



Mayor's Office of
Immigrant Affairs
Bitta Mostofi
Commissioner

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Testimony of Commissioner Bitta Mostofi
NYC Mayor's Office of Immigrant Affairs

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Preliminary Budget Hearing - Immigration

Thank you to Chairs Dromm and Menchaca and the Committees on Finance and Immigration for holding this budget hearing.

My name is Bitta Mostofi, and I am the Commissioner of the Mayor's Office of Immigrant Affairs (MOIA).

I want to start by reiterating MOIA's mission and place within the City. MOIA promotes the well-being of immigrant communities by recommending policies and programs that facilitate the successful integration of immigrant New Yorkers into the civic, economic, and cultural life of the City.

MOIA works to fulfill this mission by partnering with City agencies to support immigrants and ensure they can access the City's services and information they need, regardless of their immigration status and ability to speak and understand English. MOIA also ensures that immigrants, including emerging and vulnerable populations, have access to the legal services and information they need to protect their rights and to stabilize their immigration status. Last but not least, as a mayor's office, MOIA works to make sure that the City's voice is heard in state, national, and international discussions about immigrant rights and immigrant integration.

Starting last year, New York City has faced unprecedented health, economic and social crises, which have revealed and exacerbated underlying inequities and injustice. In order to address these issues, MOIA has primarily focused on three areas over the past fiscal year. First and foremost, MOIA has focused on combatting inequity and the addressing the impact of COVID-19 on New York City's immigrant community. Second, MOIA has focused on the institutionalization of our legal services programs. Finally, it has been particularly important this year for MOIA to empower the immigrant community through advocacy, outreach, and information-sharing.

This testimony will briefly outline the challenges of the past fiscal year, how we addressed some of those challenges and modified our programming, and end with a discussion of our plan for the next fiscal year.

Challenges of FY 2021

As I have previously testified, and as revealed in MOIA's own research, COVID-19 has had disproportional effect on our immigrant community.¹ This pandemic has devastated our immigrant community and forced all service providers to pivot away from in-person services. The federal response was slow, inequitable, and lacking adequate support for local governments. Even when the federal government finally provided a level of relief for local communities, it excluded undocumented immigrants and mixed-status families.

¹ NYC Mayor's Office of Immigrant Affairs, Mayor's Office for Economic Opportunity, and Department of Consumer and Worker Protection, *Fact Sheet: COVID-19 Health and Economic Impacts on Immigrant Communities 1*, available at <https://www1.nyc.gov/assets/immigrants/downloads/pdf/covid-immigrant-fact-sheet-20200731.pdf>.

At the same time, the Trump Administration worked in its final year to remake the immigration system in furtherance of its anti-immigrant and racist agenda. First, the Trump Administration continued to prevent many immigrants from stabilizing their status and obtaining citizenship by exclusively prioritizing white, wealthy, and highly educated immigrants while neglecting the duty to support those fleeing humanitarian crises. Second, Trump and his officials worked to undermine long-standing state and local government policies aimed at building trust with immigrants and looked to discourage immigrants from seeking the public benefits and services they are entitled to. Finally, the federal government seized on the pandemic to justify attacks on immigrants and abandoned its obligation to meet the basic needs of those in its detention.

FY 2021 Activities

Addressing the COVID-19 crisis

This year and its challenges forced MOIA to pivot our work to respond to a new reality, including by working to fill in the gaps left by an incomplete federal relief package and public benefits system. As the City looked to its own response to the COVID-19 crisis, it worked to ensure that all New Yorkers could access the help that they needed. As I testified in September, MOIA and the City were able to partner with the Open Society Foundation (OSF) to create the NYC COVID-19 Immigrant Emergency Relief Program and provide direct payments of between \$400 and \$1,000 to over 24,000 New Yorkers, which benefited them and the 52,000 people in their households. With an additional support of \$1.5 million from the Robin Hood Foundation, we were able to reach an additional 3,000 people--1,000 recipients, and more than 2,000 additional people in their households—for a total of 79,000 individuals and their families reached by this initiative.

MOIA also worked with the Mayor's Fund and HRA to secure \$1.5 million in private funding to help New Yorkers, regardless of immigration status, receive assistance to pay for the funeral expenses for loved ones. The Immigrant COVID-19 Burial Assistance Program helped address the exclusion of some immigrant families from the State and City's existing burial assistance program.

