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Testimony of Commissioner Manuel Castro

NYC Mayor's Office of Immigrant Affairs

Before a hearing of the New York City Council Committee on Immigration

Executive Budget Hearing - Immigration

Thank you to Chair Hanif and Chair Brannan, and members of the Committees on Immigration and Finance for holding this budget hearing. My name is Manuel Castro, and I am the Commissioner of the Mayor's Office of Immigrant Affairs (MOIA). I am joined by Anne Montesano, Executive Director of Interagency Initiatives and Language Access, Tom Tortorici, Director of Legal Initiatives, and Deputy Commissioner Colette Samman who will be available for Q&A.

I want to start by highlighting MOIA's goals, as outlined in the charter. The charter explicitly notes that immigrant New Yorkers make up a large percentage of the City's total population. Three million New Yorkers, or almost 40 percent, are immigrants, and 60 percent of New Yorkers are immigrants or children of immigrants. Because of this, the wellbeing of the city depends on the willingness of immigrant New Yorkers to engage with city government. Given this reality, MOIA is not and cannot be the only office that seeks to serve our immigrant communities. All City agencies must think about the needs of immigrants when engaging in their work.

The charter recognizes MOIA's unique expertise as a Mayor's Office that focuses on immigrant-related issues, and requires MOIA to advise and assist the mayor, council, and other agencies on the development and implementation of policies related to immigrant and limited English proficient New Yorkers; track state and federal policy and law; increase access to city programs, benefits, and services through outreach; and help advise on the legal service needs of immigrants. MOIA is also required to consult with the community and other stakeholders and coordinate an interagency task force on immigrant affairs. In addition, MOIA works with relevant city agencies to address the needs of immigrant crime victims and witnesses, including by working with agencies on the issuance of U visa certifications and T visa declarations. Finally, MOIA is also required to report annually on its programming and on the demographics and needs of immigrant New Yorkers.

I am proud to say that MOIA does much more than what the charter mandates, whether it is responding to the needs of immigrant New Yorkers during emergencies like devastating fires or assisting immigrants when they are victims of crimes, our leadership and staff go directly to the communities we serve.

That said, today's testimony will build on my remarks from our preliminary budget hearing and briefly outline MOIA's continued work to respond to the challenges that immigrant New Yorkers face.

MOIA's New Developments

I'd like to begin by highlighting new initiatives our office has worked on since our preliminary budget hearing in March.

Ukraine Response Initiative

From the onset of the Russian invasion of Ukraine, the mayor and I called on our federal partners to extend Temporary Protective Status for Ukrainians already living here and to streamline the process to help forcibly displaced Ukrainians come to the United States, particularly those with family in New York City. The Biden Administration heeded our call by announcing that the United States will welcome up to 100,000 Ukrainians and others fleeing Russia's aggression through the established resettlement pathways, as well as introducing the new *Uniting for Ukraine* process. As home to the largest Ukrainian population in the nation, it was only right that New York City prepared the resources needed to welcome arriving Ukrainians and meet their needs.

This past April, MOIA joined the Mayor, elected officials, and Ukrainian community leaders to announce more than \$2 million in funding to help currently residing and newly arrived Ukrainian New Yorkers take advantage of available forms of relief and resettlement pathways, including Temporary Protected Status, humanitarian parole, and more. The initiative will also include outreach, case management, interpretation and translation services, and direct assistance for displaced Ukrainian families resettling in New York City.

The funding is a prime example of MOIA's proactive response to a global crisis's impact on New Yorkers, as well as our city's continued and relentless commitment to the Ukrainian community and all immigrant communities. Currently, the city is going through an RFP process to determine which community-based organizations will deliver these services. We plan to give a more detailed announcement in the coming weeks.

We are also excited about renewed funding in FY23 for our Haitian Response Initiative. Last year, MOIA funded and convened a coalition of community-based service providers who were equipped to provide culturally and linguistically responsive services and information to new

Haitian arrivals. Given the need in the Haitian community, MOIA is grateful that this coalition will continue to support Haitian New Yorkers through FY23.

Launch of IDNYC Enrollment and Renewal Campaign

Last week, I had the honor of joining Department of Social Services Commissioner Jenkins in launching the new enrollment and renewal campaign for IDNYC at the Africa Center. We were very excited to announce IDNYC's new benefit partners including: Wollman Rink, Blink Fitness, The Africa Center, and Partner's Coffee, as well as over 30 returning art and cultural partners.

As council knows, IDNYC is managed by DSS in close collaboration with MOIA and is the largest and most successful municipal ID program in the country. In 2021, IDNYC reopened enrollment sites in all five boroughs, and responded to public demand by increasing capacity overall throughout its enrollment sites.

This year, we continue to do more outreach for IDNYC. Our recent announcement was followed by a Day of Action where MOIA and DSS led an interagency and multilingual citywide effort to encourage New Yorkers to enroll for an IDNYC or renew their current card.

Outreach staff, as well as volunteers from other agencies, were at 13 sites across the five boroughs from 8 AM to 7PM doing this work. I joined them early in the morning during a rainy Wednesday visiting Queens, Brooklyn, and the Bronx and connecting with New Yorkers about the program. This Day of Action was truly successful as we reached over hundreds of New Yorkers. While we have over one million New Yorkers enrolled, we know our work has just begun. In the coming year, rain or shine, MOIA and DSS will continue to do outreach to further boost and encourage IDNYC enrollments and renewals.

CUNY Citizenship Now! Naturalization Event

I'd also like to highlight MOIA's participation in the CUNY Citizenship Now! Event and its ongoing investment into immigration legal services.

