



Office of
Immigrant Affairs
Nisha Agarwal
Commissioner

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**Testimony of Acting Commissioner Bitta Mostofi
NYC Mayor’s Office of Immigrant Affairs**

Before a hearing of the New York City Council Committees on Immigration and Health:

“Oversight – Immigrant Access to Healthcare”

Thank you to Chair Menchaca, Chair Johnson, and the members of the Committee on Immigration and the Committee on Health. My name is Bitta Mostofi and I am the Acting Commissioner of the Mayor's Office of Immigrant Affairs (MOIA).

In my testimony today on behalf of the Administration, I will describe the work the City has done to connect immigrants to the health care system. Health care is a right that should be available to all, regardless of their immigration status or ability to pay. New York City is a leader when it comes to access to health care for our residents, including immigrants. Our health care system, including NYC Health + Hospitals and services through the Department of Health and Mental Hygiene (DOHMH), is a remarkable resource—open to all, regardless of status or ability to pay, with strong language access and cultural competency efforts—and there are many insurance programs open to immigrants. In our health access work, we have learned that perhaps the biggest area of need is to provide information and connect uninsured immigrants who are unaware of their options or afraid to access this remarkable health care system.

In order to accomplish that, this Administration has launched innovative programs focused on connecting immigrants to the health care system, and our efforts have been successful. One example of this success is MOIA's recently launched expansion of the ActionNYC immigration legal services program into NYC Health + Hospitals facilities, where we have been able to provide long-term care patients and others with immigration relief so that they can qualify for public health insurance and be secure in their legal status. In addition to this groundbreaking City investment, I will describe the range of work taking place to improve immigrant health access across the Administration.

Background

The City's public health care system is the largest municipal health care system in the country. NYC Health + Hospitals serves over 1 million New Yorkers every year in more than 70 locations across the city, and is by far the largest provider of care to the uninsured and underinsured in New York State. In fact, NYC Health + Hospitals serves a disproportionate share of the uninsured and underinsured population.

The patients at NYC Health + Hospitals reflect the incredible diversity of the City. More than four in ten patients were born outside of the United States, with the most common places of birth being the Dominican Republic, Mexico, and Jamaica. Nearly one in three patients is limited English proficient and requires language assistance services, with the most commonly requested languages being Spanish, Bengali, and Mandarin.

In addition to our care delivery system through NYC Health + Hospitals facilities and DOHMH health centers, New York City is able to help many immigrants get health insurance. Thanks to hard-won state laws and policies, Child Health Plus is available to all children under 19 years of age, regardless of immigration status, and many immigrants with a variety of permanent and temporary statuses are eligible for the Essential Plan, Medicaid, or assistance through the New York State of Health Marketplace.

About 350,000 noncitizens in NYC remain uninsured,¹ many in immigrant neighborhoods like Sunset Park, Corona, Jackson Heights, and parts of the Bronx. But the City has made significant progress. Because of increased access to health insurance through the Affordable Care Act, state laws on the issue, and increased efforts by the City to reach uninsured populations, there has been a drop in the percentage of uninsured noncitizens. In 2013, approximately 35% of noncitizens were uninsured,² but in 2016 that percentage dropped to about 25%.³

Connecting Immigrants to Health Care and Health Insurance

Linking immigrants to the health care system requires coordination by many City agencies and community-based organizations. For example, in 2014 and 2015, over thirty City agencies, community-based organizations, health care providers, and advocacy organizations participated in the Mayor's Task Force on Immigrant Health Care Access to identify barriers to access and develop recommendations. This Administration has worked with our partners to implement the Task Force's recommendations, and has gone beyond those recommendations to help immigrants access health care. MOIA, the Public Engagement Unit (PEU), DOHMH, the Human Resources Administration (HRA), NYC Health + Hospitals, and others continue to work together to find new ways to provide health services and to create an integrated experience for immigrants accessing City services.