In response to the urgent need for housing relief among New Yorkers who were left out of federal relief, MOIA partnered with DSS and HPD on Project Parachute, which is a coalition of property owners, nonprofits, and city agencies committed to helping New Yorkers left out of the federal relief packages stay in their homes. In 2020, Project Parachute launched FASTEN (Funds and Services for Tenants Experiencing Need) which provides eviction prevention services and financial resources to New Yorkers regardless of immigration status. The FASTEN program raised \$10 million from various private funders and aims to raise \$15 million in total to help 3,000 people pay their rent.

Additionally, the City, with MOIA as a partner, has worked to ensure that programming and support provided for emergency food and health services in response to COVID, and the tremendous investments in those areas, are inclusive and accessible for all New Yorkers regardless of status.

MOIA has also shifted its own programming and assisted agency partners to ensure that vital City services remain accessible during the pandemic. That includes the language access work I testified more extensively to in November, including the extensive interagency partnerships we have strengthened over the past year. MOIA itself also expanded its language services work, with the administration investing almost \$1.2 million for our language services efforts over the last fiscal year. This investment proved fortuitous, with our in-house language services team more than doubling its translation work in the last calendar year, on top of seeing an almost six-fold increase in telephonic interpretation. DCAS language service contracts expenditures—which do not include DOE, H+H, NYPD, or small purchases—have doubled since the start of the de Blasio administration and in FY2020 total expenditures were \$8.3 million.

We have also adjusted our other programming to respond to the needs of the pandemic. The IDNYC program, which was funded for over \$18 million in FY2021, shut down permanent sites at the height of the pandemic. In response, the program extended the renewal period, launched a renewal by phone team, and reopened sites in September. Currently, the program has four public enrollment centers and by March, will host four additional pop-up locations. IDNYC also launched three passive sites in September, located at HRA locations to support SNAP and Cash Assistance clients. As another example, in the last year We Speak NYC programming was held online, and featured COVID-19 resources that could be accessed by immigrant learners. Nevertheless, with a budget of \$745,891, We Speak NYC also expanded the reach of its materials and curriculum through various new partnerships, including a partnership with the Division of Multilingual Learners (DML) at the Department of Education (DOE). Together, with the DOE's DML team, WSNYC was able to disseminate over 300,000 WSNYC resources to schools in multiple languages, along with digital information and materials to principals, educators, parent coordinators, and counselors. Given the increased reliability on digital tools, WSNYC also updated its website to add a chat bot tool to help answer questions people have on services and how to navigate the site. Finally, WSNYC is also focusing on recovery planning, with additional funding from of the NYC Office of Economic Opportunity for a deeper evaluation of our workforce initiative with New Women New Yorkers, with the hope of scaling the model.

MOIA has partnered with H+H to address ongoing and exacerbated health care disparities in the City through NYC Care, with outreach partners expected to be funded a total of about \$5.6 million since program launch. NYC Care completed its citywide roll out four months ahead of schedule by launching in Manhattan and Queens in August 2020. As of December 31, 2020, NYC Care CBO outreach partners reached more than 173,000 unique community members and the program enrolled more than 50,000 New Yorkers across all five boroughs.

Institutionalizing legal services and responding to new needs

In the legal services space, MOIA's attention was on ensuring that immigration legal services remained safe and accessible, while identifying emerging or shifting needs. ActionNYC services were conducted remotely beginning March 2020 and throughout the remainder of the year. However, work to fully institutionalizes ActionNYC into the fabric of City-funded services continued. In June 2020, MOIA and DSS/HRA selected 22 immigration legal service providers (including consortium partners) across the five-boroughs for awards totaling over \$16,000,000 to

provide ActionNYC services under 2.5-year contracts through June 30, 2023, with an optional three-year extension. The selected CBOs are uniquely positioned to meet community-specific needs due to their immigration legal expertise, strong local ties, and cultural and linguistic competence, and will serve immigrant communities that are historically under-represented and hard to reach.

