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**TESTIMONY OF FRANCES LIU, SPECIAL PROJECTS ASSOCIATE FOR  
THE NEW YORK IMMIGRATION COALITION**

**before**

**THE NEW YORK CITY COUNCIL IMMIGRATION COMMITTEE**

**May 5, 2008**

Good morning. I want to thank the members of the Immigration Committee for holding this important hearing, in particular Committee Chair Kendall Stewart, and for inviting us to testify on the delays in the naturalization application process and its impact on New Yorkers. My name is Frances Liu, and I am the Special Projects Associate at the New York Immigration Coalition (NYIC). The NYIC is a statewide umbrella policy and advocacy organization for over 200 member organizations throughout New York State that promotes justice and opportunity for immigrants and refugees.

In February 2007, the national USCIS office announced an 80% fee increase for naturalization applications, which would ultimately go into effect on July 30, 2007. These fee hikes were explicitly imposed to improve services and expedite the processing of naturalization applications. Today, the utter reality is that we have only seen exacerbated delays. The national USCIS office must be held accountable for this failure.

The projected processing time for naturalization applicants in New York City is 10.1 months. While the delays in New York are not as severe as other areas of the country, they are still unacceptable. Concrete steps must be taken to address and alleviate the backlog in naturalization application processing.

These delays have significant implications in the lives of immigrant New Yorkers – immigrants who, according to the laws of this country, have done everything right. They have waited to obtain lawful permanent resident status. They have gone through the required waiting period before a person can apply for naturalization (usually 5 years). They have learned English and studied U.S. history and its government, often through ESL programs funded by the City Council's Immigrant Opportunities Initiative. They have paid their taxes, met with attorneys, completed extensive paperwork, and attended all necessary interviews. They are eager and ready to fully participate in American society. And yet, the long delays in the naturalization application process will ultimately prevent thousands of these individuals from registering to vote in this year's primaries.

and presidential elections – fundamentally important elections that will impact their lives and the future of this nation. The backlog is effectively disenfranchising the very individuals this country should welcome – individuals who have proven their desire and commitment to fully participate in and better this country.

The extensive delays in the naturalization process also impact potential employment for some immigrants, since lawful permanent residents cannot apply for many jobs with the federal government. Additionally, lawful permanent residents cannot petition for their parents, married children, or siblings to join them in this country, whereas U.S. citizens can. The processing delays are exacerbating the family separation already produced by this country's immigration system.

*Ya Es Hora, Ciudadania! It is time. Citizenship!*, a national campaign to encourage naturalization, spearheaded by NALEO and Univision, and coordinated regionally by the NYIC, used PSA's and Sunday morning TV broadcasts to educate the Latino community about the naturalization process. And nationwide in 2007, over 1.4 million naturalization applications were filed. In the months leading up to the enactment of the fee increases, immigrant advocates across the nation anticipated a rush of naturalization applications. In the New York USCIS office alone, more than 40,000 applications were received in July 2007; previously, the average number of applications received per month was approximately 6200- 6500. Clearly, there was a rush in applications – a rush that should have been fully anticipated by the national USCIS. The national USCIS office's claim that they did not expect this obvious influx in applications is spurious. They must be held accountable for their lack of preparation.

As a city, and as a nation, we should be encouraging eligible individuals to apply for citizenship and fully integrate into the fabric of this country. The New York City Council has shown its commitment to this through its continued support for the Immigrant Opportunities Initiative, which directly funds immigration legal services and ESL classes utilized by naturalization applicants. The national USCIS office must expedite the egregiously long processing time for citizenship applications.

We call on the New York City Council to urge our Congressional Delegation and our leaders in Washington to demand further action on this issue. Last May, the Deputy Director of the USCIS, Michael Aytes, stated that the office's goal to process citizenship applications is within a five-month period. They must be held accountable for creating and implementing a comprehensive plan to realize this goal.

On behalf of the New York Immigration Coalition and its 200-plus member organizations, thank you for the opportunity to provide this testimony.