ActionNYC in NYC Health + Hospitals

MOIA recently partnered with the New York Legal Assistance Group (NYLAG) and NYC Health + Hospitals to launch our groundbreaking ActionNYC in NYC Health + Hospitals program. This program is the largest ever municipal investment in the country in an immigrant-focused medical-legal partnership: over \$1.5 million baselined for FY18. ActionNYC brings free and safe immigration services to patients and community members, which in turn can help these clients qualify for public health insurance.

Earlier this year, ActionNYC began serving patients and community members at NYC Health + Hospitals/Gouverneur, NYC Health + Hospitals/Elmhurst, and NYC Health + Hospitals/Lincoln. The expansion of services into hospitals has proved effective. Clients who receive legal status can then access insurance options not previously available to them. To date, we have screened 613 patients and community members.

In late 2016, ActionNYC's NYLAG mobile legal team began serving uninsured patients in NYC Health + Hospitals long-term care and post-acute care settings. This part of the program has been a great success, screening 165 patients across seven facilities. The power of this program cannot be overstated. This program has not only provided peace of mind to our clients, but also allows NYC Health + Hospitals to receive insurance payments for their treatment. The City has baselined about \$400,000 a year for this program. We estimate that the new insurance enrollments that we have already achieved or will soon achieve, will translate to approximately

¹ U.S. Census Bureau, 2016 American Community Survey 1-year estimates.

² U.S. Census Bureau, 2013 American Community Survey 1-year estimates.

³ U.S. Census Bureau, 2016 American Community Survey 1-year estimates.

\$2.1 million per year in newly generated Medicaid revenue for NYC Health + Hospitals.⁴ We expect this number to rise as the number of health insurance enrollments increases.

ActionNYC in NYC Health + Hospitals has already had a tangible effect on our clients' lives. One client, Mr. S, recently arrived from Venezuela and was directed to the program by a stranger on the street who heard that immigration help was now available to the public at hospitals. Mr. S is a politically-active journalist who fled Venezuela after ongoing threats against him escalated. Homeless and in emotional and financial distress, Mr. S was able to secure a bed in a shelter after receiving assistance from the program, and NYLAG began an intake for a possible asylum claim. NYLAG connected him to a non-profit that assists persecuted journalists, and to financial resources that enabled him to find housing and leave the shelter. The NYLAG team helped Mr. S become a hospital patient, where he is receiving medical and psychiatric care as they prepare his asylum case. This is just one of the stories of the people who have been connected to health services as well as legal assistance through the ActionNYC in NYC Health + Hospitals program.

IDNYC

The Administration has worked to make it easier for IDNYC cardholders to access and interact with the health care system.

The City's official prescription drug discount plan, BigAppleRx, is integrated into the IDNYC card to provide prescription drug discounts at more than 2,000 pharmacies citywide. As of September 2017, IDNYC cardholders have used this benefit to save over \$618,000 on their prescriptions.

IDNYC has partnered with NYC Health + Hospitals to allow cardholders to link their IDNYC cards to their records at most NYC Health + Hospitals facilities, speeding up the registration process and appointment check-ins. As of September 2017, 4,392 cardholders have linked their IDNYC cards to their NYC Health + Hospitals accounts.

IDNYC cardholders can also use their IDNYC numbers online to access their own or their children's official immunization records from the Citywide Immunization Registry. Parents or guardians can see which vaccinations their child still needs, and can print out a vaccination history for child care, school registration, college admission, summer camp, and more. As of September 2017, 1,568 cardholders have accessed vaccine records using an IDNYC number.

IDNYC allows cardholders to choose to register as an organ donor. If the IDNYC cardholder consents, the City sends their name and identifying information to the New York State Department of Health. To date, over 160,000 cardholders have chosen to register to be an organ donor through IDNYC.

⁴ This estimate is based on average Medicaid rates per recent NYC Health + Hospitals data, but this figure may change based on actual Medicaid rates, discharge, and other factors.

Task Force Recommendations

This Administration continues to work with its many partners, including its sister agencies and community-based organizations, to implement the Task Force's recommendations.

