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Testimony of Commissioner Nisha Agarwal
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Budget Oversight

Thank you to Speaker Mark-Viverito, Chair Menchaca, and the members of the Committee on Immigration. My name is Nisha Agarwal, and I am the Commissioner of the Mayor's Office of Immigrant Affairs.

My testimony today covers MOIA's mission and role in the Administration and our cornerstone initiatives under the leadership of Mayor de Blasio. This Administration has made an unprecedented commitment to New York City immigrants. I am proud of what we at MOIA have accomplished in the last two years on behalf of immigrant New Yorkers, with the crucial support and collaboration of our colleagues throughout the Administration, the City Council, and the immigrant community. I look forward to sharing details with you about our achievements.

In addition, I am pleased to be joined by Commissioner Banks from the Human Resources Administration (HRA) and Commissioner Chong from the Department of Youth and Community Development (DYCD). There are nearly three million foreign-born New Yorkers in our city of eight million people, and they interact with our government in myriad ways. Accordingly, virtually all of MOIA's work is done in close collaboration with our sister agencies, Council colleagues, and other partners in and out of government. HRA and DYCD are two of our closest partners. Commissioner Banks and Chong will speak more about the work that we do together, as well as other work that HRA and DYCD does that impacts immigrant New Yorkers.

MOIA's Mission

MOIA's mandate is a central one in this city of immigrants. New York City is the most diverse city in America. Immigrants are integral members of our communities and make significant contributions to every facet of the city's civic, cultural, and economic life. As mentioned earlier, nearly 40 percent of New Yorkers – three million people – are foreign born. Almost half of New Yorkers speak a language other than English, and there are over 200 languages spoken in our City.

While this multilingual, multicultural mosaic is a huge asset to our city, it also presents a challenge for local government. Approximately 23 percent of all New York City residents, or 1.8 million New Yorkers, have a limited ability to read, speak, write, or understand English. Additionally, while the majority of foreign-born residents in NYC are now U.S. citizens, there are also about one million lawful permanent residents (also known as "green card holders") and others with authorized immigration status, and a substantial undocumented population, estimated to be almost a half a million people. Undocumented New Yorkers have extensive ties to their neighborhoods and communities and consider the city to be their home; however, this population faces additional barriers and hurdles.

MOIA's mission is thus broad but straightforward: we promote the well-being of immigrant communities in New York City. The office's evolution and growth corresponds to increasing recognition about the importance of this mission, both locally and nationally. The City's first "Office of Immigrant Affairs" was created in 1984 as a sub-department within the Department of City Planning. In 1990, the Office of Immigrant Affairs was moved into the mayoralty and became MOIA. In 2001, MOIA was incorporated into the City Charter by voter referendum, with

New Yorkers acknowledging “that the well-being and safety of the city” is interconnected with immigrant integration and access to services.¹

In this Administration, thanks to the leadership of Speaker Mark-Viverito and the City Council, MOIA has evolved to fulfil Mayor de Blasio’s commitment to make the city more accessible and inclusive for immigrants. To advance innovative new immigrant-focused initiatives, MOIA works closely with our agency partners as well as the Mayor’s Fund to Advance the City of New York and private funders. We have focused on several priority areas where we can have the most impact:

- First, through programs like IDNYC, New York’s incredibly popular municipal ID card, as well as through our language access and inter-agency work, MOIA has dedicated its efforts to ensuring immigrant access to City services and resources, and facilitating greater immigrant inclusiveness across local government. This work recognizes that we in government are responsible and accountable to all New Yorkers and that we must have coordinated strategies to enhance the economic, civic, and social integration of immigrant New Yorkers.
- Second, we promote access to justice for immigrant New Yorkers, with the goal of facilitating access to high-quality immigration legal services as a means of addressing income inequality and empowering low-income communities. We recently launched the citywide, community-based ActionNYC immigration legal service program and will be soon re-launching our NYCitizenship program at libraries across the city.
- Third, we advocate for reforms at all levels of government to address inequities that impact New York’s immigrant communities. Much of this work is done in coalition with our counterparts in cities across the U.S. MOIA helped to create two national coalitions, Cities for Action and Cities for Citizenship, that share best practices and join together in advocacy for crucial immigration-related reforms.

Achievements and Highlights

With these priority areas in mind, I am thrilled to speak to some of our accomplishments during this Administration.

- As mentioned earlier, New York’s municipal ID program IDNYC has been a huge success, thanks to the combined efforts of the Speaker, the City Council, Commissioner Banks and the IDNYC team at HRA, a number of agencies across the Administration, and a wide cross-section of committed community partners. Launched in January 2015, IDNYC has enrolled over 800,000 New Yorkers to date, newly connecting many cardholders to the security and peace of mind that comes with having government-issued photo ID. This year, IDNYC’s budget is 24.5 million dollars, and sits at HRA. The program not only assists New Yorkers in accessing different aspects of the city – everything from entry into their

¹ New York City Charter, Chapter 1, § 18.

children's school, to access to the city's world-class cultural institutions, to access to prescription drug, supermarket, and entertainment discounts – it also serves as ID for opening a bank or credit account at participating financial institutions and is accepted by the New York Police Department for purposes of issuing summons in lieu of arrest. Moreover, the ID honors cardholders' gender identity and provides information about their language preference and veteran status. Most importantly, IDNYC confirms a cardholder's status as a New Yorker.

