

TESTIMONY OF CHRISTIAN GONZÁLEZ-RIVERA
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BEFORE THE NEW YORK CITY COUNCIL COMMITTEES ON AGING,
THE SUBCOMMITTEE ON SENIOR CENTERS AND FOOD INSECURITY
AND THE SUBCOMMITTEE ON COVID RECOVERY AND RESILIENCY

OVERSIGHT HEARING
"PROTECTING OLDER ADULTS AT OLDER ADULT CENTERS DURING THE CONTINUED COVID-19 PANDEMIC &
REOPENING OLDER ADULT CENTERS"

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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, Chairpersons Hudson, Mealy, and Moya and members of the committees and subcommittees for holding this oversight hearing.

I want to start by acknowledging a fact that many writers and speakers have shared before: that isolation is itself harmful to older adults and to New Yorkers of all ages. The effects of isolation are particularly insidious for older adults because of its association with an increased risk of dementia, heart disease, and stroke. This is in addition to the effects on people of all ages, which include higher rates of depression, anxiety, and suicidal ideation. Because of this, we feel that the decision to reopen senior centers last year was the right one.

Now, with new leaders such as yourselves taking on the helm of the city, this is a great time for fresh ideas about what senior centers *could* be, not just try to go back to how they were. Senior centers are already a critical resource for one in five New Yorkers over 60. But social connections don't just happen at senior centers. They happen in community. As the city's dedicated spaces for older adults, senior centers could be both portals and platforms that allow older New Yorkers to carve out meaningful roles for themselves in their communities.

To accomplish this, 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 more than 250 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, the most cultural and recreational opportunities in the country, and hundreds of colleges and other learning centers?

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.

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 and portals to the city, facilitating mobilization of the resources their members and the wider community have to offer.

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 DYCD or the Dept. of Education to run cooking classes and nutrition education programs for young people that are led by older adults. 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 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?

Making New York a great place to grow old – especially for people without a lot of money – means connecting them to the full resources of this city. While senior centers already play a critical role for thousands of older New Yorkers, we would be 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.