

## The Public Ought to Know: Boro senior services must be saved from budget ax

By Corey Bearak

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**As we complete our holiday celebrations, we must remember those less fortunate. Many remain somewhat out of view. We'll see the homeless person often on the street or outside a shelter; it is an image the media does not shy from placing before us.**

Corey Bearak    Needy families with children also get attention, which they deserve. The frail elderly, however, receive much less attention although they so greatly depend on senior programs. Cuts to senior programs hurt our frail elderly the most; this makes planned changes to Meals on Wheels, or MOW, very penny-wise and dollar-foolish.

When mayors, their deputy mayors and their budget directors order agency cuts to help balance a budget, they rarely (in fact, they may never) demand the commissioners to provide impact statements that detail how proposed savings would work. In the present and past, the Fire and Correction departments budgeted for less staff to save money, only to run over the budget with overtime.

Brooklyn Councilwoman Yvette Clarke introduced legislation to require those agencies to analyze the impact of staff cuts or freezes on overtime and also provide that report to the Council. But what about when the cut happens in one agency and the impact — increased costs — shows in another one?

That appears to be the consequence of a so-called pilot program to deliver frozen meals from Minnesota and Pennsylvania to homebound Bronx seniors, which means recipients would get a combination of perhaps 60 percent frozen dishes and 40 percent hot dishes every week. Since there would be less regular contact with the seniors, vendors who deliver the meals could cut back on full service programs for their elderly clients.

Absent an effort to reverse this Bloomberg administration plan, look for it in the other boroughs, including Queens.

Though I knew of city council hearings in the Bronx on Department for the Aging programs there, Adam Dickter's reporting in The Jewish Week focused my attention on the impact on homebound seniors dependent on the Bronx Jewish Community Council for Kosher meals.

The so-called Bronx pilot actually involves three-year contracts. DFTA plans to divide MOW into 21 districts; this means we need to fear its extension to other boroughs, including Queens, in the budget that City Hall negotiates with the Council this spring. City Council Finance Chairman David Weprin (D-Hollis) said he's already focused on this problem.

Home-delivered meals provide a lifeline for homebound seniors and frail elderly; it connects them to programs and services. It helps keep them in their homes instead of nursing homes, which would skyrocket already high Medicaid costs, which are 25 percent paid by the city — our tax dollars.

The December 2003 Independent Budget Office "Fiscal Outlook" projects a "rapid increase" in Medicaid from \$4 billion to \$4.5 billion, increasing \$500 million in the next fiscal year, which begins July 1. This estimate does not reflect DFTA's dumb plan to shift delivery to frozen Meals on Wheels, part of its \$8 million agency reduction ordered by the mayor's budget office. The DFTA pilot imposes a \$4 cap per meals and limits hot meals to 40 percent of deliveries, likely to produce a waiting list of the most frail elderly.

Frail elderly — 80 percent women — continued to grow, according to DFTA's Annual Plan Summary for 2004-2005, which analyzed 2000 Census data. Elderly, 85 years and older, increased by 18.7 percent since 1990; by 17.8 percent for those age 65 and older and by 18.3 percent for those 75 years and older (more than 75,000 individuals). And 6.6 percent more seniors overall live in poverty.

More than 39 percent of seniors age 65 and over had a disability, a 55 percent increase. The State Aging Office in 1994 found one of four seniors at risk of malnutrition. Those most likely to have functional impairment and lower incomes remain most at risk of malnutrition. Hunger and malnutrition can exacerbate many chronic and degenerative diseases.

The DFTA operates as a contract agency; it delivers most services through a network of faith-based and community-based not-for-profit agencies. Many home care services now get delivered through for-profit agencies (that merits its own column).

I serve on boards of two agencies that serve seniors and work closely with another. I've developed pending legislation to help seniors stay in their homes and prepared annual testimony for two decades on DFTA's Annual Plan required by federal and state law.

With former Community Board 13 Chair Sue Noreika, I co-chair Naturally Occurring Retirement Community Without Walls, a foundation-funded model program serving parts of Bellerose, Floral Park and New Hyde Park. Planning for

NORC-WOW unveiled a rather steep income drop for seniors over age 65 in a stable middle-class community, with many at or near the poverty level.

Meals on Wheels often represents the only connection for frail elderly to senior programs; fewer meal deliveries means less contacts between programs — and services — and the elderly who do not get to senior centers but need help the most.

The proposed contract delivers fewer meals and puts seniors at risk of malnutrition. Something stinks here.

Corey Bearak is an attorney and adviser on government, community and public affairs. He is also active in Queens civic and political circles.

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