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**Testimony before the Aging Committee  
of the New York City Council**

**Maria Baez, Chair**

**Oversight Hearing**

**Bronx RFP for Meals-on-Wheels:  
What is the Effect on Seniors and the Community at Large?**

**November 25, 2003**

Good morning, my name is Nancy Wackstein and I am the Executive Director of United Neighborhood Houses (UNH). UNH is the federation of 35 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. Most of our member agencies provide a range of services to seniors and the frail elderly; several run home delivered meal programs in conjunction with the Department for the Aging (DFTA). It is because of this historic and continued commitment to our communities that we appear before you today to speak on DFTA's impending bidding process for a Bronx pilot project to restructure the current service model of home delivered meals to the elderly. Thank you for giving me this opportunity.

It is my understanding that DFTA has put forth this new pilot project to restructure their home delivered meal services because they feel it will expand service capacity, improve efficiencies, and achieve cost containment. While we are painfully aware of our City's fiscal situation, and understand that there are opportunities for the City to reduce spending and streamline services, we believe that it would be a grave mistake to implement such changes if they would have a detrimental effect on the frail seniors who benefit from these services.

As we all know, home delivered meals serve many purposes. Not only does the daily delivery of food provide a nutritious meal that is sensitive to the dietary requirements of seniors, but this service keeps seniors connected to the world outside of their home, and acts as a safety net early warning system when a senior has fallen, taken ill, or needs additional help. We've all heard about the horror stories of a food deliverer or case manager finding an elderly food recipient who has died without anyone else noticing. In many instances, the daily contact between recipients of home delivered meals and the staff that deliver them are even more important than the meals themselves. We are very concerned about the impending pilot project and the effect that fewer home visits may have on those seniors who are deemed eligible to receive frozen meals. As such, any restructuring initiative that would reduce the number of delivery visits per week and therefore reduce human contact with homebound seniors must include provisions ensuring that regular contact with frail and isolated meal recipients is maintained. While there are several models of daily telephone reassurance programs, friendly visiting and other measures to regularly communicate with seniors, I have not seen the department's plan to increase these services so as to compensate for fewer home visits.

Four of our member agencies currently serve frozen meals either in conjunction with Citymeals-on-Wheels or DFTA. One serves frozen meals as part of their supplementary weekend meal program for approximately 270 homebound seniors. By all accounts, this has been a successful endeavor and the seniors involved have fared well. However, there are serious lessons here that should not be ignored. First, the program realized early on that the frozen meals would only work well for a select group of "intact seniors" and therefore, was extremely limited in its scope and focus. In addition, their use of frozen meals has not affected the daily interaction of their meal delivery program because it is only one meal per week. This program's seniors are still getting the daily "face time" that they need to ensure their safety and well being.

DFTA has wisely indicated that after any restructuring initiative is put into place, "providers must deliver hot meals to clients who need them but have the option of delivering hot, frozen, or alternative style meals for their other clients."<sup>1</sup> This embraces the accurate notion that frozen meals are not for everyone, but we caution DFTA about putting minimum quotas on the number of frail seniors who will receive them; this would compromise the case management process that providers will use in determining what the best option is for each individual senior.

Clearly, DFTA's proposal is about more than just frozen meals. We must remember the role the home delivered meal program truly occupies for many seniors: the only human interaction and nourishment that they have on many days. Anticipating the release of an RFP that would re-design home delivered meals in the Bronx, we are greatly troubled that DFTA has not adequately organized safeguards to protect homebound seniors or even studied the impact that such changes might have. To move forward and appropriately evaluate the impact of a frozen meal delivery program, we have joined with other umbrella organizations to support a thoughtful planning process that would include a timeframe for a concept paper, the release of an RFP and a realistic program start date. DFTA must also be ready to prepare and discuss:

- A comprehensive fiscal analysis that includes the number of homebound seniors expected to participate in the frozen food program (including projections for the next five years).
- A plan and budget to improve case management training and staffing to help staff determine whether seniors are eligible to receive frozen meals. Also needed is a plan for ongoing client assessment of current needs and abilities at regular intervals.
- The program design and cost to provide a homebound senior with daily telephone reassurance programs, friendly visiting and other measures to regularly communicate with those seniors receiving sporadic food delivery.

As advocates on behalf of New York City's senior population, we are eager to see an elderly nutrition program designed that would ensure the safety of homebound isolated seniors while addressing the continuum of needs among the elderly. We assume that a well-designed planning process incorporates the larger issues facing our growing elderly population and begins to plan for the expansion of the service delivery system.

We must all work hard to ensure that the core components of home delivered meals are unharmed by any efforts to achieve cost-savings, and that their program continue to support the goal of helping older people live independently in their own homes. We thank you for the opportunity to testify today and we stand ready to work with you to bring about these necessary changes. Thank you.

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<sup>1</sup> "Home Delivered Meals Restructuring Initiative (November 2003)," Department for the Aging, meeting handout, November 6, 2003.