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State tells city to detail boiled-down plan to deliver meals to seniors

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The New York State Office for the Aging is having trouble swallowing the city's consolidation plan for delivering meals to 17,000 homebound seniors across the city.

The plan calls for turning the 96 meal delivery contracts into 20 larger contracts. But the plan has yet to win approval from the State Office for the Aging, known as SOFA.

SOFA's director, Michael Burgess, recently sent the city's Department for the Aging a five-page letter posing a slew of questions and demanding detailed information about the consolidation plan.

Advocates who oppose the consolidation said Burgess' letter was prompted by complaints by a number of elected officials, including state Senate Minority Leader Malcolm Smith (D-Queens) and Assemblyman Jeff Dinowitz (D-Bronx). They contend the state action is a major speed bump in the plan's path.

Bobbie Sackman of the Council of Senior Centers and Services said of the state action, "This is the first time we know of that the state office has ordered the city to explain its proposed changes that will dramatically change the way senior services, including Meals On Wheels, have been delivered."

Responses to a city Requests for Proposals (RFP), a form of bidding process, are due Aug. 1, with officials hoping to begin implementing the consolidated contracts in January.

Christopher Miller, a spokesman for the city's Department for the Aging, said it will cooperate with SOFA and answer all its questions. "We are confident that by working together our amendment [the application for the consolidation plan] will be approved," Miller said.

Among other matters, Burgess asked for clarification of how homebound seniors will be informed they will have a choice of receiving a daily hot meal on weekdays or twice-weekly deliveries of flash-frozen meals.

That choice is now provided only in the Bronx, which underwent a similar consolidation of its home meal delivery contracts in 2004, going from 17 vendors to just two.

Under the city plan, case managers are to determine whether seniors can handle the frozen meals. If so, they will be given a choice between hot meals or frozen. City officials say Bronx seniors favor the frozen meals. But critics say the hot meals will simply be heated-up frozen meals.

Commissioner Edwin Mendez-Santiago of the city's Department for the Aging has been given until the end of this week to provide answers to SOFA's letter, which was dated May 28.
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