MOIA also responded to additional needs exposed by the pandemic by expanding funding for some of our legal services programs. In 2020, as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic, we secured \$150,000 in additional funding for the Rapid Response Legal Collaborative (RRLC), which serves individuals who are at risk of immediate deportation and cannot be served by other forms of immigration legal services. This additional funding helped alleviate the high need for legal services for New Yorkers who continued to be detained by ICE despite the unprecedented risk to their health and safety during the pandemic. Similarly, in April 2020, MOIA was able to reallocate funds and replenish the DACA Renewal Fund (initially launched in January at just over \$77,000) with an additional \$150,000, which helped over 300 NYC Dreamers who needed financial assistance to renew their DACA. As we continued monitoring the situation, MOIA realized that immigrant New Yorkers were unable to file many other types of applications for immigration benefits due to the financial constraints of the pandemic. As a result, the original fund was expanded with an additional infusion of \$300,000 with the help of the NYC Office of Economic Opportunity. In total, the fee funds covered the filing fee costs of over 375 DACA renewals, over 160 applications for work authorization, dozens of applications for adjustment of status and naturalization, and approximately 200 applications for other forms of relief.

Through the advocacy of community members and advocates, and with the support of MOIA, the City also continued to fund the Low Wage Workers Initiative, which provides legal assistance on a range of employment-based legal matters for vulnerable immigration workers. In FY2021, the City invested \$2 million, and the Council allocated \$120,000 for outreach and education. By maintaining the previous funding level for legal services, LWWI continues to provide critically needed services to new workers and unemployed New Yorkers as the economic impact of the COVID-19 crisis continues. The LWWI will provide legal assistance on 1,500 to 2,000 cases in FY21. This includes legal advice and consultations as well as full representation in advocacy with employers and government agencies and in litigation.

Empowering the community and advocacy

One of MOIA's most important roles is serving immigrant communities on the ground. By sharing information about resources and services in the immigrant community and responding to issues or challenges raised, MOIA works to empower our communities to act on their rights and access the benefits that are available to them.

MOIA conducts Know-Your-Rights (KYRs) presentations across our immigrant community and partners, covering different topics and utilizing different models to deliver crucial information. In 2020, MOIA conducted over 700 forums and engaged thousands New Yorkers.

In addition to these KYRs events, MOIA's Outreach and Organizing team also actively communicated with immigrant New Yorkers across a variety of campaigns in 2020, as MOIA

has noted in various testimonies before this committee. This outreach is a crucial part of MOIA's overall work to provide timely, relevant information to immigrant New Yorkers about City services and programs.

MOIA's constituent helpline another direct point of contact for immigrant New Yorkers across the City, and remain responsive to the needs of the community, connecting individuals to critical Citywide available services and resources. In 2020, the Community Services Team saw its largest number of inquiries in the past few years, as immigrant New Yorkers reached out to MOIA for help during the pandemic. In 2020, the Community Services team received 14,227 inquiries: 9,106 phone calls and 5,121 emails.

Finally, and as I have spoken to many times, MOIA engaged in sustained advocacy on every level of government on behalf of immigrant New Yorkers. This included work with City agencies in supporting litigation, submitting comments on federal regulations, and otherwise advocating for immigrants and their families.

Looking forward to FY 2022

As MOIA begins to plan for the next fiscal year, a few things are clear.

First, the COVID-19 crisis and recovery is paramount. MOIA along with our sister agencies is deeply involved in vaccine outreach to the immigrant community. More work remains to be done, and we look forward to coordinating with our agency partners to ensure that every New Yorker can access the vaccine.

Second, the change in the federal administration does not mean MOIA's advocacy on the federal level is complete. In fact, the possibilities presented require us to ensure that the Trump Administration's noxious immigration policies are dismantled, and even more than that we advance real immigration reform. MOIA is working with partners across the nation to push for a vision for an immigration system addresses the long-standing inequities of the immigration system and we will push that vision forward in the coming year.

Finally, while we are hopeful that the new federal administration will work to provide much needed financial relief to the City and our communities, we need collective action on all levels of government to address this crisis. In order to build on the critical work of economic relief that we described and remains our greatest challenge, we must see real commitments at the State and Federal levels to protect immigrant communities with the basic needs for survival, while seeing the essential contributions of our communities in a fair and equitable recovery for all. I especially want to urge the state to pass the proposal to tax billionaires in order to fund relief for immigrant workers excluded from the federal relief bills.

Thank you again to Chair Dromm and Chair Menchaca for this important hearing. We look forward to working with the council to address these critical needs and to answering your questions.