



Office of
Immigrant Affairs
Nisha Agarwal
Commissioner

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Testimony of Commissioner Nisha Agarwal
NYC Mayor's Office of Immigrant Affairs

Before a hearing of the New York City Council Committee on Immigration:
“Oversight—Coordinating Multi-agency Support for Immigrant Families”

Thank you to 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.

The de Blasio Administration strives to be inclusive of all New Yorkers, regardless of their immigration status. We recognize that being undocumented can pose significant barriers for New Yorkers in accessing government services and resources to support the health, safety, and welfare of all.

Importantly, the well-being of our undocumented neighbors is inextricably bound up with the well-being of New Yorkers who are permanent residents and U.S. citizens. Undocumented New Yorkers are not separate and apart from the rest of the city's population. To the contrary, mixed-status families are very common. Our internal estimates show that nearly 16% of children in New York City, or one in six children, live in a family that contains at least one undocumented immigrant.

IMMIGRANT INCLUSION ACROSS CITY AGENCIES

Serving mixed-status families effectively often requires the involvement of multiple agencies because of the different needs and opportunities of family members with varying immigration statuses. To ensure that our sister agencies can effectively respond to these needs, MOIA works to embed principles and practices of immigrant inclusion across City government in all areas—from outreach and communications to regulatory actions to the design of new and existing programs.

This effort builds on our long-standing work with agencies consulting on language access and expands its scope to develop strategies to ensure that City government is accessible and inclusive of immigrant New Yorkers. As an example, MOIA recently expanded the role of our language access director position to become our Executive Director of Immigrant Inclusion, to lead this effort. Under her leadership, we will continue our work with agencies to develop immigrant inclusion strategies, including identifying areas beyond language that create barriers for immigrants to avail themselves of city services; identifying tools and resources agencies need to develop and implement immigrant inclusion strategies; providing technical assistance to agencies; and sharing successful immigrant inclusion strategies across agencies. We will also continue to help agencies with language access, which is a key component of immigrant inclusion. Throughout our work across City government, we focus on methods to ensure that all New York City residents can get the help they need, even if they are undocumented or if their family members are undocumented.

SERVING IMMIGRANTS AND MIXED-STATUS FAMILIES

Interagency collaboration to effectively serve New York City immigrants is not new for the Administration. MOIA and our sister agencies have worked together closely on a number of programs and services, with considerable success. Through collaborations like the IDNYC program and others, MOIA has identified a number of best practices that inform our efforts to serve diverse immigrant populations, including immigrants in mixed-status families. I am pleased to share some of these best practices with you today.

1. Partner early with relevant agencies, community leaders, and community-based organizations

City agencies' effectiveness in serving immigrant families is enhanced by identifying the right partners within government and in the community and collaborating with them. Such partnerships help inform policy decisions and facilitate stakeholder engagement and buy-in. Importantly, these partnerships also help build bridges and strengthen ties between local government and immigrant communities. For example, in the Administration's implementation of the IDNYC program, we benefited immeasurably from working closely with the Council and a coalition of immigrant-rights groups and other advocacy and service organizations. These partners consulted on key aspects of the program, from developing a successful outreach strategy to card design. Similarly, the success of the IDNYC program is also attributable to our partnerships with our sister agencies, with important contributions from the NYPD, the Human Resources Administration, NYC Health + Hospitals, the Department of Youth and Community Development, the Department of Health and Mental Hygiene, the Department of Probation, and many more.

2. Leverage existing resources and trusted relationships to reach immigrants

Building on the above, reaching New York's large and diverse immigrant population requires identifying existing systems and opportunities and leveraging these to deliver services. This helps us avoid re-inventing the wheel. In addition, immigrants in mixed-status families can be among the City's most difficult-to-reach populations, owing in large part to the longstanding perception, caused by our broken federal immigration system, that it is dangerous for them to seek help from government. Accordingly, it is imperative to make use of existing effective routes for disseminating information and making contact.

The Administration used this strategy with the interagency task force established by MOIA in 2014 to address the needs of unaccompanied minors coming to New York City from Central America and the needs of their families. One of the primary outcomes of that task force's work was the first-ever placement of City staff at the federal Immigration Court—which all newly arriving unaccompanied minors must pass through—to connect these young people to school

enrollment, access to health care, and more services provided by DOE, DOHMH, ACS, and other agencies.

We have taken a similar approach with our ActionNYC immigration legal services program, which works in trusted sites within the community to connect immigrants to legal services. One set of ActionNYC sites is through DOE's Community Schools, which are public schools paired with a community-based organization to provide support and connections to social services, and therefore are ideal partners for connecting immigrant students and immigrant families with legal services. Our re-launched NYCitizenship program also leverages community-based sites by locating services at public library branches in immigrant-dense neighborhoods throughout the City. In addition, NYCitizenship partners with HRA to reach the agency's significant roster of immigrant clients who are eligible for naturalization and could access additional benefits upon becoming U.S. citizens.

