



**Testimony**

of

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before the

**New York City Council Committee on Immigration**

on

**Oversight: How Does NYC Support Immigrant Parents of Children Ages 0-5 years?**

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Good afternoon Chair Menchaca and members of the Committee. I am Dr. Abigail Velikov, Senior Director of the Early Childhood Health and Development Unit of the Division of Family and Child Health at the New York City Department of Health and Mental Hygiene. On behalf of Commissioner Bassett and Deputy Commissioner George Askew, I want to thank you for the opportunity to testify on the many ways the Department supports expectant parents and families with children from birth to five years old.

Before I talk about the Department's programming, it is important to note that the Department serves **ALL** New Yorkers regardless of immigration or documentation status. We do not request any information concerning immigration status as a condition for participating in our programming, and our services are offered to families who meet the income and service eligibility requirements without any consideration of immigration status.

The Department aims to protect and promote the health of all New Yorkers, regardless of origin, education and primary language. Therefore, in a city where 40% of our population is foreign-born and 24% has limited English proficiency (LEP), providing language services representing the diversity of New Yorkers is vital to the Agency's mission and goals. Our comprehensive language access policy mandates that emergency communications, legal notices, and health bulletins are translated into any languages spoken by at least one percent of the NYC LEP population. All other communications are translated into any languages spoken by at least five percent of the eligible population, as determined by program or census data, and may be translated into additional languages if necessary. We also offer professional interpretation, including telephonic interpretation, in-person interpretation and American Sign Language interpretation. This policy ensures wide access to information and allows DOHMH to eliminate language barriers to its services.

The first five years of life are foundational for assuring lifelong physical, cognitive, economic and social emotional health and development. The impact of both the physical environment (home, early care and education settings, and neighborhoods) and socio-emotional environment (relationships that young children share with their primary caretakers and other adults in their lives) are critical to future health and wellbeing. In a city of numerous health and development disparities, our best hope of achieving overall health and development equity rests in early investments and supports – before a woman even begins to consider becoming pregnant.

One of the cornerstones of a truly comprehensive Public Health Department is the robust support and promotion of the health and development of young children. We know that investments made in the earliest years of life reap benefits beyond early health and development to life success and fiscal savings for all. The Department is committed to promotion of the health and development of Our Littlest New Yorkers. This commitment is evident, for example, in the Division of Family and Child Health, whose vision is that every child, woman and family in New York City recognizes their power and is given the opportunity to reach their full health and development potential.

The majority of programming for families of Our Littlest New Yorkers is offered through this Division, and other Divisions with relevant programming, including the Division of Mental Hygiene, Division of Environmental Health, and the Center for Health Equity, work closely with this Division to coordinate service delivery across the Department.

The Department offers a number of resources and avenues of support for parents and families, expectant parents and those who may become parents. The “Here for You” campaign, launched in 2017 on social media, television, subways and buses, encouraged parents and caregivers to call 311 or visit the Department’s web site to learn about the range of available City resources and services. Calls to 311 are routed to the Early Childhood Health and Development Unit who provides information and support specific to parents’ and caregivers’ needs. The campaign also promoted the Department’s programs for families with young children, including neighborhood-based parent groups, home visiting programs and the Early Intervention Program. Our neighborhood-based parent groups, called Parents Connect, were launched in 2017 in response to parent focus groups that indicated a desire for parents and caregivers to connect with one another and learn about early childhood health and development, including Department resources.

The Nurse-Family Partnership (NFP) program provides evidence-based support for first-time mothers through voluntary home visits by specially trained nurses to help improve pregnancy outcomes, child health and development and to provide Our Littlest New Yorkers with the best possible start in life. NFP is available to first-time mothers who meet income requirements, regardless of age or immigration status, and services are provided to families throughout the five boroughs. NFP also works with mothers in the foster care system, homeless shelters, and those involved in juvenile justice and are either incarcerated or recently released from Riker’s Island. The program serves over 2,500 unique clients annually. Thanks to funding from the City Council, we have been able to significantly expand the NFP and increase capacity by over 30 percent and reach additional families.

