



May 10, 2023

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 Chairs Brannan and Hanif and the Committees on Finance and Immigration 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 Jasniya Sanchez, Deputy Chief of Staff, and Tom Tortorici, Executive Director of Legal and Support Initiatives, who will be available for Q&A.

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 comprehend English. MOIA also ensures that immigrants, including emerging and vulnerable populations, have access to the legal and social services and information they need to protect their rights and to stabilize their immigration status. MOIA works to make sure that the City's voice is heard in state, national, and international discussions about immigrant rights and immigrant integration. And last but not least, we uplift and celebrate the cultures, languages, and contributions of all the immigrants who have built this great city and continue to make it thrive.

MOIA's unique expertise as a Mayor's Office focuses on immigrant related issues, and by Charter requires MOIA to advise and assist the mayor, the 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's work goes far beyond what the charter mandates, and I am excited to speak about some of the agency's achievements today. This testimony will briefly outline the challenges that immigrant New Yorkers face and highlight some of MOIA's strategies to address these challenges in the past fiscal year. As New York City continues to be

a beacon for immigrants from around the world, the role of MOIA is more important than ever. MOIA will continue to serve as a model for other cities seeking to welcome immigrants and will lead the world to uphold our values as a nation of immigrants.

FY 2022 Activities

During our preliminary budget hearing we highlighted some of the work our office has been leading. At the core are three key principles: inclusion, empowerment, and innovation. I am now going to discuss our emerging areas of focus.

Language Justice and English-Language Learning

The Adams Administration is committed to language justice. This 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. This linguistic landscape presents complex challenges for all of City government. While the City has made progress in ensuring that all New Yorkers can connect with the services and programming they need, regardless of what language they speak, there is much left to do.

In 2022, MOIA worked to further embed language access into city operations and bolster the City's language access infrastructure. Internal efforts included educating city staff about language access, strengthening MOIA's internal capacity to support agencies in advancing language access and delivering multilingual communications. MOIA also worked with agency partners to improve language services procurement and advised on language access legislation.

The Language Service Team at MOIA helped provide translation and interpretation as part of the response to localized emergencies that devastated immigrant communities. In 2022, MOIA and other agencies delivered language services for community members recovering from the Bronx and Sunset Fire. Services were delivered in Spanish, French, Mandingo, Soninke, Pulaar, Wolof, Fulani, Bambara, Mandarin, and Cantonese. As the year unfolded, the agency provided additional support for efforts to assist refugees and asylum seekers arriving in New York in Ukrainian, Russian, Spanish, and Haitian Creole.

Recent Arrivals

NYC continues to lead the nation in its response to this unprecedented humanitarian emergency, with a coordinated, multi-agency effort that humanely meets the immediate, medium- and long-term needs of those who have arrived amidst this immigration crisis. The City has shown compassion and care to over 60,800 asylum seekers since spring of last year and is currently caring for over 37,500 people. MOIA has collaborated with our sister agencies, including the Department of Homeless and Department of Social Service (DHS/DSS), Health and Hospitals, NYC Emergency Management (NYCEM), and most recently NYC Housing Preservation and Development, as they operate the City's newest humanitarian-relief center (HERRC). The entire City is pitching in resources and staff to support these new arrivals. As of March 31, 2023, New York City alone has incurred more than \$817 million in costs related to housing and caring for the asylum seeker population. Over Fiscal Year 2023, the city anticipates spending \$1.4 billion, and \$2.9 billion in Fiscal Year 2024. This means an estimated total of \$4.3 billion will be spent by June 30, 2024.

This administration's efforts to date, to provide shelter and numerous other support services, as we have shared in previous hearings, to approximately over 60,800 asylum seekers who have arrived since last spring have been extraordinary. We continue to receive approximately 200

asylum seekers each day, becoming a humanitarian emergency that has put an enormous strain on the shelter system. Due to the urgent demand for beds for those arriving daily, the City has opened over 125 new emergency shelters.

