



70 West 36th Street, Fifth Floor, New York, NY 10018
tel: 212-967-0322 fax: 212-967-0792

Testimony before the Aging Committee of the New York City Council

Maria Baez, Chair

Oversight Hearing on Emergency Preparedness for Seniors

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Good afternoon, my name is Jessica Walker and I am a Policy Analyst at United Neighborhood Houses (UNH). UNH is the federation of 36 settlement houses that benefits half a million New Yorkers—from infants to adults to seniors—with educational programs, employment assistance, human services, and cultural activities at 350 locations throughout New York City. Founded in 1919 to bridge the common interests and concerns of New York's settlement houses and the communities they serve, UNH and its member agencies today comprise one of the City's largest human service systems. It is because of this historic and continued commitment to our communities that we appear before you today to speak on the emergency preparedness of our seniors. Thank you for giving me this opportunity.

The problems that many seniors experience during emergencies are often the result of problems that were there prior to the incident. With that in mind, I want to focus today on a major obstacle in safeguarding our seniors, both in emergency and everyday situations: isolation. In the summer of 1995, an oppressive weeklong heat wave assaulted the city of Chicago, Illinois. During this period, 739 heat-related deaths occurred, the majority of which were older adults. Eric Klinenberg, who wrote a book about the heat wave, says that these deaths were not the result of sheer health problems, but social problems. He stated in a recent interview:

The death toll was the result of distinct dangers in Chicago's social environment: an increased population of isolated seniors who live and die alone; the culture of fear that makes city dwellers reluctant to trust their neighbors or, sometimes, even leave their houses; the abandonment of neighborhoods by businesses, service providers, and most residents, leaving only the most precarious behind.¹

Oftentimes, as was the case in the 1995 Chicago heat wave, seniors who are most at risk during emergencies are those who are isolated. These seniors are generally very old, and are frequently suffering from chronic medical conditions and dealing with the stress of significant life events (e.g., bereavement, hospitalization or recent change in living arrangement). Other challenges associated with isolated seniors include lifestyle choices (e.g., substance abuse), environmental issues (e.g., living in harsh climates or high crime areas), socioeconomic issues (e.g., financial

¹ "Dying Alone: An Interview with Eric Klinenberg, author of *Heat Wave: A Social Autopsy of Disaster in Chicago*." The University of Chicago, 2003.

concerns) and personal beliefs and attitudes. Only minimal support is required to help this vulnerable group remain independent, yet isolated seniors have difficulty accessing health and community services. Reasons for this vary. Sometimes they do not meet participation criteria, other times they lack the financial resources required to participate, yet other times they do not perceive a need for assistance or are unwilling to accept it. Many seniors wish to remain self-sufficient despite their needs because they do not want to be a burden. This “independence at all costs” often results in the refusal of service, to the point where the senior places themselves at risk as their health and living conditions deteriorate. Isolation is a gradual but complex process resulting from the interplay of many factors associated with advanced age. Communities are generally aware that this population exists but the very nature of the issue makes it difficult to identify these seniors.²

Nearly half of all seniors in New York City live alone.³ Unfortunately, we do not know how many of them have strong social connections to family, friends, and community services that can help them when they are in need. Those seniors who live alone, have high needs, and have weak social connections are especially at risk; they are already experiencing unmet needs and if an emergency were to occur, their situation would only be exacerbated.

The electrical failure that took hold in New York City on August 14th lasted between 12 and 29 hours, depending on where you live. Authorities reported five deaths related to the blackout, including a 72-year-old man who died alone in a fire set by a burning candle.⁴ While this number is indeed unfortunate, we know that it could have been much worse. If the blackout had gone on longer, what would have happened to the frailest and most isolated seniors among us? I hope we never have to find out. There are things that we must do today to prevent total catastrophes like what happened this past summer in France’s heat wave, when upwards of 10,000 seniors died alone as their grown children went on summer vacation and left them without necessary social supports.⁵

We need to create an effective system for identifying isolated seniors citywide that helps them receive the help they need, even before an emergency occurs. While the child welfare system isn’t perfect, they have been able to create such a tracking system that allows them to monitor and properly respond to children in need. One of the recommendations discussed by Nora O’Brien in her valuable issue brief, “Emergency Preparedness for Older People,” does call for the development of “a city map highlighting neighborhoods with a high concentration of older people, as well as more detailed neighborhood maps.” This is a great first step, which should be followed and fully used well before any emergency situations exist. Such a mapping system would be useful right now in helping us to identify and reach out to isolated seniors in need—to put them in touch with senior services and medical help in their communities. This will allow seniors to remain safe and secure even as they continue to grow old in their own communities with dignity.

We appreciate the work of the City Council and look forward to working with you to bring about these necessary changes that will help protect our seniors.

Thank you.

² “Building support Networks for Isolated Seniors.” Ontario Health Promotion E-bulletin, August 16, 2002. website: www.ohpe.ca

³ Census 2000. Table P20. Households by Age of Householder by Household Type (Including Living Alone) by Presence of Own Children. www.census.gov

⁴ “New York City gets back to business as usual today,” by The Associated Press, August 18, 2003.

⁵ “Chirac goes on TV to quell heatwave anger.” The Guardian, August 22, 2003. By Amelia Gentleman in Paris.