- MOIA has led an unprecedented investment in language access across the City government, putting real resources into this Administration's commitment to equity and access. We have engaged senior staff at City agencies to come together for discussions, trainings and collaboration on various aspects of language access. In addition to MOIA's oversight and technical assistance efforts, there are vast investments and commitment to language access at the Agency level, which Commissioner Banks will address in terms of the tremendous progress that HRA has made in this realm. In relation, we have worked with the City Hall Press Office, the Speaker's Office, and the CUNY School of Journalism to develop a Directory of Ethnic and Community Media. And we have spearheaded an effort to increase engagement and advertising across the city in ethnic and community media outlets.
- Earlier this year, MOIA together with the City University of New York launched ActionNYC, the nation's largest investment by a municipality to prepare for the President's executive action on immigration. ActionNYC is a citywide, community-based program that offers immigrant New Yorkers the opportunity to get free, high-quality advice about immigration and connections to key social service referrals and programs. The start of ActionNYC has demonstrated the great need for these services. ActionNYC's budget this year is 7.9 million dollars. Of this amount, we anticipate that 5.1 million dollars will go directly to the field for legal services, community navigation, outreach, technology and a hotline. An additional \$767,000 will support infrastructure and marketing to ensure success in the field. Since the program began seeing clients last month, the ActionNYC hotline has answered 1,268 calls, and ActionNYC outreach teams have made 3,101 appointments.
- Additionally, ActionNYC recently expanded its reach to over eight Community Schools. ActionNYC in Schools will integrate ActionNYC's new service delivery model with DOE's innovative Community Schools program. Foreign-born students and students of foreign-born parents represent about 46 percent of the Community Schools student population, and immigration legal services are among the most important tools available to empower and engage immigrant families. Through ActionNYC, we will reach immigrant families who may not access City and nonprofit services by any means other than those provided through the schools. This year, this aspect of the ActionNYC program is partnering with Catholic Charities and will cost \$158,901 for an abbreviated period of services. Next year, ActionNYC will reach 20-25 Community Schools.

- As another component of our immigration legal services programming, we are re-launching the NYCitizenship program in partnership with the City's three library systems and HRA. NYCitizenship will help more immigrant New Yorkers become citizens by providing free citizenship resources and legal services at 12 libraries branches across the city. Given that obtaining citizenship status has been linked to establishing increased financial security for many immigrants, NYCitizenship will also provide free financial counseling at the libraries. This program is connected to our other immigration legal services programming, and it also builds on the formal partnership announced in June 2015 between the City, U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services, and the three library systems to strengthen citizenship education and awareness efforts across New York City. A final component of NYCitizenship will provide citizenship legal services to a subset of citizenship-eligible HRA clients whose benefits could potentially increase if they naturalized. This year the program will cost \$735,900 in private dollars.
- In the area of immigration advocacy, MOIA leads the national initiative Cities for Action on behalf of Mayor de Blasio, a coalition of over 100 mayors and municipalities that have come together in support of federal immigration action and reform. Through Cities for Action, we have coordinated with cities throughout the country to support greater refugee protections and decry federal efforts to deprive so-called “sanctuary” cities of crucial public safety funding. And earlier this month, Cities for Action spearheaded the filing of a Supreme Court amicus brief in *United States v. Texas*, urging the Court to overturn a lower court’s decision and allow President Obama’s executive actions on immigration to move forward and provide temporary relief for millions of immigrants and their families. The brief was signed by 118 cities and counties representing 35 states and an estimated 55 million people, including over 15 million immigrants (more than 37 percent of the nation’s immigrant population). We have raised \$150,000 in private funds to support the City’s efforts in advocating for New York’s immigrant communities at the national level.

Of course, MOIA has not been the only agency or government entity promoting immigrant inclusion and integration. Crucial immigrant services are provided across the Administration. For example, in FY17, significant, targeted investments to support immigrant New Yorkers include approximately 30 million dollars in programming specifically dedicated to enhancing the education of immigrant students in New York City’s schools, and another 3.5 million dollars spent by DOE alone for translation and interpretation services to allow immigrant and other New Yorkers communicate with the agency in the language in which they feel most comfortable. These amounts, together with IDNYC, overall immigrant legal services funding, citywide DCAS contracts for language services, and DYCD’s immigrant-specific portfolio, represent unprecedented levels of targeted investment in immigrant communities. And of course, these amounts do not capture the incredible range of City services that are not specifically earmarked for immigrants, but that immigrants are utilizing and benefiting from on a daily basis – such as food stamps, small business services, health care, sanitation, civil legal services, after-school programming, and beyond, as my colleagues Commissioner Banks and Commissioner Chong will testify.

