

NEW YORK CITY DEPARTMENT FOR THE AGING
PUBLIC HEARING ON THE 2008-2009 ANNUAL PLAN
TESTIMONY OF BROOKLYN BOROUGH PRESIDENT
MARTY MARKOWITZ

TUESDAY, OCTOBER 23, 2007

GOOD MORNING COMMISSIONER MENDEZ-SANTIAGO, ASSISTANT COMMISSIONER FREIZEN, AND THE OTHER MEMBERS OF THE PANEL AND THANK YOU FOR YOUR WORK ON BEHALF OF THE ELDERLY — WHOM I PREFER TO CALL THE “MATURE” RESIDENTS OF BROOKLYN AND NEW YORK CITY.

I AM GRATEFUL TO HAVE THE OPPORTUNITY TO SPEAK ABOUT THE CRITICAL ISSUES AFFECTING OUR SENIOR RESIDENTS, SINCE BROOKLYN HAS THE MOST SENIORS IN THE CITY, AND NEW YORK CITY HAS ONE OF THE LARGEST AGING POPULATIONS IN THE NATION.

AS OUR RESIDENTS GROW OLDER, MANY OF THEM ARE CHOOSING TO STAY IN BROOKLYN, BECAUSE AS WE ALL KNOW THERE’S NO BETTER PLACE TO SPEND YOUR SUNSET YEARS. BUT THERE ARE MANY CHALLENGING ISSUES THAT WE NEED TO ADDRESS SO THAT OUR OLDER RESIDENTS STAY SAFE, HEALTHY, AND ACTIVE AS LONG AS POSSIBLE —AND SO THEIR SENIOR YEARS ARE THEIR VERY BEST YEARS.

A CRITICAL ISSUE FOR ALL OF BROOKLYN, ESPECIALLY OUR SENIORS, IS AFFORDABLE HOUSING.

I’M ON THE CUSP OF BEING A SENIOR MYSELF, AND AS THE BABY-BOOMERS START TO RETIRE, THE NEED FOR AFFORDABLE HOUSING FOR SENIORS WILL BECOME ACUTE. BY THE YEAR 2030, NEW YORK’S ELDERLY POPULATION IS EXPECTED TO BE 1.84 MILLION — WHICH IS A 47 % INCREASE FROM THE YEAR 2000.

WE NEED TO BE AS CREATIVE AS POSSIBLE IN ORDER TO PRODUCE MORE AFFORDABLE HOUSING FOR SENIORS.

WHETHER WE USE 421-A REAL ESTATE TAX PROVISIONS AS LEVERAGE, ESPECIALLY IN COMBINATION WITH OTHER INCENTIVES, OR CREATE PUBLIC/PRIVATE PARTNERSHIPS THAT EARMARK A CERTAIN NUMBER OF UNITS ON LOWER FLOORS OF NEW DEVELOPMENTS FOR SENIORS, WORKING FAMILIES, AND THOSE WITH LOW- OR MIDDLE-INCOMES — WE MUST KEEP HOUSING FOR SENIORS AFFORDABLE FOREVER!

AND FOR SENIORS WHO WANT TO STAY IN THEIR EXISTING HOMES, WE NEED TO MAKE RESOURCES AVAILABLE FOR MAINTENANCE AND REPAIR, FROM HELPING THEM FIND HONEST, RELIABLE, AND AFFORDABLE REPAIR SERVICES, TO HELPING THEM FINANCE REPAIRS WITH LOW- OR NO-INTEREST LOANS.

SENIORS ARE PARTICULARLY VULNERABLE WHEN IT COMES TO PREDATORY LENDING PRACTICES, AND BROOKLYN SENIORS ARE AMONG THOSE WHO BEEN DISPROPORTIONATELY TARGETED.

WE NEED TO EDUCATE SENIORS ABOUT THESE PRACTICES, AND PROVIDE THE RESOURCES AND LEGAL REPRESENTATION THEY NEED TO PROTECT THEIR HOMES FROM MORTGAGE FORECLOSURE.

IN ADDITION, OLDER RESIDENTS SOMETIMES NEED HELP STANDING UP FOR THEIR RIGHTS.