Immigrants in New York City have more health insurance options than immigrants in many other parts of the country due to inclusive state laws and policies. The Administration has invested in a year-round, multi-agency campaign, GetCoveredNYC, to connect immigrants and others to the health insurance options available to them. MOIA has trained the 40 GetCoveredNYC specialists at PEU, who are multilingual and experienced in outreach to the diverse uninsured populations across the five boroughs, on immigration status eligibility questions. This specialized immigrant-focused outreach was incorporated into the larger GetCoveredNYC campaign, which includes year-round multilingual ads and texting services, as well as on-the-ground outreach to communities across the City. MOIA also arranged in-depth trainings for City health insurance enrollers on immigrant eligibility rules.

MOIA and our sister agencies have also worked to provide information about these health insurance options through community outreach. MOIA has published and distributed a resource guide for immigrants that includes health care and insurance information in 11 languages. Through its Office of Citywide Health Insurance Access (OCHIA), HRA works to expand access to health insurance for all New Yorkers. HRA partners with public and private organizations to make health insurance outreach and enrollment assistance available on-site at City offices and community events. HRA/OCHIA has also created a Guide to Health Insurance and Health Care Services for Immigrants in New York City. The guide is available in 11 languages in print and online, and has been widely circulated across City agencies, local communities, faith-based organizations, as well as through targeted training sessions and workshops.

The Task Force called on the City to ensure the provision of culturally and linguistically competent health care, and we continue to work on this issue alongside our partners at NYC Health + Hospitals and beyond.

In response to the Task Force's call for a "direct access" program, the Administration launched a demonstration project in 2016 called ActionHealthNYC, which served low-income immigrants who were not eligible for health insurance through the New York State of Health Marketplace. ActionHealthNYC helped coordinate care for uninsured immigrants, including primary and specialty care. This program was a privately-funded partnership between MOIA, DOHMH, HRA, NYC Health + Hospitals, several Federally Qualified Health Centers, and community-based organizations. The program completed its one-year demonstration on June 30, 2017. The City will review the results of the program's evaluation, which is underway and will be completed soon, for findings related to improving access to care for uninsured immigrants.

Additional Outreach and Access to Health Care Services

The Administration continues to improve access to health care services across the City. In 2015, NYC Health + Hospitals partnered with the NYC Economic Development Corporation on the Caring Neighborhoods initiative, to expand primary care to underserved populations, including immigrants. The Caring Neighborhoods project will include seven facilities. Sixteen

neighborhoods are now receiving expanded services at the five sites that are open. Patients at these sites are now able to access comprehensive primary care, as well as specialty care based on community needs, which includes behavioral health, cardiology, endocrinology, and after-hours urgent care.

We have recognized a need for additional mental health supports for immigrant New Yorkers. The Trump Administration's xenophobic and toxic rhetoric and policies have directly affected many immigrant New Yorkers. Calls for increased immigration enforcement, hateful speech, and instances of discrimination have created deep fear and anguish in our immigrant communities. In response, MOIA and its sister agencies are doing outreach to immigrant communities in order to connect immigrants in need to NYC Well, a cornerstone of the City's ThriveNYC plan. NYC Well provides a suite of mental health services, including crisis counseling, short-term counseling, follow-up services, and referrals, 24 hours a day, 7 days a week, and 365 days a year. Mental health professionals are available through NYC Well in more than 200 languages. All MOIA outreach staff have been trained on the mental health services available through ThriveNYC, and MOIA has cross-trained ThriveNYC staff and providers on outreach to immigrant communities. Also, MOIA recently worked with DOHMH to issue a letter to mental health providers citywide about challenges their DACA-recipient patients may experience as a result of the stress caused by the Trump Administration's decision to terminate DACA. The Administration has reached out to immigrant students and families: early this year the New York City Department of Education sent students home with information about NYC Well and available health care resources in an effort to reach immigrant families.

We have also undertaken special insurance outreach efforts for specific populations in need—in particular, children and young adults.

