



City Council FY22 Preliminary Budget Hearing
Committee on Aging
Oversight: Serving Seniors in Senior Residences
and Communities During the Pandemic
June 22, 2021

Testimony of Myung J. Lee, President & CEO

My name is Myung Lee and I am the President & CEO of Volunteers of America-Greater New York (VOA-GNY), the local affiliate of the national organization, Volunteers of America, Inc. I would like to thank the Chair of the City Council Committee on Aging, Council Member Margaret Chin, for the opportunity to submit this testimony.

Volunteers of America-Greater New York (VOA-GNY) is an anti-poverty organization that seeks to end homelessness in the New York metropolitan area by the year 2050. We focus our continuum of care to address the most prevalent causes of homelessness: (1) lack of affordable **housing**; (2) unmet **health** needs, including but not limited to mental health and substance use; and (3) lack of jobs that create **wealth**. In each of these areas we strive to incorporate strategies that address issues of racial equity. We know that our clients are confronting longstanding barriers to accessing quality housing, healthcare, and employment. Our programs are designed to ensure that our clients do not have to face these challenges alone.

VOA-GNY operates and provides services in emergency shelters, transitional housing, and permanent supportive housing for close to 11,000 men, women and children through 65 programs located in New York City, Northern New Jersey, and Westchester annually. We are one of the largest providers of services to families and individuals experiencing homelessness in the Greater New York area, serving survivors of domestic violence, people living with HIV/AIDS, veterans, and others who have behavioral health or substance use needs.

VOA-Greater New York is the sole provider of supportive housing services in City-owned single room occupancy residences (SROs). Our SROs do not yet meet the definition of a Naturally Occurring Retirement Community (NORC) and therefore do not qualify for funding designated for NORCs through the NYC Department for the Aging (DFTA), but as our tenants age and their needs become more complex, we must be able to provide them with additional supports so they are able to remain in the community they know safely, for as long as possible.

These SROs were not necessarily developed with older adults in mind, but many of our residents have lived with us for years, and in some cases, decades. An SRO cannot accommodate a live-in aide, and shared rooms do not afford the privacy needed to address a broad range of medical needs, from changing bandages to conducting an at-home dialysis procedure. To effectively meet the needs of aging adults who are experiencing or are at risk of experiencing homelessness, there must be greater public and private investment in affordable housing for aging adults.

A study published by University of Pennsylvania in 2019 noted unprecedented levels of homelessness among the late Baby Boom cohort because they have faced economic disadvantage throughout their lives, having entered the labor force and housing markets facing back-to-back recessions in the late 1970s and early 1980s. This study, which was published 11 months before the first known case of COVID-19 in New York, projected there would be 18,000 homeless adults age 55 and older in NYC by 2030, based on historical trends and demographic data.

In recent years, VOA-GNY has extended its expertise to the thoughtful, effective, and efficient development of purpose-built housing for NYC's older adults who are homeless or at risk of becoming homeless. Last month, we welcomed the first tenants into our East Clarke Place Senior Residence (East Clarke Place) in the Bronx. Designed specifically to meet the needs of older adults, the 14-story building has 122 studio and one-bedroom apartments. Thirty-seven of the apartments are reserved for chronically homeless older adults who will move into fully-furnished, accessible studio apartments with all the services they need to stay permanently housed, safe and connected. Eighty-four apartments are being filled by lottery, and those applicants must meet age and low-income requirements. The remaining unit is reserved for a fulltime live-in super. No tenant will pay more than 30% of their income toward housing.

One of our tenants, Rosalind, lived in a third floor walkup in the Bronx before she moved into a one-bedroom apartment at East Clarke Place this month, having secured the residence by way of community lottery. Rosalind is an army veteran and has been working non-stop since her service ended, most recently for 17 years at a bank on 170th and Jerome, before retiring. Rosalind receives two monthly infusions to treat her neuropathy, has had bilateral knee replacements, and had been relying on an albuterol pump to ease her difficulty breathing as she made her way up the stairs in her old walkup. Her doctor had prescribed her a motorized scooter, but she never tried to obtain one, having had no place to store it and fearing that if she left it outside her prior home, it would have been stolen.

Rosalind had been applying for housing through NYC Housing Connect since 2010, and was stunned when she learned she had “won the lottery.” Because she “lives to cook,” she’s thrilled with her brand new kitchen, with its ample cabinets and pantry. Additionally, Rosalind now looks forward to getting a motorized scooter.

While we are proud that East Clarke Place is a residence where adults can age safely and with dignity, we were astonished and heartbroken to receive 26,000 applications, including 200 that were handwritten, for only 84 low- and very low-income units for aging adults. This was a sobering reminder that there is a tremendous unmet need for affordable senior housing with on-site supports.

East Clarke Place serves as a model for how non-profits with expertise in the housing sector can partner with government to effectively meet the growing demand for permanent supportive housing. Financing sources for this \$69 million development project included Reso A grants from Council Member Vanessa Gibson and Bronx Borough President Ruben Diaz, HPD’s Senior Affordable Rental Apartments (SARA) Program, HDC’s Extremely Low- and Low-Income Affordability (ELLA) Program, NYS Energy Research and Development Authority Funds, and tax credit equity.

In the fall of 2021, Volunteers of America-Greater New York will begin the ground up construction of Andrews Avenue South Senior Residence, a 9-story building providing permanent housing in what is currently an abandoned parking lot. This development will provide affordable housing for 118 individuals earning no more than 30%-60% of the local area median income (AMI), and all of whom will benefit from rent subsidies and will not pay more than 30% of their household income. Eighty of the building's units are open to seniors who are considered low-income, and half of this number will be targeted specifically for low-income Bronx seniors. Thirty-seven of the building's units will serve chronically homeless seniors. One unit will be reserved for the building's superintendent.

Tenants will have access to resources that are not readily available in buildings in New York City including recreational activities, access to Wi-Fi, and a terrace garden where seniors will be able to plant fruits and vegetables and create a garden of their own. Every tenant will have access to a large community room, multiple lounges, reading areas, and beautifully landscaped outdoor areas that offer residents the opportunity to interact with friends and neighbors. Tenants will have laundry facilities on every floor, a bike storage room, and extra storage space. The building will also include Green and Sustainability features to achieve LEED for HOMES Platinum certification. VOA-GNY will provide concierge resources and care coordination services that support tenants in accessing on-site and off-site services. The supportive services that will be provided will allow tenants to transition from housing instability to a life of hope, resilience, and security.

I urge members of the Committee on Aging and their colleagues in the New York City Council to prioritize funding new affordable housing units for aging adults, who deserve to live in spaces that are beautiful and designed with their specific needs in mind. VOA-GNY will continue to do its part, working in concert with public and private partners to leverage the expertise of our staff and develop more permanent supportive housing for those who need it the most.

Respectfully submitted by:

Volunteers of America - Greater New York
135 West 50th Street, 9th Floor
New York, NY 10020