

The Lo-Down

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City's Senior Center Cuts Hit LES Harder Than Any Other Neighborhood



It's like a second home. Every weekday, around 150 seniors gather inside a lively community center at 189 Allen Street. Some come for a hot meal – others for ballroom dancing – or a friendly game of checkers. On Friday, we stopped by the center, run by University Settlement, to talk with seniors and staff members about the unsettling news that this center and five others on the Lower East Side are on the chopping block.

On Thursday, the city's Department of Aging announced a draconian plan to close 105 senior centers (40% of the system) due to proposed budget cuts in Albany. Service providers say the LES is being hit harder than any other neighborhood. According to [Gotham Gazette](#), the Department of Aging decided to cut 30% from each community district. Any center serving fewer than 85 meals a day was placed on the closure list.

In addition to the Allen Street facility, the cuts threaten the following locations:

- The BRC Senior Center at 30 Delancey
- A kosher meal service run by the United Jewish Council of the East Side at 197 East Broadway
- The Laguardia Senior Center at 280 Cherry

- The Smith Houses Senior Center at 50 Madison
- The Polish & Slavic Center at 103 East 7th Street

Michael Zisser, executive director of University Settlement, acknowledges the Lower East Side is being disproportionately impacted because it has more services than many other neighborhoods. But he argues there are more resources here because there's more demand. Last year, NYU's Furman Center found Community District 3 (LES, East Village, Chinatown) had the second highest number of seniors living below the poverty line in the entire city.

Zisser said the impact of closing a center with a membership of one-thousand seniors would be tremendous. But since the facility is a base of operations for a catering service for similar centers on Delancey Street and Confucius Plaza in Chinatown and supports a Meals on Wheels Program, closure would also have ripple effects across the community. The contract, worth somewhere between \$500,000-\$600,000, allows University Settlement to provide essential services in a center that's been in operation for four decades, he explained.

BRC executive director Muzzy Rosenblatt said his center, serving more than 500 seniors, provides a critical lifeline to people "with no pensions and frequently no health insurance." He conceded the city and state are in a terrible financial bind but added, "these particular cuts make no sense to me whatsoever... the elderly are being used as political pawns."





[When the proposed cuts were announced on Thursday](#), City Councilmember Maragret Chin released a statement saying, “Governor Cuomo’s budget again and again targets the most vulnerable members of our community... Cutting funds for senior citizens severs a lifeline to integral health care, nutrition, and counseling services.”

Several lawmakers, including U.S. Representatives Carolyn Maloney and Nydia Velazquez, wrote a letter to Cuomo last week, urging him to restore the funding to New York City. In response to a request from **The Lo-Down** on Friday, State Assembly Speaker Sheldon Silver office released the following statement:

Our senior centers are a lifeline for thousands of seniors across this community. Last year we fought and won restorations to Title XX (a federal allocation to New York State) to keep senior centers in our neighborhoods open and I am committed to doing so again in this year’s state budget.”

(The governor’s office says the Title XX money is being shifted from senior programs to child welfare services - not cut outright)

Seniors at the Allen Street center were heartened to learn their elected officials are concerned. Friday afternoon, aides to State Senator Daniel Squadron stopped by, going from table to table, encouraging residents to join the fight. It was not a hard sell. Several seniors, holding onto the morning newspaper, talked with us about what shuttering this center would mean to them.

Eduardo Miranda said the friendship and camaraderie here helped get him on his feet after open heart surgery. John Yap, who teaches other seniors ping pong, said he felt sick upon hearing the news. Nelly Velazquez said it's the only senior center within walking distance and believes most seniors would just stay in their apartments alone all day if it closed. The people here, Olga Colon explained, are like a second family to her.

Late last week, Community Board 3 was mobilizing to help save the centers. Susan Stetzer, district manager, said she doesn't think most people understand how devastating the cuts would be on the Lower East Side. CB3 staff members are taking a hard look at new demographic information to better understand the needs of the senior population.

They're also mapping the locations of the targeted centers. Based on their initial research, it appears a large swathe of the neighborhood (in the northwest corner of the community district) would be almost completely unserved if the cuts go through.

Meanwhile, the neighborhood's social service providers are bracing for more bad news in the weeks ahead. They're expecting after school and youth programs to be hit hard, as well. So it appears they'll be waging a multi-front war to save programs for at-risk communities.

By [Ed Litvak](#) in [Politics](#) on March 7, 2011 9:00 am | 

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