MY OFFICE HAS BEEN WORKING SINCE JUNE TO TRY TO ASSIST SIX ELDERLY HOMEOWNERS IN BEDFORD-STUYVESANT WHERE CONSTRUCTION ON STUYVESANT AVENUE IN 2005 HAS CAUSED SEVERE SEWAGE BACKUPS. MORE THAN TWO YEARS LATER, THEY STILL DO NOT HAVE ANSWERS FROM THE DEPARTMENT OF ENVIRONMENTAL PROTECTION AS TO WHAT IS CAUSING THE PROBLEM, NOR DO THEY HAVE A SOLUTION.

TODAY, I AM CALLING ON YOUR AGENCY TO DEVELOP A SENIORS OMBUDSMAN OFFICE TO ADVOCATE FOR OUR ELDERLY RESIDENTS — WHETHER IT'S FOR A MAJOR PROBLEM LIKE SEWAGE BACKUP OR A SIMPLE REFERRAL TO A RELIABLE HANDYMAN.

TRANSPORTATION IS ANOTHER IMPORTANT CONCERN FOR OLDER BROOKLYNITES. ONLY 14 OF OUR MORE THAN 150 SUBWAY STATIONS ARE ACCESSIBLE TO PEOPLE WITH DISABILITIES.

MANY BROOKLYN RESIDENCES ARE 6 TO 8 BLOCKS FROM THE NEAREST BUS ROUTE, AND ALTHOUGH ACCESS-A-RIDE IS AN OPTION, IT IS STILL NOT PERFORMING AS WELL AS IT SHOULD.

FOR INSTANCE, PARA-TRANSIT VEHICLES ARE CONSIDERED ON TIME IF THEY ARRIVE WITHIN 30 MINUTES OF THE SCHEDULED PICKUP TIME.

I URGE YOU TO WORK TOWARD REDUCING THE PICK-UP WINDOW TO 15 MINUTES OR LESS, AND TO INCREASE BUS SERVICE AND THE NUMBER OF ACCESSIBLE SUBWAY STATIONS IN BROOKLYN.

LACK OF TRANSPORTATION, OF COURSE, CAN LEAD TO SOCIAL ISOLATION, ANXIETY, DEPRESSION, AND HOPELESSNESS.

I APPLAUD YOUR FOCUS ON THESE ISSUES. HOWEVER, I URGE YOU TO WORK TO PREVENT MENTAL HEALTH PROBLEMS BEFORE THEY DEVELOP BY IMPROVING SENIORS' ACCESS TO EXERCISE AND NUTRITION PROGRAMS, WHICH SLOW THE AGING PROCESS AND IMPROVE PHYSICAL AND MENTAL HEALTH.

EVERY SENIOR CENTER IN NEW YORK CITY SHOULD HAVE EXERCISE EQUIPMENT AND INSTRUCTION AVAILABLE, AND GOVERNMENT AGENCIES SHOULD WORK WITH PRIVATE GYMS TO DEVELOP INITIATIVES LIKE "ADOPT-A-SENIOR-CENTER" — IN WHICH A GYM WOULD SEND AN INSTRUCTOR TO TEACH A CLASS AT A SENIOR CENTER IN THE MORNING OR AT OTHER TIMES WHEN GYM ATTENDANCE IS LOW.

OTHER CREATIVE INITIATIVES, SUCH AS PARTNERING WITH MAJOR GROCERY CHAINS TO PROVIDE SENIORS WITH BUS SERVICE — AS THEY DO IN UPSTATE NEW YORK — ARE PROGRAMS WHERE EVERYBODY WINS.

THE CHAINS INCREASE THEIR CUSTOMER BASE, AND SENIORS HAVE THE OPPORTUNITY TO SHOP FOR A WIDE ASSORTMENT OF NUTRITIONAL FOODS AT GOOD PRICES.

WE ALL KNOW THAT CONNECTIONS WITH OTHERS, A SENSE OF PURPOSE, AND SATISFYING WORK ARE FACTORS THAT CONTRIBUTE TO ONE'S GENERAL SENSE OF WELL-BEING —AT ANY AGE.

