

# HUNTER | Brookdale Center for Healthy Aging

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BEFORE THE NEW YORK CITY COUNCIL COMMITTEE ON AGING

OVERSIGHT HEARING  
"THE FUTURE OF SENIOR CENTERS AFTER COVID-19"

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My name is Christian González-Rivera and I'm the director of strategic policy initiatives at the Brookdale Center for Healthy Aging. We are CUNY's aging research and policy center and a part of Hunter College. We are changing the future of aging by supporting innovative research and developing policies and practices for New York that will become models used around the world. Through this work, we strive to create opportunities for *everyone* to age as well as *anyone* can.

Thank you, Chairwoman Chin for holding this oversight hearing and for asking two critical questions. First, what should the senior centers of the future look like? And second, how can our experiences in living through this pandemic inform the senior centers of the future?

We would like to address first the issues of transitioning to in-person services and then discuss our ideas for what the senior center of the future should be like.

As for the present, we think that senior centers do not need to reopen all services at the same time. For instance, certain activities like walking groups and even some socially distant studio art classes should be restarted, while congregate meals may still need to be delayed in favor of Grab and Go. To make sure this is done well, we support the idea of postponing the Request for Proposals to give providers more time to plan for this kind of phased reopening. Also, we think that DFTA should open their working group to more stakeholders who can advise them on how carry out this transition. Brookdale, for one, stands ready to assist DFTA in this way.

As for the future, we suggest that the senior center of the future serve two main functions. First, it should be a place that facilitates access to this city's abundant resources. Second, it should be a place that unleashes older New Yorkers' power to use their knowledge, skills, and energy to support their fellow New Yorkers, regardless of age.

**Senior centers should be older New Yorkers' portal to the city**

The senior centers across the five boroughs are asked to be a cafeteria, benefits counselor, mental health counselor, recreation center, wellness center, art studio, college, and corner café for New Yorkers ages 60 to 100 and beyond. Why do this when we live in a city with thousands of restaurants that need our business, the nation's largest municipal social services agency, the most cultural and recreational opportunities in the country, and hundreds of colleges and universities?

The senior center of the future would be funded not just by DFTA. Imagine a future where the Dept. of Parks and Recreation funds and partners with senior centers to provide exercise classes to older adults. And where HRA provides funding for benefits counselors. And where the Department of Health and Mental Hygiene helps design and provide wellness activities and links older adults to the mental health services system. And where senior centers join forces with public libraries, museums, colleges, and nonprofit arts organizations to provide cultural offerings, leveraging the public and private funding that those institutions have at their disposal. And where senior centers work with providers of virtual services of all kinds to make their programming accessible to older adults.

DFTA's primary role should be to facilitate those partnerships, helping public and private partners to understand and successfully meet the needs and desires of older adults. And what goes on in senior centers should be determined by older adults themselves, not prescriptive government contracts. The senior center of the future should be a space where older adults help each other and government helps them do that. But first senior centers have to go from seeing themselves as service providers to seeing themselves as neighborhood hubs, facilitating mobilization of the resources their members and the wider community have to offer.

Leveraging existing resources to benefit older adults is more efficient and expansive than expecting senior centers to provide everything themselves. As Brookdale's executive director Dr. Ruth Finkelstein always repeats, it's the difference between rolling a library cart of books into a senior center and having a senior center help its members to get library cards and get to the library.

**Senior centers should be older adult-centered spaces in service to the whole city.**

To paraphrase former President John F. Kennedy, senior centers should also ask what older New Yorkers can do for their city.

Imagine a future where senior centers with kitchens were not solely dependent on DFTA for their lunch money, but could hold a contract with the Dept. of Homeless Services to cook meals for the homeless. Or they could hold a contract with DYCD or the Dept. of Education to run cooking classes and nutrition education programs for young people that are led by older adults. Or they could hold contracts from HPD and NYCHA to provide food for social activities led by older residents of public housing and Section 202 buildings. Or from Parks to provide snacks and refreshments for older adults participating in walking clubs or other exercise programs. Most senior center kitchens sit idle when not used for lunch service. Why not put them to work for all New Yorkers and engage older adults in the process?

Some senior centers already encourage their participants to share their skills and knowledge by leading classes and workshops for their peers within the walls of senior centers. But why stop there? Older adults can have a lot to offer younger people, too. Imagine a future where any New Yorker can go to a senior center to take classes on cooking, appliance repair, storytelling, sewing, gardening, and lots of other OG DIY and maker skills. And imagine a senior center having the resources to help older adults turn their skill into a service or perhaps even a business enterprise or a job. And where artists, teachers, and entrepreneurs of all ages can come and lead an activity, focus group a service or product, try out a lesson or group activity. What if senior centers were maker spaces where older adults can showcase the skills that they are seldom invited to use out in the world?

Senior centers can also be of service during and after hurricanes, pandemics, or other calamities. The best research on emergency management says that communities need resource hubs that serve as sources of supplies and information as well as a base camp for local emergency response. For instance, the Department of Health can make senior centers official distribution centers for PPE. HRA could locate benefits counselors there to help provide economic support to displaced workers. In case of a power outage, senior centers could serve as charging stations. They already serve a citywide role as cooling centers during heatwaves. This city boasts more than 270 senior centers distributed across the five boroughs, making them ideal community hubs in emergencies. Senior centers can be a resource for older adults rendered vulnerable by a disaster. But they can also be an organizing platform for the many other older adults—and people of all ages—taking action to help their neighbors.

To DFTA's credit, their concept paper goes a long way towards providing a vision for senior centers that are more connected to resources outside their walls. From an organizational perspective I am happy to see that many ideas that Brookdale has discussed with DFTA have made it into the concept paper.

But making the senior center of the future a reality is not Commissioner Cortés-Vázquez's challenge alone. The DFTA commissioner should not be the only commissioner at this hearing. The commissioners of HRA, Parks, Transportation, DOHMH, DCLA, and other agencies should be here, too, talking about the senior centers of the future. After all, it could be that the senior center of the future receives much more of their funding from agencies other than DFTA.

We know that this represents a significant departure from the way things have always been done since the senior center system was created in the 1960s. But the current pandemic reminds us again of what we already know: that people do not live their lives in the silos created by government. We will never be able to make New York a great place to grow old – especially for people without a lot of money – if people lack a sense of purpose and community. And if we don't support that sense of purpose by connecting them to the full resources of this city, then we're doing them a disservice by giving them just the sliver of services that a small agency budget can supply.

Thank you again for the opportunity to testify. And, we remain, as always available to you as you think about how New York City can become an even better place to grow older.