Navigation Center and Satellite Locations

The City's first Asylum Seeker Resource Navigation Center — a seven-agency effort operated by Catholic Charities of New York through a city contract, opened on September 15, 2022. The Navigation Center serves as a central place where newly arrived asylum seekers receive free and confidential help to access a variety of important services and resources, including health care, education, and immigration legal services, that will help them integrate and thrive in New York City. These services are also being delivered at shelters across our city. The center continues to support individuals and families who have arrived in New York City on or after January 1, 2022.

The opening of the Navigation Center was shortly followed by the opening of 12 satellite locations throughout the boroughs in late December.

As of May 8, 2023, the Navigation Center has served 15,209 individuals across 6,482 households. An additional 10,662 individuals have been served at the satellite sites. In less than one year, more than 25,000 individuals have been served by this new and innovative system.

Legal

Long before buses started arriving at the Port Authority Bus Terminal, New York City began investing tens of millions of dollars annually into immigration legal services, recognizing that immigration legal services are a tool of empowerment for immigrant New Yorkers and their families. Legal services can help immigrant New Yorkers stabilize their immigration status and access jobs, health insurance, and education, ultimately benefiting New York City as a whole. MOIA's legal services programs exist in partnership with legal service providers and community-based orgs. Providers conducted over 11,000 legal screenings in 2022, a 30 percent increase from 2020, and opened over 6,100 new cases, an increase of 21 percent. The City's immigration legal information hotline fielded more than 40,000 calls, which is the highest call volume in the hotline's history.

In response to the surge of recent arrivals, the City has provided more than 4,000 newly arrived asylum seekers with legal orientations, focusing on federal immigration processes and requirements, the 1-year asylum filing deadline, and warning against immigration legal fraud. With partners, the City has piloted multiple screening and asylum application assistance events. The Adams administration has also allocated \$5 million in new immigration legal funding for the Asylum Seeker Legal Assistance Network (ASLAN) across FY23 and FY24. This funding will expand access to immigration legal information, orientation, individual consultations, brief advice, pro-se application assistance, and full representation for priority populations for asylum seekers. We are currently finalizing the ASLAN program model, for public release soon.

Empowerment and Advocacy

Finally, addressing the issues that immigrant New Yorkers face requires engagement with all levels of government. I want to specially highlight the work we do with Cities for Action, a coalition of over 170 U.S. cities and local governments that collectively advocate for pro-immigrant federal policies and exchange best practices on local policies and programs. In 2022, the coalition identified three overarching strategic priorities to help guide C4A's federal

advocacy. The strategic priorities were to support the immigrant workforce, which is instrumental in local communities' economic recovery, partner with local leaders to support the needs of asylum-seekers, refugees, undocumented immigrants and other vulnerable populations, and advocate for Immigration Enforcement Reform. With these priorities in mind, C4A released several statements and multi-city advocacy letters to encourage immigrant inclusive federal policies and programs. The letters were also instrumental in calling out policies that fall short or actively cause harm to immigrant communities.

In the absence of a coordinated federal response to support asylum seekers and receiving communities, C4A cities and counties across the country relied on each other for support. Since August 2022, C4A calls have served as a space for localities to brainstorm and troubleshoot issues they were facing in resettling newly arrived communities. C4A has served as a crucial vehicle for local governments to share welcoming strategies, information, and resources with each other. Many of the C4A cities were communities that received buses from Texas, Arizona, and Florida. C4A mayors were able to work together to push back against the anti-immigrant narrative being fueled by some Southern governors. C4A has issued various statements affirming New York City's commitment to welcoming values and calling on the federal government to operationalize an intentional and transparent system for coordination and communication about population flows to our states and localities; to ensure adequate federal funding sources – beyond FEMA's Emergency Food and Shelter Program – for receiving communities to address immediate housing and health-related needs of newly arriving people; and to expedite Employment Authorization Document processing to allow newly arrived people to become self-sufficient.

Conclusion

During unprecedented times, MOIA has done groundbreaking work for immigrant communities. We have become a national leading office during times of crisis, while continuing to care for and advocate for immigrant communities with empathy and compassion. Thank you to the Chairs and to the Committees for this chance to testify. I look forward to answering any questions you have.