



Mayor's Office of
Immigrant Affairs
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Commissioner

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NYC Mayor's Office of Immigrant Affairs

Before a hearing of the New York City Council Committees on Immigration and Mental Health,
Disabilities and Addiction:

“Oversight - Addressing the Mental Health Needs of Immigrants in NYC”

Thank you to Chair Menchaca, Chair Ayala, and the members of the Committees for calling this hearing. My name is Nick Gulotta and I am the Director of Outreach and Organizing for the Mayor's Office of Immigrant Affairs (MOIA). I am joined today by the Department of Health and Mental Hygiene (DOHMH), New York City Health + Hospitals, and the Mayor's Office of ThriveNYC.

The City is committed to a vision of a mental health system that works for everyone. Health care, including mental health care services, is a right that should be available to all, regardless of immigration status or ability to pay. This fundamental belief guides what MOIA and our partners do every day to connect immigrants, and New Yorkers more generally, to the mental health services they need.

These are services that are desperately needed. As a starting point, immigrants face unique stressors from their migration that can increase their risk of psychological harm.¹ And all New Yorkers, regardless of immigration status, face strains on mental health and may need to access mental health services. Add to this the heightened anti-immigrant actions and rhetoric of this federal government, and it is no surprise that we have heard from our immigrant communities that they experience toxic stress and live in an atmosphere of fear.

This testimony will give a brief overview of the mental health needs of immigrants and the work of MOIA to support and advise our agency partners in their provision of mental health services.

Mental health needs of immigrants

We know that immigrants face various barriers when it comes to accessing mental health services. These barriers include stigma,² lack of insurance,³ language barriers,⁴ and more. These are barriers that have existed before the Trump administration, but the Trump administration's policies have exacerbated the barriers to access and created additional mental health needs.

Unsurprisingly, studies show that hostile immigration policies, including increased and indiscriminate immigration enforcement,⁵ harm the mental health of immigrants and can

¹ American Psychological Association, *Immigration Policy: A Psychological Perspective* (summarizing studies that show the harms of fear imposed by hostile immigration policies), available at <https://www.apa.org/advocacy/immigration/fact-sheet.pdf>.

² Nadeem et al., (2007) "Does Stigma Keep Poor Young Immigrant and U.S.-Born Black and Latina Women From Seeking Mental Health Care?" *Psychiatric Services*, 58:12, 1547-1554, available at https://ps.psychiatryonline.org/doi/full/10.1176/ps.2007.58.12.1547?url_ver=Z39.88-2003&rfr_id=ori%3Arid%3Acrossref.org&rfr_dat=cr_pub%3Dpubmed&.

³ Chen, et. al, "Estimating the Effects of Immigration Status on Mental Health Care Utilizations in the United States" (2011), available at <https://link.springer.com/content/pdf/10.1007%2Fs10903-011-9445-x.pdf>.

⁴ Chung, (2010) "Changes in the Sociocultural Reality of Chinese Immigrants: Challenges and Opportunities in Help-Seeking Behaviour." *International Journal of Social Psychiatry*, 56:4, 436-447, available at <https://doi.org/10.1177/0020764009105647>.

⁵ For more information about the increase in immigration enforcement in New York City, including an increase in the arrests of those immigrants with no criminal convictions, see our fact sheet, available at https://www1.nyc.gov/assets/immigrants/downloads/pdf/2019_01_moia_ice_enforcement_nyc_aor.pdf.

exacerbate existing stress and mental health conditions.⁶ This federal administration has demonstrated clear disregard for how its actions affect the health of immigrant families; instead, it has implemented a series of policies that directly and indirectly harm immigrants' mental health. As just one example, despite the obvious and long-term harm of separating children from their families,⁷ the Trump administration implemented a family separation policy at the border, while being unequipped to address the mental health consequences of this separation.⁸ As another example, the Trump administration has sought to kill the Affordable Care Act, despite the clear benefits that the law has had on increasing insurance coverage and access to health care in New York City and across the U.S.

This situation has contributed to tremendous strain experienced by our immigrant community. In our conversations with community-based organizations (CBOs) that serve immigrants, we have heard that clients are suffering from heightened stress, depression, post-traumatic stress disorder, and other mental health conditions.

The City's response

As my colleague from DOHMH will testify, the City has made unprecedented investments into mental health services for New Yorkers. As the City's health care agencies, NYC Health + Hospitals and DOHMH are providing the crucial mental healthcare system to all New Yorkers, with ThriveNYC tackling the critical gaps in our mental healthcare system to ensure mental health for all New Yorkers. These investments have been coupled with policy and programmatic innovations that are aimed at reducing the barriers that I have mentioned. The work is ongoing, and the City is committed to continuing to identify and address barriers that different vulnerable populations face in accessing the care that they need.

Before I turn to how MOIA is involved in this work, I want to note that at a time when the federal government has displayed a naked indifference to the well-being of immigrants, the City has by contrast moved to guarantee health care, including mental health services, for immigrant New Yorkers. All patients are welcome at NYC Health + Hospitals, regardless of immigration status or ability to pay. Through NYC Health + Hospitals and the recently launched NYC Care program, we are ensuring that even those without insurance have access to the affordable health care they need. This includes access to behavioral health services, like psychiatry or substance use services.

⁶ American Psychological Association, *Immigration Policy: A Psychological Perspective* (summarizing studies that show the harms of fear imposed by hostile immigration policies), available at <https://www.apa.org/advocacy/immigration/fact-sheet.pdf>.

