



70 West 36th Street, 5th Floor, New York, NY 10018
Phone: (212) 967-0322 Fax: (212) 967-0792 www.unhny.org

**Testimony of United Neighborhood Houses
by Carin Tinney, Policy Analyst for Aging Services**

**Before the New York City Council Aging Committee
Chairwoman Jessica Lappin**

**NYC Council Oversight Hearing on Social Isolation
January 26, 2012**

Good afternoon Chairwoman Lappin and Members of the City Council Aging Committee. My name is Carin Tinney, I am the Policy Analyst for Aging Services at United Neighborhood Houses. UNH is the federation of 37 Settlement Houses and Community Centers around the City. 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.

Many of our city's older adults have little or no social support and having adequate social support is directly related to social isolation. Truly isolated individuals become the shadows of the community, invisible and in times of personal or public emergency cannot be reached. The thought that someone could be isolated to the point that they are unable to receive the help they need in a city of eight million people is troubling, especially since we know how to prevent individuals from becoming socially isolated. New York City's network of settlement houses and community centers makes it their mission to provide social support to older adults, including those on the brink of isolation and those who otherwise would be isolated. We work to strengthen communities and the relationships within them.

New York City's 1.3 million older adults are particularly at risk for becoming socially isolated. Our older adult population is more likely to be poor, disabled, and to live alone than their counterparts nationwide. The situation will likely be compounded by the coming demographic surge in the older population. Baby Boomers, who will compose the largest cohort group of seniors ever, are even more at risk for social isolation than their parents as they are more likely to remain unmarried, have fewer offspring, have higher rates of poverty, and higher incidence of disability. The City's elders also have risk

factors like: weak familial ties, unfamiliarity with neighbors, high rates of chronic disease and disability, higher poverty levels, being a member of the LGBT community, amongst others risk factors.

Cures for "end-stage" social isolation are limited. As good as we are as a network of providers, we do not have a fail-safe method to identifying those seniors who have become truly isolated. Two programs do exist however, that have the potential to draw attention to a senior who has become socially isolated: Carrier alert and Con-Ed Third Party Program. Both programs have had limited reach and success which can be attributed to lack of advertising and lack of general awareness of the programs by the public. The Con-Ed program, while well intentioned and a step in the right direction, also presents the challenge of timing- the third party (identified at enrollment by the senior) isn't notified about an unpaid bill until two months have passed.

Nearly all of the City's aging programs provide the opportunity to build social ties, preventing isolation, be it at a senior center, NORC or in a case management program. But, social isolation continues to exist not because we do not have the programs to prevent it from taking hold in a person's life, it exists because the programs are often poorly funded, hard to access by a layperson, have waiting lists, are not culturally sensitive, are perceived as unattractive by some subsets of the senior population, and/or simply do not have the capacity to serve every older adult in the City. For example, at 88% utilization rate, the City's senior centers served 2% of the older adult population in 2011. Imagine- what would happen if every adult over the age of 65 chose to attend a Senior or Innovative center. We simply couldn't serve everyone. Budgets for core services like case management, senior centers and home delivered meals traditionally do not fund outreach and DFTA is not a well-known entity to the general public. The lack of awareness of the various programs hurts the network's ability to reach potentially at-risk seniors.

A major problem contributing to social isolation is the deterioration of funding for aging services. While we applaud the Council for its overwhelming support of this population particularly this past budget cycle, the recession has taken a toll on our City's ability to reach and remain in contact with homebound seniors. Last year, the Mayor cut \$6.6 million to the case management program (of which the Council restored \$3 million) and the year prior upwards of \$14 million for home care was eliminated- both programs serve homebound seniors not on Medicaid. Those effected by the cuts are at an increased risk for social isolation due to diminished contact with the 'outside' world. We are grateful to see that the

City has held the Department for the Aging harmless for FY12 and FY13. Maintaining funding for aging services at the current levels is important, but as soon as the economic climate improves, we need programs to be funding based on the need and size of the population rather than funding programs based on what can be scraped together.

We encourage the adoption of new information technology that recognizes abnormal or disrupted patterns in attendance at senior centers and alerts providers to seniors who might be experiencing difficulties. We also encourage the Department for the Aging to explore assessments that measure someone's risk for becoming socially isolated. Public awareness campaigns (and funding for it) highlighting the services and programs offered at the Department for the Aging could reach caregivers, seniors and others who may need help but do not know who to turn to. Existing programs like Carrier Alert need to be strengthened and we need to explore the pros/ cons and possibilities of making Carrier Alert an opt –out program for DFTA program participants.

When a senior becomes socially isolated, we need to see it as a failure of our society. We must continue to ask the question: what can we as individuals and as a community be doing to better the welfare of the elders in our great City, and prevent social isolation?

Thank you for the opportunity to testify and bringing this very important matter to the public sphere.