

Build more affordable homes for NYC's seniors

By MYUNG LEE

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As the City Council and Adams administration hammer out their first budget deal, one of the most prominent issues on the table is also the one [New Yorkers say matters most](#): affordable housing. The Council, in their response to City Hall's initial budget proposal, urged the administration to [allocate \\$4 billion to the city's capital budget for affordable housing](#), upholding a campaign promise made by Mayor Adams.

This effort for more housing dollars is encouraging and deserves praise. But something is missing in the ongoing conversation: a dedicated plan to address the worsening senior housing crisis. The Council and mayor need to work together to provide resources for senior New Yorkers specifically so that they can access the safe, affordable housing they need to age with the dignity they deserve.

It is important to start with a clear understanding of just how serious this emergency is.

There are more than [one million New Yorkers over the age of 65](#), half of [whom live alone](#). Roughly [one in four New York City renters](#) are senior citizens, and nearly 60% of that population is considered rent-burdened by the federal government. That means they spend at least 30% of their incomes — which are

generally fixed — on housing costs, significantly restricting their ability to spend on groceries, medical care, transportation and other necessities.

Yet for New Yorkers 75 years of age or older, the [supply of dedicated senior housing relative to the population is less than 5%](#), a figure far below New York's peer cities nationally, and it [disproportionately impacts vulnerable populations](#) like the LGBTQ+ community.

Distressingly, the crisis will only worsen if we don't take action. New York's population is [growing older](#). We have a moral obligation to address this crisis and to address it now.

That will only be possible if we recognize that seniors have unique needs that must be built into their living environment. That includes the physical layout of apartments, which need to be designed for those who may struggle with mobility, and opportunities for on-site services and support. At our new senior housing residence in the Bronx, [East Clarke Place](#), we provide on-site services, helping residents manage independent living and organizing fun events to keep them engaged and instill a sense of broader community.

We were only able to build such an inclusive environment — 84 apartments were reserved for extremely-low and low-income seniors and 37 more were reserved for formerly homeless seniors — due to the support of city funding and our partners in government at the Department of Housing Preservation and Development (HPD). It is a testament to what is possible when we come together and create solutions for our aging neighbors. But it also speaks to the work that is left to be accomplished. More than 26,000 New Yorkers applied to live at East Clarke Place, including hundreds of handwritten applications.

Take a moment and imagine living alone in an apartment you cannot afford in the city you have called home for your entire life, sitting down to write application after application for housing “lotteries” with those long odds. That is the sad reality for far too many in our community.

There are simple steps we can take to deliver not just hope but change. First, Adams and the Council should work together to fully staff HPD, the Department of Social Services and other [city agencies struggling with a lack of manpower](#). Insufficient staff levels have a real impact on the pipeline of senior housing, often delaying new projects from coming online or leasing up.

Another straightforward step would be to fund [cost-of-living adjustments](#) for the social services staff that work with seniors, many of whom are paid poverty wages because of insufficient government contracts. Low wages make it harder for social services organizations to find and retain workers to manage on-site programming and help seniors maximally benefit from their homes.

Most importantly, we need one unified vision with adequate resources to create a steady pipeline of senior housing. The release of the city’s formal housing plan, which is expected to be published in the near future, is an opportunity to do just that. By doing so, the Adams administration will go a step further than its predecessor, which made [bold but ultimately unfulfilled promises](#) to its aging constituents.

Without these and other steps, New York City will continue on an unacceptable trajectory where growing old with dignity is virtually impossible for low- and

middle-income seniors. That is not the city we want to live in, nor is it the city our aging neighbors deserve.

While the situation may seem bleak, it is possible to reverse that trajectory now — and we cannot afford any delay.

Lee is the president and CEO of VOA-Greater New York, an anti-poverty organization with more than 125 years of experience serving New Yorkers in need.