Recently I was able to see the impact of the City's investment in naturalization support at John Jay College, where MOIA sponsored and tabled at a CUNY Citizenship Now! application assistance event. This event helped over 200 green card holders to ascertain their eligibility for U.S. citizenship. Many of them also qualified for fee waivers that will allow them to naturalize without charge.

Immigration legal services are a tool of empowerment for immigrant New Yorkers and their families, and MOIA demonstrates its commitment here not just by word, but through deed.

New York City leads the nation by dedicating more funding to immigration legal services than any other municipality. We do this in partnership with legal service providers, community-based organizations, and City agencies, through initiatives including ActionNYC, Immigrant Opportunity Initiative and the Rapid Response Legal Collaborative.

We are grateful for community-based and citywide legal service partners who carry out this difficult work in service of immigrant New Yorkers every day. To date, we invested tens of millions of dollars into immigration legal services. MOIA oversees more than \$10 million in funding for legal services programming, over \$8 million of which is baselined funding. ActionNYC makes up the lion's share of that funding, with over \$8.7 million allocated to that program. The council can find more details on ActionNYC in our annual report.

Language Access

The Adams Administration is committed to language access and justice. Ensuring language access is a large task: about 22 percent of New Yorkers have Limited English Proficiency (LEP), and about half of immigrant New Yorkers have LEP. In addition, over 200 languages are spoken in the city. We will continue to build up the City's infrastructure to support the delivery of high-quality language services; advise and provide technical assistance to our sister agencies to improve the way city government communicates with non-English speaking New Yorkers; and serve as a lab to pilot and further educate our partners on best language access practices. We look forward to sharing more details about this work through a forthcoming press announcement.

FY 22 Activities

Now, I'd like to shift gears to MOIA's activities over the past couple of months and fiscal year. I'd like to reemphasize that I am not covering all of MOIA's work in this testimony. The annual report includes descriptions of the ways MOIA designs, proposes, implements, and manages a portfolio of programs that directly serve immigrants and are intentionally responsive to their needs.

The following overview touches on just a few relevant pieces of our work, which focuses on two main areas: responding to the unique needs of our immigrant communities and closing the access gap for immigrant New Yorkers.

Responding to COVID-19

As the City continues to move forward in recovering from the pandemic, it is critical that this recovery process is equitable, and we do not leave our vulnerable communities behind. As stated in previous testimonies, immigrants have been a key part of the city's recovery story, with many of them serving on the frontlines as essential workers. But the COVID-19 crisis has had a disproportionate effect on these very communities.

To address the disparate impact of the pandemic on immigrant New Yorkers, MOIA partnered with private funders, City agencies, and community-based organizations to implement emergency relief programs. MOIA also connected immigrants in need to community-based organizations who assisted individuals in applying for new state programs. More details of our work can be found in our 2021 report.

We know that the way forward and out of the pandemic is for everyone to get vaccinated and boosted. Over the past year, MOIA partnered with the Vaccine Command Center and NYC Health + Hospitals to secure \$2 million in funding for a Vaccine Outreach program targeting undocumented New Yorkers. We recently hit a milestone of reaching over 50,000 immigrant New Yorkers through this effort.

More details of our COVID-19 response work can be found in our annual report.

Empowerment and Advocacy

MOIA is mandated to conduct outreach to immigrant New Yorkers to facilitate access to City resources and services. This work is also included in my job description.

When I started at MOIA, I made it a goal to visit 222 community-based organizations in 2022. My visits have given me an opportunity to hear directly from community members as to what the needs of immigrant communities are, as well as bring along other city officials to connect with these diverse communities and organizations, such as my Deputy Mayor Williams-Isom.

But it's important to know that our outreach and advocacy work is done frequently.

Earlier this month, MOIA along with DSS, DOHMH, HPD, H+H, and NYCHA, submitted a comment in support of the Biden Administration's proposed Public Charge rule, reiterating our position that public benefits should NOT be considered in the public charge test.

MOIA's Outreach team and Community services team continues to be on the ground, conducting Know Your Rights presentations, offering a real time support system through in-person, public-facing events, and the AskMOIA Hotline.

Again, my testimony does not cover all of MOIA's work. I encourage council to read through our 2021 report to learn more about our advocacy and outreach work.

Addressing Emerging Needs

A big part of MOIA's work is addressing the emerging needs of New York City's immigrant communities. Over the past fiscal year we've learned that the COVID-19 pandemic was not the only emergency that faced immigrant New Yorkers.

I previously described our work supporting New York City's Ukrainian and Haitian community and our annual report highlights MOIA's work in supporting immigrant communities through emergencies like Hurricane Ida.

Conclusion

Finally, in the past couple of months, I have had the privilege of meeting with diverse immigrant communities across New York City's five boroughs. I have visited Life of Hope, Korean American Family Service Center, and La Colmena to name a few, and joined NYLAG and Razom in hosting a legal clinic to help Ukrainian New Yorkers get TPS information. Most recently, I partnered with the Mexican consulate and local community leaders in raising the Mexican Flag for Cinco de Mayo at the historic Bowling Green Park to honor the contributions of Mexican immigrants to our city.

With every interaction, conversation, and event I've attended, it is clear that New York City is an immigrant city and we must do all we can to support our communities thrive in our city and in particular the amazing community groups already working with our neighbors to meet their most critical needs.

With that said, thank you again for calling this hearing. I look forward to working with the Council on addressing urgent needs as the budget process continues. I am happy to answer any questions you have.