

**Comments by Public Advocate Betsy Gotbaum on
the New York City Department for the Aging (DFTA) Concept Paper for
Home-Delivered Meals Request For Proposals
(March 13, 2008)**

By 2030, the 60-and-older population in New York City is expected to grow by half a million seniors, an increase of 46 percent. In response, DFTA must prepare for a rise in demand of home-delivered meals. Considering the expanding diversity of the senior population, the city will also have to increase the cultural and dietary diversity of meals delivered.

While I commend DFTA for taking the lead in rethinking the home-delivered meals program, I am concerned about the process and nature of the changes proposed in the city's concept paper.

First, it appears that DFTA has not evaluated the existing network of kitchens and delivery services to identify senior centers that do a good job of providing both congregate and home-delivered meals in a manner that is cost effective and satisfying to seniors; nor has there been an effort to improve the efficiency and quality of centers that need help. Instead, DFTA is proposing a complete overhaul of the system based on a two-year pilot program in the Bronx and the Philadelphia home-delivered meals program. These programs have been criticized by advocates for not meeting the health and dietary needs of seniors, not providing ethnic diversity in meals, and for putting a cap on daily hot meal deliveries as a proportion of all meal deliveries.

Second, DFTA intends, and has already begun to redesign its three major services—case management, senior centers, and home-delivered meals—in an extremely short timeframe that is not warranted by current circumstances and could be detrimental to seniors. Under the redesign, case management organizations are solely responsible for assessing seniors for the home delivered meals program. However, not enough time has passed for DFTA to evaluate case management organizations' handling of the new system and troubleshoot problems that arise. DFTA should do at least this much before moving on to the home-delivered meals RFP.

Third, the primary motive behind the proposed changes seems to be cost-cutting. Reducing the number of provider contracts from 97 to between 10 and 20 will likely reduce the quality of food delivered. Additionally, while DFTA points to the Bronx pilot program as a model of successful cost containment, advocates have reiterated that those same cost containment measures have not allowed for cultural and dietary diversity of meals. A focus on the bottom line, in combination with inflation and rising gas prices, could also compromise contractors' ability to sustain the delivery of daily hot meals.

Perhaps most importantly, the crucial social component of meal delivery is likely to suffer if the system is redesigned with an emphasis on creating economies of scale. DFTA now acknowledges the need for human contact. However, they are making the providers responsible for offering friendly visits without providing additional funding or instituting a system of oversight to ensure that visits take place.

To address the serious concerns voiced by senior advocates and service providers in the community, including some of those who were invited to DFTA work group meetings, DFTA should:

- Postpone the actual RFP by six months. The postponement period would give DFTA an opportunity to evaluate existing kitchens and delivery services. The postponement would also allow DFTA to assess and troubleshoot the new case management system before moving on to its redesign of the home-delivered meals contracts.
- Separate and stagger the release of the home-delivered meals RFP and the senior congregate activities RFP so that DFTA and providers can focus their efforts on one RFP at a time.
- Issue a revised concept paper before the release of the RFP. The revised paper should include the precise number of service areas/contracts, the proposed cost per meal allotment, an assurance that RFPs will not cap daily hot meal deliveries as a proportion of all meal deliveries, and an explanation of how Bronx pilot providers ensured quality and diversity of meals if, in fact, they were able to do so.
- Increase the number of contracts awarded through the RFP to at least two per case management region in order to ensure quality and diversity of delivered meals.
- Take responsibility for creating and funding a system of friendly visits and reassurance calls for seniors who receive twice-weekly frozen meals instead of daily hot meals rather than leaving full responsibility with the vendors.

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