



**Testimony of United Neighborhood Houses
Before the Assembly Standing Committee on Aging,
Chairwoman Joan Millman**

Presented by Carin Tinney, Policy Analyst for Aging Services

December 13, 2011

Good afternoon Chairwoman Millman and Members of the Assembly Standing Committee on Aging. My name is Carin Tinney, I am the Policy Analyst for Aging Services at United Neighborhood Houses in New York City. UNH is the federation of 37 Settlement Houses and Community Centers from all five boroughs. UNH promotes and strengthens the neighborhood-based, multi-service approach to improving the lives of New Yorkers. UNH supports its members through policy development, advocacy, and capacity-building activities.

UNH members offer a broad spectrum of services for the older adult population in New York City and have been doing so for decades. UNH members operate over 40 senior centers (including 2 of the new DFTA-funded Innovative Centers), 8 have home delivered meals programs, four have case management programs, and 3 operate caregiver support programs. Our members also run Naturally Occurring Retirement Community Programs, transportation services, legal services for seniors, and also staff and/or run low-income senior housing; one member has an assisted living facility and several have home care programs. We truly are a comprehensive community-based network of support for seniors wishing to age in their own homes.

Most of the programs and services are long-standing, publicly-funded vital resources- proven to be effective at helping seniors to live safely at home in their communities. A senior center for example, allows for informal monitoring of a seniors physical health and social well-being in a comfortable, engaging environment. NORC's offer ongoing screening and monitoring of social, physical and cognitive health in a person's place of residence; caregiver support programs offer the respite and support needed for family caregivers who are often under tremendous stress (which often leads to their own health problems).

We applaud this committee for exploring the 'non-medical' side of the home and community based service system. One of the main reasons for institutional care's poor reputation, particularly since congregate care was first conceptualized, is the over-medicalization of everyday life. When everyday life becomes over-medicalized, a person becomes their diagnosis, is viewed through the lens of what is wrong with him/her, and 'treated' accordingly. The focus of dinner is about the intake of calories rather

than the simple enjoyment of eating a meal; planting a flower becomes a therapeutic activity; and daily conversation between residents and staff member is limited to "How are you feeling?" or "Are you in any pain?" Historically, institutions focused more on nursing and often neglect to respect first and foremost, that this is a person's home.

As New York moves to strengthen its home and community based system of helping frail elders to age in place, concerted attention needs to be paid to the non-medical side of a person's life. We need to keep and strengthen existing services like senior centers that provide a safe and local place to gather, socialize and learn; hot home delivered meals to those who have a hard time getting out or cooking- consisting of foods that are familiar and comforting; and caregiver support services so that those choosing or needing to provide support to a loved one can continue to do so. The communities of New York- the streets, sidewalks, and parks- should be places to be enjoyed by older adults not feared.

As advocates for the senior population, we need to be vigilant that the services and supports we provide are not medicalized where not appropriate. This past year, we successfully opposed the Governor's proposal to merge the State Office for the Aging into the Department of Health for this reason. I think I can safely say that no one among us wants to be known for his/her diagnosis or disability. So while increased health and medical needs will certainly and undeniably continue to be a part of growing old, it is imperative for the socially-oriented system of supports and services in New York to be strengthened in order to attend to the whole person.

Thank you again for convening this hearing and for the opportunity to testify.