

**Testimony Of Commissioner Steven Banks, New York City Human Resources
Administration**

Before the New York City Council's Immigration Committee

HRA's Fiscal Year 2017 Preliminary Budget

March 28, 2016

Good afternoon Speaker Mark-Viverito and Chairman Menchaca. Thank you for inviting me to appear before you today to discuss the programs and services for immigrant communities across New York City at the New York City Human Resources Administration. My name is Steven Banks and I am the Commissioner of the Human Resources Administration.

HRA is the nation's largest social services agency assisting over three million New Yorkers annually through the administration of more than 12 major public assistance programs. HRA also administers one of this Administration's cornerstone programs: IDNYC, the country's most successful municipal identification program. And as of June 2015, HRA houses the Office of Civil Justice that was established by a local law enacted by the Council.

With an annual budget of \$9.9 billion and a staff of 14,301, HRA provides assistance and services to three million low-income children and adults. This includes:

- Economic support and social services for families and individuals through the administration of major benefit programs (Cash Assistance, Supplemental Nutritional Assistance Program benefits (food stamps), Medicaid, and Child Support Services);
- Homelessness prevention assistance, educational, vocational and employment services, assistance for persons with disabilities, services for immigrants, civil legal aid, and disaster relief;
- And for the most vulnerable New Yorkers: HIV/AIDS Services, Adult Protective Services, Home Care and programs for survivors of domestic violence.

It is important to note that in providing these core services we address the needs of thousands of low-income immigrant New Yorkers each year. To enhance our client services, in 2014, HRA established the Office of Advocacy and Access (OCAA) to make sure that all New Yorkers have equal access to benefits and services. OCAA includes our Office of Refugee and Immigrant Affairs (ORIA) and two new offices: the Office of LGBTQI Affairs, and the Office of ADA Affairs.

ORIA is unit exclusively dedicated to clients with limited English Proficiency (LEP), refugees, and immigrants.

The goals of HRA's Language and Immigrant Access work are as follows:

- Provide guidance and expertise to HRA program areas to ensure access to services for immigrant and LEP New Yorkers;
- Ensure that HRA's programs are in compliance with federal, state and local immigrant and language access laws;
- Work with and support HRA programs to develop and promote policies and tools to help staff provide client services to immigrant and LEP New Yorkers; and
- Strengthen relationships with community groups to respond to inquiries and gather feedback on HRA services/programs.

Projects underway at ORIA include:

- Launching a citizenship pilot in partnership with MOIA and private funders to conduct targeted outreach to HRA clients to link them to free citizenship assistance;
- Working with advocates to identify and address barriers that immigrant clients face when accessing HRA's services;
- Enhancing staff expertise around immigrant eligibility for public benefits, through new and improved trainings, hands-on seminars with staff across HRA's programs, and a 2016 Immigrant Heritage Week panel on U and T visa holders;
- Rolling out new LEP training for frontline staff and providing additional tools for site-based language liaisons to better equip them to serve LEP clients;
- Managing and expanding the Agency's interpretation, translation and bilingual testing contracts, and identifying and addressing barriers that clients and staff face in accessing language services;
- Managing and closely monitoring the Agency's sign language contract to ensure quality service;
- Collecting and analyzing program data pertaining to immigrant and LEP clients and language service provision to inform program design and policies and improve data collection; and
- Providing technical assistance to program areas to help develop new and improve existing policies, procedures, and trainings on immigrant eligibility and language access, and assisting staff in making immediate eligibility determinations and providing language services.

Agency-wide, we've accomplished the following:

- Introduced additional self-service procedures, including self-service check-in, self-service scanning and mobile document uploading (which allows clients to submit eligibility documents via a smart-phone). These technologies allow multilingual access and together these processes effectively reduce client wait times in the center and benefits determination.

- Engineered a new SNAP on-demand interview process. Rather than waiting to be called for an eligibility interview, clients will be able to call the Agency at a time that is convenient for them. The phone system associated with the new interview line can be used in nine languages (English, Arabic, Bengali, Cantonese, Haitian Creole, Korean, Mandarin, Russian and Spanish). The line gives additional instructions on how to request an interpreter in Polish, Albanian, French, Urdu, Hindi, Vietnamese and Greek.
- Conducted a successful SNAP outreach campaign to promote the website FoodHelp.NYC. The campaign included Facebook and Twitter posts, advertising in 12 community newspapers (7 in languages other than English); advertisements on buses; bus shelters; and train stations and significant outreach through other City agencies and programs. The FoodHelp.NYC site is translated into the six Local Law languages, including subtitles on embedded videos. The goal of the campaign was to counter some of the barriers to SNAP participation, including a low level of English proficiency.
- Redesigned the Agency's web page (www.nyc.gov/hra) to be more accessible and user-friendly. The new site includes information on immigrant eligibility for various programs and contains separate non-English pages with links to program information, applications and documents in all of the Local Law languages (Arabic, Chinese, Haitian Creole, Korean, Russian and Spanish).