3. Achieve efficiency to reach scale

To ensure that services can be delivered as broadly as possible, we have seen success with programs that offer flexible levels of engagement with immigrants and mixed-status families. Certain agency clients may require greater direct intervention than others, and individuals' and families' needs may change over time. Being able to provide varying levels of service based on the needs of an individual allows for greater efficiency and scale.

In our ActionNYC legal services program, for example, community navigators provide intake, screening, and coordination services, under the supervision of an immigration attorney. Navigators are not attorneys, but have in-depth training and expertise in service delivery so they can help with preparation of documents and coordination of referrals. Immigration attorneys, under this model, supervise navigators and perform the more intensive legal work.

In addition, we have seen success with our publication of the Document Collection Guide, co-produced with the New York Immigration Coalition, because it was designed to be flexible for use independently by immigrants or in conjunction with a navigator or attorney.

Our partner agencies have seen success with this model as well. In the ActionHealthNYC program, immigrant patients receive care coordination services appropriate to their level of need. And in the recently released RFP for comprehensive services for immigrant families, DYCD has identified a need for a high-touch model of case management to complement the existing services available to immigrants in New York City.

4. Tailor outreach and marketing in a linguistically and culturally competent manner

In addition to interagency referral mechanisms and formal partnerships, agencies are increasingly employing targeted, data-driven techniques to reach immigrants through outreach and through the media. MOIA has worked with our partners, including those in the Council, to develop a directory to assist agencies to expand their purchases of ethnic and community media advertising. These ad buys have consistently risen every year under the de Blasio Administration, and we have seen major successes in campaigns using ethnic media, such as our recent campaign to educate DACA recipients about Medicaid eligibility. MOIA has also coordinated with other agencies to inform the targeting strategy and messaging in campaigns to bring services to immigrant families, such as those related to SNAP and emergency food assistance, health insurance enrollment, and more.

AREAS OF ONGOING COORDINATION

We are applying these best practices for serving immigrants and immigrant families to our continuing work in priority areas for MOIA and the Administration as a whole. Recent examples have included a partnership between HRA and the Department of Small Business Services to embed public assistance enrollment support within Workforce1 centers in order to reach clients, including immigrants, who may be eligible but unenrolled. DYCD is also working with other agencies to explore opportunities to connect immigrants and other clients to necessary services, such as helping individuals receiving HRA benefits to access adult literacy services and identifying Beacon or Cornerstone community centers that may be able to house a DOE adult education program.

Of particular relevance for mixed-status families is our ongoing work in adult literacy programming and immigration legal services.

In the field of adult literacy, we understand the need for improved coordination across the diverse providers that work in this area. We are committed to working with the providers, City agencies, CUNY, and the Council to develop a system for literacy services that more effectively meets the needs of New York City's adult learners and does so at scale, relying on the best practices and principles I have described today. We will adopt and adapt the lessons of our successes, such as the establishment of partnerships and leveraging of existing resources, to ensure that the City's literacy planning has a strong foundation based in agencies' and providers' years of expertise and roots in the community.

As part of our vision for adult literacy, we see the We Are New York (WANY) program as a crucial component of the broader literacy initiative by providing volunteer-led English language learning classes that supplement ESOL classes. WANY is coordinated by MOIA and includes many partnerships with a diverse range of community-based providers and City agencies,

including the Department of Education, to reach immigrants of all statuses and mixed-status families. The best practices and principles we have derived from our work hold true in WANY: WANY provides community members with another literacy option among the spectrum of varying levels of services across the city, and it has been able to reach immigrants in their communities and through trusted networks. WANY has been successful in helping English learners practice English and in empowering them to access city services, with over 2,500 individuals served through 125 classes in the past year alone, making it an important component in the City's literacy infrastructure going forward.

In immigration legal services, we are coordinating closely with HRA's new Office of Civil Justice to establish referral pathways for complex immigration cases between ActionNYC service providers and HRA Immigrant Opportunities Initiative (IOI) service providers. This interagency effort is based on our recognition of the importance of the principles and practices I have described today, including the need to create effective partnerships and the desire to achieve efficient delivery of services by ensuring appropriate levels of services based on individual immigrants' and families' needs.

In both of these areas and others, I look forward to further work with the Council, our community partners, and our sister agencies. We all share the important goal of continuing to improve our ability to serve New York City's immigrants and mixed-status families so that all New Yorkers, regardless of their immigration status or their family members' immigration status, can grow and thrive together.