DFTA'S CURRENT ANNUAL PLAN ADDRESSES THESE ISSUES IN VARIOUS PLACES, BUT I URGE YOU TO BRING THEM TOGETHER THROUGH VOLUNTEER ACTIVITIES, ESPECIALLY MENTORING. YOU MENTION PROGRAMS LIKE FOSTER GRANDPARENTS, RE-SERVE AND THE EXPERIENCE CORPS — AND YOU POINT OUT THAT OLDER ADULTS WHO VOLUNTEER DO BETTER PHYSICALLY, COGNITIVELY, AND SOCIALLY.

BUT UNFORTUNATELY, FEWER THAN HALF OF PEOPLE AGES 50 AND OLDER ARE BEING ASKED TO VOLUNTEER.

TODAY, I CALL ON YOUR AGENCY TO GREATLY EXPAND INTERGENERATIONAL PROGRAMS, ESPECIALLY IN THOSE NEIGHBORHOODS WHERE OUR YOUNG PEOPLE ARE NOT THRIVING AS WE WOULD LIKE.

EVERY DFTA-FUNDED PROGRAM SHOULD OFFER OPPORTUNITIES FOR SENIORS TO VOLUNTEER, INCLUDING AS MENTORS TO HELP CHILDREN AND YOUNG PEOPLE IN NEED WITH LITERACY AND MATH TUTORING, AS WELL AS LIFE AND CAREER CHOICES.

AREAS LIKE CENTRAL BROOKLYN HAVE A CRITICAL NEED FOR ADULT MENTORS, AND OUR SENIOR RESIDENTS COULD MAKE A REAL DIFFERENCE IN THE LIVES OF CHILDREN BY OFFERING THE INTENSIVE MENTORING OF AN EXPERIENCED AND CARING ADULT.

I ASK YOU TO CONSIDER PILOTING SUCH A PROGRAM IN BUSHWICK, BROWNSVILLE, CROWN HEIGHTS, BEDFORD-STUYVESANT, OR ANOTHER OF BROOKLYN'S NEEDIEST NEIGHBORHOODS.

WHENEVER POSSIBLE, WE SHOULD GIVE OUR SENIORS STIPENDS FOR THEIR EFFORTS, WHICH WOULD NOT ONLY ENCOURAGE THEM TO BECOME ACTIVE AND ENGAGED MEMBERS OF THE COMMUNITY BUT ALSO WOULD HELP THOSE WHO ARE ON FIXED INCOMES.

AS YOU YOURSELF SAID IN TODAY'S *NEW YORK TIMES* IN THE SECTION ON RETIREMENT, WHEN SENIORS ARE PAID IT NOT ONLY HELPS THEM, BUT IT ALSO HELPS THE AGENCY, SINCE IT FORCES THEM TO IDENTIFY THE SKILLS THEY REALLY NEED.

MANY VOLUNTEER PROGRAMS CAN BE RUN OUT OF SENIOR CENTERS, SO VOLUNTEERING BECOMES A SOCIAL ACTIVITY AS WELL.

THE CENTERS CAN ALSO POST INFORMATION ABOUT PART-TIME OR FULL-TIME JOBS, WHICH ARE A GREAT WAY TO KEEP PEOPLE YOUNG.

UNFORTUNATELY, WE STILL DON'T HAVE ENOUGH SENIOR CENTERS IN BROOKLYN TO MEET THE DEMAND.

ONLY ONE NEW CENTER HAS OPENED IN THE ENTIRE BOROUGH SINCE THIS TIME LAST YEAR—AND IT MERELY REPLACED A CENTER THAT HAD CLOSED.

I INVITE YOU TO WORK WITH MY OFFICE TO FIND AN APPROPRIATE LOCATION FOR A NEW SENIOR CENTER IN FLATBUSH, AS WELL AS CENTERS IN BENSONHURST, SHEEPSHEAD BAY, AND OTHER AREAS THAT WOULD SERVE OUR LARGE CARIBBEAN AND ASIAN SENIOR POPULATIONS.