⁷ Society for Research in Child Development, *The Science is Clear: Separating Families has Long-term Damaging Psychological and Health Consequences for Children, Families, and Communities* (2018) (summarizing the many studies that show that separation between children and parents, except in cases where there is evidence of maltreatment, is harmful to the development of children, families, and communities), available at https://www.srcd.org/sites/default/files/resources/FINAL_The%20Science%20is%20Clear_0.pdf.

⁸ U.S. Department of Health and Human Services Office of Inspector General, *Care Provider Facilities Described Challenges Addressing Mental Health Needs of Children in HHS Custody* (2019) (finding that children had experienced significant trauma before coming into federal custody and that current supports were inadequate).

Turning to MOIA's role in this work, we serve primarily as support for the multi-agency efforts to care for the mental health of immigrant New Yorkers. As non-clinicians, we are concerned with three things: monitoring what needs and barriers arise in the community, sharing information about available mental health services when we conduct outreach, and supporting our City partners on immigrant-specific mental health issues or language needs.

As an example of the work we do to monitor needs, MOIA, alongside representatives of DOHMH and NYC Health + Hospitals, attended and contributed to the New York Immigration Coalition's Immigrant Behavioral Health Roundtable. During that roundtable, we were able to hear directly from advocates and immigrant-serving CBOs about the kinds of barriers that their clients were facing in accessing mental health services.

Our staff also shares information, in partnership with ThriveNYC, about the array of mental health services available in the City with immigrant community members on a daily basis. Over the past year, MOIA has been diligent about promoting City programs and services like NYC Well, which is offered in English, Spanish, Mandarin and Cantonese as well as with interpretation in over 200 languages, and partnering with ThriveNYC at community events and via social media to ensure immigrant New Yorkers are aware of the availability of free, confidential mental health support. The option to speak with trained counselors in over 200 languages has been especially emphasized, given our multilingual audience. Promotion of mental health support services increased in the wake of particular events that directly impacted New York City's immigrant communities, including but not limited to the initial reports of family separation in 2018, continued reports of deplorable conditions in detention facilities on the U.S.-Mexico border, ICE raids and activity across the five boroughs in summer 2019, and the final publication of the "public charge" rule.

We have also worked to combat fear and unease during those times by providing KYRs presentations and answering community questions. All MOIA outreach staff have been trained on the mental health services available through ThriveNYC, and MOIA has additionally trained ThriveNYC staff and providers on outreach to immigrant communities. MOIA provides information about NYC Well in our agency One Pager that MOIA outreach staff diligently hand out at almost all events. In 2018 to 2019, MOIA's outreach teams conducted over 1,575 outreach events. During our rapid response campaigns for DACA, the Travel Ban, and TPS, we included messaging in one pagers that were handed out to thousands of impacted New Yorkers, encouraging anyone experiencing stress and the trauma caused by federal policies to call NYC Well. In addition, MOIA's outreach staff included messaging about this subject at all speaking engagements at houses of worship, schools, and at community meetings during these outreach campaigns.

Another example of how we incorporate mental health resources into the materials and programming we create is shown in MOIA's supplemental English language learning and conversation program, We Speak NYC. We produced an episode for learners called "Rafaela's Test," which highlights the story of an immigrant New Yorker's experience with stress and anxiety. The episode guides viewers through the character Rafaela's experience using NYC Well as a free resource for all New Yorkers. Class participants also receive workbooks that have

additional information on NYC Well. Through these conversation classes, we reach thousands of English Language Learners each year at community based organizations, houses of worship, schools, and libraries, introducing learners to information on how to access many of NYC's free resources.

MOIA also works with our partners across the administration to support immigrant specific issues. For example, during the family separation crisis, MOIA and our partners connected with service providers contracting with the federal government about the needs of children in their custody. As part of that work, we learned that there was a gap in bilingual child and adolescent psychiatry services for separated and unaccompanied children in federal custody in New York. We were able to work with NYC Health + Hospitals to provide additional supports for those providers, including consultations and access to outpatient services. Specifically, NYC Health + Hospitals embedded a child/adolescent psychiatrist who is providing consultation to the mental health professionals with the contracted providers. We've also implemented a system for facilitated referrals to the Bellevue child/adolescent outpatient psychiatry clinic, and NYC Health + Hospitals has launched a trauma-informed psychoeducational group with the providers that focuses on post-traumatic stress and coping skills.

MOIA also regularly works with the ThriveNYC community engagement team. We collaborate to share our services at resource fairs, community events, town halls, Thrive Talks, and beyond. MOIA has also supported dozens of impactful community events co-sponsored or organized primarily by the ThriveNYC outreach team. One example of this was a panel discussion about mental health with the Sikh community at the Sikh Cultural Society Gudwara in Richmond Hill in September 2016 that was attended by over 300 people where MOIA assisted with outreach and provided interpretation in Punjabi. Another event was in August 2018, when we co-organized a DREAMer Mental Health Workshop and Know Your Rights with ICE event with ThriveNYC and the Hispanic Federation. Each year, MOIA staff also participate in the Thrive NYC Weekend of Faith, which reaches thousands of New Yorkers including immigrant New Yorkers in all 5 boroughs.

Conclusion

Thank you again for calling this hearing and addressing the importance of mental health to the well-being of our immigrant communities. We look forward to working with the Council to realize our vision of a truly inclusive mental health system. I look forward to answering your questions.