In addition, MOIA and the Administration have been fortunate to have strong partners in the legislative branch. From strategic investments like the “Key to the City” initiative, the New York Immigrant Family Unity Program, and immigrant health, the Speaker and the City Council have invested in innovative models to connect immigrants to much-needed services and assistance, setting a standard for other jurisdictions nationwide.

Our strong work together is underscored by the success MOIA has had in attracting private funding for many of our projects. From our collaborative work with the Council to promote immigrant health through the ActionHealthNYC program, to our legal and financial empowerment work through the NYCitizenship program, foundations have taken note of the Administration and the Council’s immigrant-focused investments and supported the growth of these investments.

The Work Ahead

MOIA’s accomplishments in what is arguably the most inclusive, immigrant-friendly city in the world are a testament to the tremendous leadership in this Administration and the City Council – but of course there is still more to be done.

We plan to continue and expand our work with our sister agencies so that an immigrant-inclusive lens is more deeply infused in major reforms across the city. For example, the City, led by the Mayor’s Office of Workforce Development, is leading a transformation of the City’s workforce development system into a career pathways framework. MOIA works closely with our workforce colleagues to consult on immigrant inclusion in this shift. We seek to similarly bring our population-expertise to collaborate with subject-matter experts across the Administration on other crucial efforts impacting immigrant New Yorkers: from services for seniors to housing and tenant protection.

We also see unmet needs in our current programming where we would welcome further public investments. For example, our immigration legal services program, ActionNYC, is designed to connect immigrants with safe, reliable immigration information and assistance, and also to create greater capacity and scale through the use of community navigators and an emphasis on “straightforward” affirmative cases such as DACA, TPS, citizenship and others. There remains, however, a great need for legal assistance in more complex cases such as asylum and removal defense in non-detained cases. Recently, my Office conducted an informal analysis of the City’s existing immigration legal services funding and found that we invest approximately 33 million dollars in a diverse range of immigration cases. However, a gap in complex immigration representation remains. Since immigrants have no right to appointed counsel, and because immigration law is notoriously complicated, the impact of having high-quality legal representation in complex immigration matters cannot be overstated.

Another pressing need is in addressing the English language learning and adult basic education needs of immigrants who are eager to advance their skills and more fully integrate into our city. As you know, over 1.8 million New Yorkers are limited English proficient and currently face waiting lists for access to ESOL and other adult basic education programs. Citywide, there is

over 87 million dollars in City, State, and Federal funding for literacy services, mainly at DOE, CUNY, DYCD, and the public libraries. While this investment is tremendous, we are aware that it has not kept up with the needs in terms of scale or impact.

My office is working closely with our colleagues across the Administration about how to more strategically address literacy needs in the short and long term. Today, MOIA and CUNY are releasing a Request for Proposals for an educational component to ActionNYC, to specifically support DACA-eligible individuals in meeting the educational requirement for DACA so they can apply for and obtain this important federal benefit. The program, while addressing a significant gap, is a small step towards reform in the literacy field. MOIA has also re-launched We are New York (WANY) – English conversation groups centering on a 10-episode, Emmy-Award winning comedic drama that is based on true-to-life stories of immigrants making their way in New York City. WANY helps immigrant New Yorkers practice English while providing useful information about essential City services and presenting compelling storylines about New Yorkers coming together to solve common problems. In less than a year, MOIA has recruited and trained over 200 volunteers to lead 10-week WANY conversation groups at libraries and community-based organizations. About 2,500 people will complete the WANY course this year. But WANY is only a part of the answer and we look forward to continuing conversations to move the City's literacy investments towards a new era of reach and innovation.

Last, we seek to expand our office's capacity to handle funding questions related to immigrant issues. Currently, MOIA makes recommendations to the Administration on budget priorities related to immigrant inclusion and integration based on our expertise. This system, of course, produces multiple funding streams, which speaks to the fact that immigrants are served in many ways by many agencies. Recognizing the need to coordinate across the Administration, we are currently in discussion with OMB to identify ways to more closely track immigrant funding. We look forward to strategizing so we can more closely coordinate the funding streams provided for immigrant inclusion, as well as to work in tandem with our partners in the City Council to coordinate and make strategic investments.

In closing, I want to recognize the incredible work of the Speaker, the Committee on Immigration, and the entire City Council, on behalf of New York City immigrants, together with the Mayor, my Administration colleagues, as well as private funders, community-based organizations, legal service providers, healthcare providers, and others. We look forward to continuing to work with these partners to advance immigrant rights and integration in our city over the coming year.

Thank you.