DFTA RECENTLY CAME OUT WITH A NEW PLAN FOR CASE-MANAGEMENT, AND I WANT TO THANK YOU FOR DELAYING ITS START DATE FROM JANUARY TO APRIL, WHICH SHOULD MAKE THE TRANSITION TO NEW PROVIDERS EASIER FOR OUR OLDER CITIZENS.

BUT I REMAIN SERIOUSLY CONCERNED ABOUT COLLAPSING THE CURRENT 12 BROOKLYN CONTRACTS INTO 7.

WE ARE LOSING MORE SERVICE AREAS THAN ANY OTHER BOROUGH, IN SPITE OF HAVING THE LARGEST NUMBER OF SENIORS.

THE NEW ZONES SEEM TOO LARGE FOR APPROPRIATE CASE MANAGEMENT, ESPECIALLY WITH THE SERVICES THAT YOU HAVE, COMMENDABLY, ADDED TO THE R-F-P.

AND ALTHOUGH THE CASELOADS ARE SOMEWHAT SIMILAR NOW, A LOOK AT THE 60-PLUS POPULATION IN EACH ZONE SHOWS THAT THE NUMBERS ARE LIKELY TO BE VERY DIFFERENT IN THE FUTURE.

BROOKLYNITES WHO ARE 60 OR 65 NOW MAY NOT BE IN THE CASE MANAGEMENT SYSTEM AT ALL.

HOWEVER, IN THE NEXT 10 OR 15 YEARS, THEIR NEEDS ARE LIKELY TO CHANGE.

I AM DISAPPOINTED THAT IN CREATING THE NEW CASE-MANAGEMENT ZONES, YOU WORKED WITH CURRENT NUMBERS, RATHER THAN PROJECTING FUTURE NEEDS.

I'M ALSO DISAPPOINTED THAT YOU IGNORED THE ADVICE OF SENIOR ADVOCATES AND ELECTED OFFICIALS, INCLUDING ME, WHO URGED YOU AT LEAST TO BREAK BROOKLYN'S CONTRACT TWO IN HALF.

AS IS, THE CONTRACT COVERS SIX COMMUNITY DISTRICTS AND EIGHT MAJOR LANGUAGE GROUPS.

WHEN SOME OF THE BRIGHTEST MINDS AND LEADING EXPERTS ON SENIOR ISSUES WARN YOU THAT A CONTRACT AREA IS TOO LARGE AND DIVERSE FOR EFFECTIVE SERVICE, AND YOU CHOOSE NOT TO MAKE A CHANGE, I THINK YOU OWE IT TO EVERYONE TO EXPLAIN YOUR DECISION.

ANOTHER SERIOUS CONCERN IS THAT MANY SENIORS — ESPECIALLY NON-ENGLISH SPEAKERS AND MEMBERS OF MINORITY GROUPS —MAY FALL THROUGH THE CRACKS DURING THE TRANSITION TO THE NEW CASE-MANAGEMENT SYSTEM.

THEREFORE, I AM FORMALLY REQUESTING A RIGOROUS EVALUATION OF THE NEW CASE-MANAGEMENT SYSTEM. SPECIFICALLY, THE EVALUATORS MUST TRACK THE CLIENTS THAT ARE CURRENTLY BEING SERVED TO SEE HOW MANY HAVE DISRUPTIONS IN SERVICE, WITH SPECIAL ATTENTION BEING PAID TO SENIORS IN POVERTY, MEMBERS OF MINORITY GROUPS, AND IMMIGRANTS.

ALSO, SINCE ONE OF THE PURPOSES OF THE REORGANIZATION IS TO DELIVER SERVICES MORE EFFICIENTLY, EXPENSES AND OUTCOMES SHOULD BE EVALUATED AND COMPARED BOTH BEFORE AND AFTER THE NEW SYSTEM IS IN PLACE.

AS WE LOOK TO THE FUTURE, WE SEE THAT THE EXPANDING SENIOR POPULATION WILL ALSO CAUSE AN INCREASE IN THE NUMBER OF ELDERLY WHO ARE POOR AND/OR IN ILL HEALTH.