The Newborn Home Visiting Program (NHVP), another Health Department home visiting program, offers voluntary home visits to families in the South Bronx, East and Central Harlem, and North and Central Brooklyn with an infant birth to 2 months of age to facilitate the adjustment to parenthood; assure a safe living environment for families; provide maternal and infant health education on topics including child development and safe sleep; offer breastfeeding support; and identify health and social issues that require referral to community-based services. In 2015, the NHVP expanded its reach to provide visits to all families with an infant 0-2 months of age who reside in a Department of Homeless Services (DHS) shelter. This collaboration has enable more comprehensive and coordinated education and support to meet the needs of families in shelter, and we have been able to reach over 1,500 families residing in shelters since then. The program recruits participants at hospitals and receives a daily client listing of eligible families from DHS to serve families residing in homeless shelters.

The Early Intervention (EI) Program provides a broad array of services to children birth to three years old with or at risk of developmental delays or disabilities, and assists and empowers families to meet their children’s needs. Infants or toddlers suspected of having a developmental delay or disability can be referred to the EI program by a wide range of

individuals, including family members, doctors, social service workers, child care workers and staff at community organizations. EI services are provided to families citywide, regardless of immigration status, and include speech therapy, special instruction and physical and occupational therapy. The program serves over 30,000 children each year.

The Cribs for Kids program provides free cribs to families in need of a safe sleep space for their children. Outreach workers provide cribs to new parents in parts of the South Bronx, East and Central Harlem, and North and Central Brooklyn during home visits. Families in the Newborn Home Visiting Program and Nurse-Family Partnership also receive cribs and safe-sleep education.

The Healthy Start Brooklyn program, out of the Center for Health Equity's Brooklyn Health Action Center, provides a variety of support programs for new parents who live in the neighborhoods of Brownsville, East New York, Bedford Stuyvesant and Bushwick, including childbirth and parenting education, fitness classes, and resources on breastfeeding, perinatal depression, developmental delays and stress relief; group prenatal care through CenteringPregnancy; the In the Circle fathers' program; Healthy Families home visiting and doula services.

The Department has several initiatives to encourage breastfeeding and address the racial and ethnic disparities in breastfeeding rates. We offer breastfeeding education and pumps to new mothers through our home visiting programs; develop and distribute educational materials and information to providers and consumers about breastfeeding; work with community-based organizations to build local capacity to support breastfeeding; and offer trainings to local health care providers, hospital staff and field workers, including Certified Lactation Counselor, Train the Trainer, and Community Breastfeeding Educator courses. Last year, we also installed a lactation pod, a self-contained mobile unit that offers a comfortable and private space for breastfeeding or pumping, in each borough, including public locations such as the Bronx Zoo, the Brooklyn Children's Museum and the Staten Island Children's Museum.

As part of Latch On NYC, we work with hospitals to support mothers who choose to breastfeed, reduce formula supplementation to healthy breastfed infants during the hospital stay and discontinue distribution of promotional or free infant formula that can interfere with a mother's choice to breastfeed. The New York City Breastfeeding Hospital Collaborative works to increase the number of maternity facilities that achieve the World Health Organization and UNICEF "Baby-Friendly" designation, a special recognition for hospitals and birthing centers that offer an optimal level of care for infant care and feeding and mother/baby bonding. There are currently 16 Baby-Friendly designated maternity hospitals and birthing centers in New York City. The Brooklyn Breastfeeding Empowerment Zone (BFEZ) is a place-based initiative in North and Central Brooklyn run by our Center for Health Equity's Brooklyn Health Action Center. BFEZ trains and recognizes the power of community members to support breastfeeding parents and families, including male partners and family members, faith-based leaders, small businesses and other community members to ensure that every mother and baby has the opportunity to experience the health benefits of breastfeeding. Additionally, we engage local groups, faith-based organizations, employers and employees to adopt practices that protect,

promote, and support breastfeeding through our Breastfeeding-Friendly Spaces initiative and Know Your Rights workshops.

The Department works collaboratively with other City Agencies, including the Department of Education and the Administration for Children's Services, to coordinate service delivery for families and children. For example, DOE sent informational packets on NYC Well, the City's connection to free, confidential crisis counseling, mental health and substance misuse support, information, and referral, and available health resources home with students in effort to reach more families. We also participate on cross-agency workgroups, including the Children's Cabinet.

Thank you again for the opportunity to testify, and we look forward to continue working with the Council to connect New York City families to the comprehensive range of Department programming and services. I am happy to answer any questions you may have.