fresh, delicious, healthy and offer seniors choice - including menus that are religiously and culturally appropriate. Before COVID, we sponsored the Fresh Food for Seniors program, bringing food from the GrowNYC farmers to seniors in Manhattan. This program is beloved.

During the pandemic, these efforts have included improving the City's GetFoodNYC program content, delivery, and oversight systems to better serve older and homebound adults. I am glad to see continuing improvements in the City food programs that have transitioned several times in the midst of a difficult situation. But quality control and access must be maintained so that we don't return to the chaotic stress of the spring. Older adults still need assistance and sustenance, especially with the approach of flu season and the ongoing virus health vulnerability concerns.

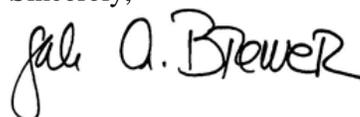
This point is worth emphasizing. We need to fully fund the older adult services that we know are essential today and those that are needed next year. The recent cuts by the Administration to the Indirect Cost Rate Funding Initiative are inequitable, especially to organizations serving older adults. This inaction to fulfill current financial commitments to nonprofits, coupled with the City's dim fiscal outlook, is another reason to delay the Older Adult Center RFP.

Human service agencies are actively addressing food access, housing insecurity, and use of technology and connectivity. These remote and facility-based services require a foundation of support staff and budgets that match operating costs. Yet it is my understanding that DFTA contracts are slated to receive only 60% of their indirect rate, and only for several months of their FY20 contract. While no clear guidance has been issued, many anticipate a similar funding rate for a limited number of months of the FY21 contracts, as DFTA did not receive funds to fill the gap. I organized a letter from all 5 Borough Presidents to the Mayor demanding that this indirect cost issue be addressed immediately.

It is clear to me that with so many challenges for the centers, including uncertainty about contracts, food distribution and technology, the RFP should be delayed. There may be need and rationale for the City to provide funding for and enter into a negotiated acquisition of additional contracts to expand the number of centers available to serve older adults to address the ongoing need for prepared meals and virtual connections to combat isolationism during this difficult time.

Thank you for your time and consideration.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Gale A. Brewer". The signature is written in a cursive, flowing style.

Gale A. Brewer