I APPRECIATE YOUR ATTENTION TO ADDRESSING THESE PROBLEMS, BUT THE DEPARTMENT FOR THE AGING MUST ALSO BE MORE PROACTIVE, AND TRY TO LOWER, IN ADVANCE, THE NUMBER OF OLDER NEW YORKERS WHO WILL NEED YOUR SERVICES.

THEREFORE, I CALL ON YOU TODAY TO FORGE ALLIANCES WITHIN CITY GOVERNMENT TO HELP AND ENCOURAGE OUR YOUNGER RESIDENTS TO PREPARE FOR THEIR “MATURE” YEARS, ESPECIALLY IN THE KEY AREAS OF FINANCE AND HEALTH.

YOU POINT OUT THAT SENIOR POVERTY IN NEW YORK CITY HAS INCREASED 27 PERCENT WHILE FALLING NINE PERCENT NATIONWIDE, IN PART BECAUSE NEW YORK IS SUCH AN EXPENSIVE PLACE TO LIVE.

THOSE OF US IN GOVERNMENT HAVE A RESPONSIBILITY TO MAKE IT EASIER FOR LOW-INCOME ADULTS TO SAVE FOR RETIREMENT, THROUGH TAX CREDITS AND EVEN MATCHING FUNDS.

SUCH AN EFFORT WOULD MORE THAN PAY FOR ITSELF THROUGH INVESTMENT GROWTH, AND WOULD LOWER THE NUMBER OF SENIORS WHO WILL EVENTUALLY NEED HOUSING SUBSIDIES, HOME-DELIVERED MEALS, MEDICAID, AND OTHER INCOME SUPPORT SERVICES.

IN TERMS OF HEALTH, WE NEED TO BUILD A CULTURE OF FITNESS IN NEW YORK CITY, WHERE DAILY OR NEAR-DAILY EXERCISE IS CONSIDERED THE NORM — AND WORKING ADULTS CAN GET REGULAR EXERCISE MORE EASILY, WHETHER THROUGH EMPLOYER-SPONSORED FITNESS CLASSES, OR AN EXPANDED NETWORK OF BICYCLE LANES FOR COMMUTING, OR OTHER MECHANISMS.

THE HEALTHIER YOU ARE WHEN YOU’RE YOUNG, THE MORE LIKELY YOU WILL RETAIN GOOD HEALTH AS YOU AGE, AND THE LESS LIKELY YOU WILL SUCCUMB TO THE MANY AGE-RELATED AILMENTS THAT YOUR ANNUAL PLAN DESCRIBES.

I WANT TO THANK YOU, COMMISSIONER MENDEZ-SANTIAGO, AND THE MEMBERS OF THE PANEL, FOR ALL THAT YOU ARE DOING FOR OLDER BROOKLYNITES AND NEW YORKERS.

AS SOMEONE WHO RECENTLY BECAME ELIGIBLE TO JOIN THE SENIOR CENTER I FOUNDED OVER 30 YEARS AGO IN FLATBUSH, I LOOK FORWARD TO WORKING WITH ALL OF YOU TO ENSURE THAT OUR SENIORS’ SUNSET YEARS ARE AS BEAUTIFUL AS THEY CAN POSSIBLY BE.

YES, IT WILL COST SOME MONEY, BUT THAT’S WHY IT’S SO IMPORTANT TO LOBBY THE MAYOR FOR MORE FUNDING FOR YOUR AGENCY.

SURELY WE CAN ALL AGREE THAT THE MATURE RESIDENTS OF NEW YORK CITY HAVE PAID THEIR DUES, AND HAVE EARNED THE RIGHT TO GET A LITTLE ATTENTION FROM THOSE OF US IN GOVERNMENT.

IT IS TIME FOR ALL OF US TO BE AS CREATIVE AS POSSIBLE IN MEETING THE NEEDS OF OUR INCREASING SENIOR POPULATION.

OF COURSE WE SHOULD DO IT BECAUSE IT’S THE RIGHT THING TO DO — BUT SINCE WE ARE ALL TOMORROW’S SENIORS — OUR HARD WORK TODAY WILL BENEFIT EVERY ONE OF US TOMORROW.