Retirees protest closure of 105 senior centers in New York City

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Last Friday, over 300 senior citizens gathered at City Hall in Manhattan to protest Democratic Governor Andrew Cuomo's proposed budget cuts that would reduce funding for senior centers in all five boroughs. 105 senior centers across the city will be permanently closed on April 1 if the state Legislature approves Cuomo's budget proposal, which includes nearly $4 billion in brutal spending cuts.

The centers provide elderly residents of the city with free meals, social services like rent assistance and transportation, and companionship. According to the Department for the Aging, over 30,000 older adults visit the centers each year. The cutbacks would mark the greatest attack on senior centers in the city's history, with 41 percent of New York's 256 senior centers threatened with closure. The proposal has outraged retirees and older workers across the city, many of whom live in poverty.

The protest at City Hall was attended by elderly New Yorkers from every borough, along with a handful of city council members. Seniors at the rally carried signs saying "Save our senior centers," and condemned the looming closures. Many of them showed up to protest with friends they'd made at their local senior center.

"We're home all day. This place we can go and socialize with all our friends, handicapped, blind or otherwise," one retiree told *NY1* news. "We get there, we have our meals, we congregate, and we reminisce. And this is what they want to take away from us? Shame on any politician that would take that away from us," said another.

New York City's senior centers are under threat because Governor Cuomo's new budget proposal includes a $25 million cut to Title XX, a program that provides 25 percent of the funding for the city's senior centers. Many seniors and senior center directors have called on state lawmakers to extend the tax surcharge on New Yorkers earning over $200,000 a year in order to keep the centers open. However, both Cuomo and Mayor Michael Bloomberg are determined to let the tax expire.

"This potentially devastating loss of state funding would profoundly affect senior centers across New York City," said Christopher Miller, director of public affairs for the Department for the Aging. The closings could begin as early as July 1 and would affect between 8,000 and 10,000 older New Yorkers.

26 centers in Manhattan are threatened with closure, including the BRC Senior Center in Chinatown. 78-year-old Jing Luo first began visiting the center 13 years ago while caring for her ailing husband, and credits the center for improving her quality of life. "After I came here, I felt happier, not as depressed. My nutrition has improved, and I feel happier," she said.

The borough of Queens is slated to lose 22 of its senior centers, including 7 centers in western Queens. Josephine Forlano, 85, expressed her anger at the slated closure of her local senior center, Catholic Charities Steinway Street in Astoria. "I was happy to have some place to go out and join people and be happy for the last few years of our life. We are not asking for much," she told the *Queens Chronicle*.

Staten Island, which already has the fewest number of senior centers, will lose 4 of its centers, while 22 centers in the Bronx are threatened with closure. Brooklyn is set to lose the most senior centers, with 31 to be closed down across the borough.

Every year New York's senior centers come under attack as the city grapples with spiraling deficits. Last year, after initially threatening to close 50 senior centers, the Bloomberg administration shut down 29 centers across the city. While each center only costs

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about $100,000 per year to operate, the centers have been continuously plagued by under funding, according to the Council of Senior Centers and Service (CSCS).

According to Rimas Jasin, executive director of Presbyterian Senior Services, the centers often provide seniors with their only nutritious meal of the day. Presbyterian Senior Services is set to lose three of the six senior centers it operates under the city's plan. "If it weren't for those centers, those seniors are going to remain isolated in their own apartments, their health is going to decline," Jasin told the *Wall Street Journal*. If the cuts are implemented, over 2.5 million meals provided to the elderly each year will be lost, including thousands of meals on wheels delivered to disabled seniors. Anti-hunger advocates have warned that the closures will increase food insecurity among the city's elderly population.

"Both of our centers are in areas where the poverty level is above the city average," said Jose Ortiz, executive director of the Spanish Speaking Elderly Council, which operates two senior centers in Brooklyn. "More than 90 percent of our seniors live on less than $14,000 a year." Ortiz explained that one of the centers operated by the Council is in an isolated community and seniors would have no place to go if it shuts down.

The proposed closures will affect some of the most vulnerable members of society. Elderly poverty has declined since the 1960's, when over a third of adults over the age of 65 lived in poverty. By the 1980s, the official elderly poverty rate had been reduced to 10 percent. According to the National Bureau of Economic Research, the growth in Social Security was the main factor behind the decline in elderly poverty. However, benefits have declined significantly over the years. Social Security beneficiaries have been denied a cost-of-living increase for the past two years.

Moreover, efforts to reduce poverty have been entirely abandoned by the political establishment over the past three decades. As a result, elderly poverty has been on the rise in recent years, with millions of older adults struggling to meet their basic living expenses.

According to official statistics, 8.9 percent of adults over the age of 65 were living in poverty in 2009. But figures released by the Census Bureau last January found the elderly poverty rate to be 16.1 percent that year. The data released by the Census Bureau took into account out-of-pocket medical costs and other living expenses.

"Our rolls are swelling. There are more and more people on our rolls, there are more and more people in need of our services," said Enid Borden of the Meals on Wheels Association of America, which delivers meals every day to over a million older adults. "The other side these numbers don't tell is the fact that seniors in this country are going hungry. How can we let that happen?"

Another report released last year by the AARP found that for the majority of older adults living in poverty, Social Security accounts for most if not all of their family income. The report also found that among the elderly, women and minorities are the most affected by poverty, with 20 percent of African-American and Latino seniors living in poverty.

Elderly poverty will only be exacerbated in the coming months as the ruling elite seeks to make working people pay for a crisis generated by the corporate elite. Even as elderly poverty continues to rise, both parties are preparing to launch a ruthless attack on Social Security benefits in the name of fighting the deficit. This is despite the fact that the program is funded separately by payroll taxes and does not contribute to the debt.

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