NYCitizenship

Following the April launch of NYCitizenship, which is a collaboration between HRA and MOIA, HRA will be targeting outreach to immigrant clients with disabilities who are potentially eligible to become U.S. Citizens and thereafter receive federal disability benefits. These clients will be provided with free, experienced immigration attorneys who will assist them in filing their applications at our WeCare vendor sites. Clients will also be provided with free financial empowerment services. For those clients who become naturalized, staff will assist them in applying for additional benefits they would then be eligible to receive.

Immigrant Eligibility Seminars

ORIA has launched Immigrant Eligibility Seminars with HRA staff working in the Medicaid area, the Family Independence Administration (FIA), and the HIV/AIDS Services Administration (HASA).

In these forums, ORIA is able discuss trends and patterns from the data we gather as well as concerns that advocates convey to us. The goal of these seminars is to increase expertise among a cadre of immigrant eligibility specialists across HRA's programs.

Immigrant Access Workgroups

HRA launched two advocate workgroups focusing on immigrant eligibility. These advocate workgroups meet with our Family Independence Administration and Medicaid programs

bimonthly and provide a forum for advocates to discuss matters regarding how immigrant eligibility cases are processed and suggest solutions to ensure that HRA is meeting the needs of immigrant clients. A language access workgroup will be starting later this year.

In February 2016, there was a total of 246,720 non-citizen recipients of SNAP/food stamps, accounting for 14.7% of the SNAP caseload; 47,609 CA recipients were non-citizens, accounting for 12.88% of the CA caseload, and 496,270 Medicaid recipients were non-citizens, accounting for 22.38% of the MA caseload.

Approximately 795,613 or 22% of HRA's clients are non-citizens and approximately 532,632 or roughly 34% of HRA's caseheads are limited English proficient. This reflects only individuals receiving cash assistance, SNAP, Medicaid and/or HASA. In 2015, our clients spoke a total of 91 languages. Our largest group of clients speaks Spanish. After that, it's Mandarin, Russian, Cantonese, "Chinese-other" and Bengali.

This diversity of languages spoken among our clients is mirrored in our workforce. 20% of HRA employees report being bilingual or multilingual and these staff are often the first line in our efforts at outreach to and connecting with immigrant communities.

I also want to update you on two of the special programs at HRA that provide key services to immigrants: IDNYC and the legal services program operated by our Office of Civil Justice.

IDNYC

As Commissioner Agarwal described, in FY14, in partnership with the Council, the Administration created and implemented the largest municipal identification program in the country. IDNYC is directly operated by HRA through a joint initiative with the Mayor's Office of Immigrant Affairs and the Mayor's Office of Operations.

In its first year of operation, we saw unprecedented success: more than 800,000 New Yorkers obtained their IDNYC and we now operate in 23 locations and five pop-up sites.

A new need consisting of \$7.6 million and 80 positions has been added to the HRA budget in FY17 to support the continued operation of the IDNYC program. The new need brings the baseline budget to \$18.7 million and 241 positions in FY17.

HRA continues to be proud to serve as the "back office" for IDNYC. The infrastructure for this program, including the front-facing enrollment staff as well as the back-end review staff and all equipment, sits within HRA; nearly every part of our agency has contributed to the effort to make IDNYC the most successful municipal identification program in the country. In addition to our External Affairs division in which IDNYC senior and front-line staff are housed, our General Support Services group has provided construction, moving and labor support; our Management and Information Systems department has handled the wiring, cabling and equipment installation and setup at all IDNYC enrollment centers citywide and the offices for the IDNYC leadership team and program integrity staff; our Office of Staff Resources has facilitated the interviewing,

hiring and training of all IDNYC program employees; our Office of Legal Affairs has handled procurements and provided support and guidance regarding legal issues; and staff from across our program areas participated as volunteers assisting with site management at enrollment sites across the City.

Legal Services Program – Office of Civil Justice

Over the past two years, this Administration has made an extraordinary investment in legal services to level the playing field for low-income New Yorkers facing potentially life-changing legal challenges. The de Blasio Administration's support for and funding of civil legal services make New York City a national leader in providing such services for low-income families and individuals. In addition to consolidating legal services programs at HRA, starting in Fiscal Year 2014 the Administration has dramatically expanded these important services, providing access to quality representation that was previously unavailable to thousands of low-income New Yorkers facing eviction, harassment by unscrupulous landlords, immigration legal issues, and a range of other civil legal needs. The provision of civil legal assistance is a part of HRA's overall effort to address poverty, fighting income inequality, and preventing homelessness.

