

Mayor's Senior Services Changes Threatened By Assembly-Passed Bill

The controversial plan by the city's Department for the Aging which proposes changes in home meal delivery and senior center operations would be stopped dead in its tracks under a bill passed by the Democrat-controlled Assembly in the waning hours of the legislative session last

Senior Spotlight

By John Toscano

week.

However, the Republican-led state senate had previously passed a different bill addressing senior services in New York City, so neither bill appears to have a chance of becoming law unless the two houses pass a compromise bill, which appears highly unlikely since the legislature ended its 2008 session last Wednesday.

At the moment, the DFTA-proposed reform program backed by the Bloomberg mayoral administration is still alive.

However, the City Council, according to Councilmember James Gennaro (D-Fresh Meadows), is "fully engaged in active discussion with the mayor's office on this matter and has already won a number of delays that could avert a crisis for seniors."

Last year, Gennaro said, he had sponsored a \$1.5 million budget amendment that saved the City Meals-On-Wheels program from extinction.

Under that program, homebound and other seniors get a warm, freshly cooked meal delivered to their homes every day of the week. Other meals are delivered to be kept refrigerated, then warmed up for a Sunday meal.

Under the DFTA's proposed changes, home-delivered meals could be mostly or all frozen, to be defrosted and eaten by the homebound seniors. The DFTA has received variations of fresh or frozen delivered meals, but has not made a final decision as to whether the present system in practice for many years will be changed.

The DFTA also has put out a similar Request for Proposal (RFP) seeking plan submissions to possibly change how senior centers are operated. According to reports on the DFTA's future aims, some local centers could be closed and some cen-

tralization of present centers could occur.

Under the Assembly bill passed last week, according to Assemblymember Audrey Pheffer (D-Rockaways), the DFTA plan would be scrapped and an analysis of senior services' consolidations of home-delivered meals and senior center operations would be undertaken before any new contracts could be entered into by the DFTA.

The Assembly bill calls on DFTA to analyze the way in which consolidation has taken place to this point and forces them to adjust their methods of consolidation to be more responsive to the community, Pheffer said in a release.

Pheffer also stated, "The mayor's plan to 'modernize' senior centers and 'restructure' the Meals-On-Wheels program was really a plan that dismantled a system that successfully serves thou-

sands of seniors in New York City. It is an ill-conceived plan that must be stopped."

The mayor's plan, when announced earlier this year, was put forward as changes dictated by seniors' living longer and more future retirees entering the senior ranks, thus creating new problems on how to serve the appreciably increased senior population.

The senate bill passed to deal with the DFTA plan called for more oversight of local county senior services programs by the State Office for the Aged (SOFA) and assurances that seniors and senior advocate groups' input was being solicited and considered. It was sponsored by state Senator Serphin Maltese (R-C, Middle Village) and co-sponsored by Senator Frank Padavan (R-C, Bellerose).

Medicare Improvement Passed In House By Wide Margin

BY JOHN TOSCANO

A bipartisan bill outlining improvements in the Medicare program passed the House last week by a whopping 355-59 vote.

Congressmember Joseph Crowley hailed the measure's passage saying, "Seniors across Queens and The Bronx can breathe a sigh of relief—the Democratic-led Congress has once again worked successfully to protect their needs for both affordable care and the doctor of their choice."

Crowley said that as a member of the powerful Ways & Means Committee,

which has jurisdiction over Medicare legislation, he was "proud to be a part of the team that fought for this passage".

The Queens/Bronx lawmaker added: "Our seniors must have access to the healthcare services, prescriptions and doctors they need to stay alive and healthy. It is my hope that President [George W.] Bush will agree by signing this bill into law."

Under the terms of the bill, Crowley said, the pending 10 percent payment reduction for doctors who serve in the Medicare program would be prevented. The bill also enhances Medicare preven-

tive and mental health benefits, improves and extends programs for low-income senior beneficiaries and extends expiring provisions covering rural and other providers.

Crowley noted that the bill would be completely paid for by reforms to the Medicare Advantage programs, "which will bring the program back in line with traditional Medicare benefits".

The Advantage programs are operated by private insurance companies and offer the same basic Medicare coverage plus

See page 40

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