As part of the response to the surge in unaccompanied minors arrivals in 2014, DOHMH provided bilingual health insurance enrollment services at the federal immigration court to help inform and enroll unaccompanied minors and their families in public health insurance. From September 2014 through August 2017, DOHMH staff screened over 7,700 adults and children, nearly 35 percent of whom did not have insurance.

MOIA has worked to connect DACA recipients to public insurance. In 2016, MOIA launched a \$300,000 campaign to encourage those eligible to apply for Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals (DACA), and to connect DACA recipients to Medicaid, funded by a grant from the New York State Health Foundation. As part of the campaign, around 30 navigators and attorneys and about 90 Certified Application Counselors and health advocates were trained on DACA applicants' and recipients' Medicaid eligibility. In the quarter before our campaign launched, only about 750 initial DACA applications were filed in New York State, and in the months directly following our campaign more than 3,400 immigrants filed initial applications for DACA—a 450% increase in applications statewide, the majority of which we believe were here in NYC and may have been sparked by our campaign. Our campaign helped immigrants access DACA, as well as health insurance.

Challenges in a New Federal Climate

In response to reports of immigrant residents' fears about using public health care services lest they be targeted for immigration enforcement, the Administration took immediate steps to reassure immigrants that health care services were still available to them and safe to access. MOIA and NYC Health + Hospitals issued an open letter to immigrant New Yorkers in December 2016 in 14 languages, reiterating the right to get medical care in NYC regardless of immigration status or ability to pay. We worked with NYC Health + Hospitals to post signs in welcome areas to say "We care about your health – not your immigration status." This is a message that has resonated in the immigrant community and has helped alleviate fear. DOHMH has placed similar signs in their health centers. MOIA, NYC Health + Hospitals, the New York Immigration Coalition, and NYLAG also held a series of forums at NYC Health + Hospitals facilities to inform patients of their rights and to reiterate NYC Health + Hospitals' commitment to protecting patient privacy and not inquiring about immigration status. We believe that our message has been heard by the community. While we remain deeply concerned about the chilling effect of the federal government's cruel and xenophobic immigration policies, the data do not show a measurable overall chilling effect on uninsured patients' utilization of services at NYC Health + Hospitals facilities.

We've seen other changes as a result of shifts in federal policy. The immigration courts across the country have ended the special priority docket for unaccompanied minors. This has made it more difficult for providers to reach this population with services, including health insurance. But the Administration continues to do outreach at other locations. In 2016, ActionNYC began to offer immigration legal services in public schools, aimed at serving both students and families that need support.

The end of DACA and the upcoming expiration of Temporary Protected Status (TPS) for several countries threaten many immigrants with the loss of their state Medicaid coverage. The City is deeply concerned about the impact of ending policies that have helped so many New Yorkers, and continues to advocate for solutions to protect DACA and TPS recipients. In addition, we are aware that the State government is considering public insurance options for former DACA and TPS recipients, and we look forward to working with the State on this issue.

The Trump Administration and Republicans in Congress have continued to attack the Affordable Care Act, which provides health insurance to millions of Americans, including many immigrant New Yorkers. For example, cuts to federal funding for outreach for the Affordable Care Act pose a serious barrier to enrollment. The Mayor has been a vocal advocate for the Affordable Care Act, and we will continue to fight against efforts to repeal or undermine it. The City is continuing efforts to connect immigrants with health insurance coverage, including through GetCoveredNYC and HRA/OCHIA's tailored services for immigrant populations.

Conclusion

We thank the Council for being a crucial partner in the work to increase immigrant access to health care. As you know, the Access Health NYC initiative and the Immigrant Health Initiative fund 33 community-based organizations. These initiatives, which are focused on immigrants and other underserved populations, are a powerful part of the City's work in this area.



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We have increased our outreach efforts, engaged in national advocacy, and worked with our partners to address barriers to immigrant access to health care. We are dedicated to continuing to connect immigrants to the health care they need, and we look forward to working with the Council further on these issues.

Thank you for allowing us to provide testimony on this important topic.