To advance these efforts, in 2015 Mayor de Blasio, in partnership with the Council, signed the legislation to create the Office of Civil Justice. Established by Local Law 61, the Office of Civil Justice oversees the provision of free or low-cost legal services to low-income New Yorkers and ensures these programs are working effectively, by regularly evaluating and reporting on the effectiveness and efficiency of our programs and on the need for legal assistance among vulnerable New Yorkers.

In Fiscal Years 2015 and 2016, the Administration dramatically increased funding for civil legal services for low-income New Yorkers. Specifically, the January 2017 Plan includes baseline funding as follows:

- \$36 million for anti-harassment legal services and \$4.3 million for related tenant support outreach;
- \$25.5 million for anti-eviction legal services comprised of \$13.5 million in funding for the Homelessness Prevention Law Project and an additional \$12 million for expanded legal services targeting neighborhoods from which the highest numbers of clients are entering the shelter system;
- \$5.6 million for Executive Action legal assistance programs for immigrant New Yorkers, including \$3.6 million for the ActionNYC program operated in partnership with MOIA and CUNY;
- \$5.3 million for immigration legal assistance (for which the IOI RFP process will be concluding shortly); \$3.5 million for legal assistance for adults and children with disabilities to secure federal disability benefits; and
- \$2.1 million for civil legal services for seniors.

In addition to the Administration's commitment to supporting civil legal services, I want to acknowledge the extraordinary commitment of City Council Speaker Melissa Mark-Viverito and the entire City Council to expanding access to justice by funding legal services. In FY2016, HRA is overseeing \$19.3 million in discretionary funding added by the City Council during the Adopted Budget process for legal services for the working poor, family reunification immigration defense, the unaccompanied minors immigration initiative, assistance for domestic violence survivors and veterans, citywide legal services, and anti-eviction and SRO legal services. Together with the Council, this year the City has committed over \$69 million for civil legal services for low-income New Yorkers. No other city allocates even a small fraction of what New York City is committing to provide access to civil justice.

A key focus of our civil legal services program is legal help for immigrants. Through our immigrant legal assistance programs, we are making available qualified and culturally competent attorneys to help immigrant New Yorkers navigate the immigration legal system, achieve status, protect the rights of immigrant workers, and provide counsel and support for immigrant survivors of trafficking and domestic violence.

Through Community Service Block Grants funded at approximately \$2.1 million, citywide and community-based legal services providers including Ansoh Center for Refugees, BronxWorks, CAMBA, Catholic Charities Community Services, The Door, Gay Men's Health Crisis, HANAC, the Legal Aid Society, Make the Road New York, New York Asian Women's Center, New York Legal Assistance Group, Northern Manhattan Improvement Corporation, Sanctuary For Families, and Shorefront Jewish Community Council provide a range of services for immigrant New Yorkers, such as: legal assistance to help immigrant adults and youth attain citizenship and lawful immigration status; legal and social services for immigrant survivors of domestic violence and human trafficking; and services designed to provide information, education, advocacy and legal services to protect low-wage immigrants from exploitation and violations of their employment rights.

Additionally, HRA is overseeing several immigration legal services programs funded by the Council, including:

- The Unaccompanied Minors Initiative (\$1.7M), which provides unaccompanied immigrant and refugee children in New York City with counsel, the opportunity to apply for relief from removal, and the opportunity to receive much-needed social, medical and mental health services;
- The New York Immigrant Family Unity Project (\$4.9m), providing representation for immigrant New Yorkers facing deportation to ensure that immigrants' rights are protected in court and to keep families together; and
- The Immigrant Opportunity Initiative (\$3.2m), which provides immigrants with legal assistance and other services – as you know, the Administration is including \$3.2 million in baseline funding for this important initiative, and we expect to announce the RFP awards in the coming weeks.

Finally, I would like to provide a brief update on the implementation of HRA's Employment Plan. As the plan is phased in and HRA no longer takes a one-size-fits-all approach to employment, we will be matching clients with opportunities which suit their skills and give them the best chance for long-term career pathway success. Accordingly, HRA has issued Requests for Proposals (RFPs) for three new employment programs for HRA Cash Assistance clients, including those who have limited English proficiency and/or are immigrants:

- CareerCompass will provide comprehensive employability assessment and service coordination services for adult clients (ages 25 and older).
- CareerAdvance will provide sector- and population-specific employment services to foster long-term employment outcomes. Accordingly, one of the CareerAdvance contracts will provide training and employment services specifically to clients who are Limited English Proficient (LEP) and immigrants.
- YouthPathways will provide comprehensive assessment, training/education, and employment services steeped in youth development principles to young clients (ages 18-24).

In addition to these programs, the employment contractors will be able to leverage an array of HRA employment programs for clients served through the new contracts resulting from the RFPs.

Within our new ESL employment services, we will work with approximately 4,710 LEP clients who have a federal or state work activity requirement; these new client-centered employment programs will address their particular needs as ESL clients.

Thank you for this opportunity to testify and we look forward to your questions.