**Testimony Submitted by**

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**Citymeals on Wheels**

**Before The New York City Department of Health and Mental Hygiene**

**Chapter 34 (Grocery Delivery Program)**

**to Title 24 of the Rules of the City of New York Public Hearing**

**January 13, 2023**

My name is Jeanette Estima and I am the Director, Policy and Advocacy. Thank you for holding today’s hearing and the opportunity to submit comments on the Department of Health and Mental Hygiene’s (DOHMH) proposed Amendments to Title 24 of the Rules of the City of New York, adding a new Chapter 34 (Grocery Delivery Program), which would establish rules for a subsidized grocery program.

Citymeals on Wheels was founded forty years ago to fill a significant gap in city services, securing funding to provide weekend and holiday meals to those homebound older adults unable to shop and cook for themselves. While the Department for the Aging funds the one daily meal that homebound older adults receive Mondays through Fridays (excluding holidays), Citymeals funds the same network of providers to deliver weekend, holiday, and emergency meals. *Without Citymeals, the most vulnerable older adults would not receive a meal 115 days each year*. To bridge this gap, Citymeals raises over $25 million to fund about 2 million weekend and holiday meals annually.

Additionally, Citymeals has become the default emergency responder for older adults citywide, beginning with 9/11. In 2017, the opening of our Bronx warehouse solidified this role by giving us the capacity to keep at least 50,000 shelf stable, ready to eat meals on hand, with the ability to quickly package more meals to assist the older adults we normally serve and those in temporary need. We have stepped up during citywide emergencies like Superstorm Sandy and Hurricane Ida, as well as more localized emergencies such as a power or gas outage. Nowhere was this more clearly demonstrated than the Covid-19 pandemic, which rendered thousands of older adults effectively homebound when it very suddenly became unsafe for them to be in most public spaces. Between March 1, 2020, and March 31, 2021, Citymeals delivered more than 4 million meals to 50,000 older adults throughout NYC, a 112% increase from the year prior. Time and again, we have illustrated the value of our agile and resourceful model.

The Chapter 34 (Grocery Delivery Program) program emerged in the wake of the Covid-19 pandemic. We applaud the City for continuing to invest in food assistance for New Yorkers in need. It is especially important to put money in the hands of New Yorkers so they can make their own decisions about what to eat. That said, we do have some feedback about the most recent version of the Groceries to Go program as outlined in the proposed rule.

This program is a continuation of the Get Food program that was created in response to the Covid-19 pandemic. Get Food evolved into Get Food Recovery Meals, which served about 10,000 homebound older New Yorkers at its height. Upon the conclusion of Get Food Recovery Meals, NYC Aging surveyed recipients in order to transition eligible older adults into the City’s home-delivered meal program as needed. However, only 1,300 did transition into the home-delivered meals program; most found the intake process too onerous and refused an assessment or were deemed ineligible. It is unclear to us how the remaining program participants are addressing their nutritional needs. Given that a significant number of NYC Care members are older adults, and that there are very limited options for food insecure older adults, it is imperative that Groceries to Go makes every effort to support its older NYC Care members in the following ways:

1. The Administration and DOHMH should consider how to provide better access for older New Yorkers who are homebound or have limited mobility and often lack the digital literacy, devices, or internet service required to use the program in its current design. We know that the email requirement for enrollment in the program will be a barrier for many older New Yorkers, not to mention the need to order online. *We recommend creating a system to support ordering by phone* *(without requiring an email address)* with at least a few vendors, if not all, so that anyone without internet access or literacy can enroll in the program, order groceries, schedule delivery, and pay over the phone.
2. In order to ensure that older adults who are homebound and not connected to the internet can learn about the program, *we also urge DOHMH to do outreach by mail, and through Older Adult Centers and community-based organizations that do in-person outreach*, especially to residents with limited English proficiency.
3. We strongly encourage the program to allow enrollees to have the freedom to use the credits on food items of their choosing, allowing households to make choices that reflect their particular needs, cultural preferences, dietary or medical requirements, and personal taste. The rules state that eligible groceries, “may be limited to certain categories as determined by the Department.” *We strongly urge the DOHMH not to apply additional limitations to eligible foods, and to ensure that participants are able to purchase prepared food.* Many older adults have impairments that, for example, render them unable to see well enough to cook their own meals, or unable to stand long enough to prepare or cook food from scratch. Finally, many homebound older adults do not have someone who can come by regularly to help with these tasks. Therefore, access to a wide variety of prepared foods is critical to meeting their nutritional needs.

Thank you for your time and consideration. We look forward to working with you to ensure that older New Yorkers are able to meet the nutritional requirements that support their overall health and wellbeing.