



Mayor's Office of  
Immigrant Affairs  
Bitta Mostofi  
Commissioner

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Testimony of Commissioner Bitta Mostofi  
NYC Mayor's Office of Immigrant Affairs

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**“Oversight – The IDNYC Program”**

Thank you to Chair Menchaca and the members of the Committee on Immigration. My name is Bitta Mostofi, and I am the Commissioner of the Mayor's Office of Immigrant Affairs. I am pleased to be here with my colleague Sonia Daly from the Department of Social Services, who is available to answer questions.

It is remarkable to take a few moments here, with the sponsors of the Local Law and our partners from community and advocacy groups, to reflect on the IDNYC program more than four years since our launch in January 2015, and as we approach the first set of renewals beginning in January 2020.

I have been fortunate to have been part of the birth and incredible growth of the IDNYC program since before it launched in 2014, first as the director of external affairs for the program and then as Assistant Commissioner and now Commissioner of MOIA. I am proud that more than 1.2 million New Yorkers now carry an IDNYC card—more than 18% of the city's population age 10 and older. But setting aside the sheer size and reach of the program, I also want to share a few stories about some of the people who have become cardholders, to help paint a picture of what the City and the City Council have accomplished.

A Queens housekeeper in her sixties who never had a bank account, despite living in New York City for 27 years.

A Puerto Rican woman who was raising her granddaughter after the child's mother passed away, and wanted help finding educational activities to bring her to.

An immigrant who only had photo ID from his country of origin and faced discrimination when asked to present it.

An elderly man who could not speak English and suffered a fall while walking in Chinatown, and had his IDNYC with language preference and emergency contact information listed on the back.

A working mother, whose daughter had never seen the elephants that her mother had gone to see in India as a child.

For these people, IDNYC has been more than just a piece of plastic in their wallets. It has been a facilitator of access, a key to unlock the services and supports as well as the best of New York City's cultural offerings. It allowed that housekeeper to open her first bank account. It meant that the man who fell was given the appropriate assistance right away. It meant that that woman from India could afford to bring her daughter to the zoo for the first time in her life.

These people are the faces of IDNYC's success. They are the New Yorkers who, because of their income or their language or their immigration status, had been denied the full participation in the life of the city that they deserved. With IDNYC, I am happy to say that we have helped to make a difference in their lives and to begin to address these kinds of inequities in access and

opportunity—not just for immigrants, but for New Yorkers of all backgrounds and circumstances.

It is a pleasure to have this time to testify about how we got to where we are today, and where we can go in the future to continue to grow and build IDNYC to even better serve our residents.

### **IDNYC's development and launch**

When he entered office in 2014, Mayor de Blasio promised to create a municipal ID card. The Mayor's Office of Immigrant Affairs, the Human Resources Administration, and the Office of Operations, along with others in the Administration, worked closely with the Council, leading to the passage of Local Law 35 less than six months in to the session. The law directed the Administration to develop and launch a program, set standards for acceptable application documentation, and provided the framework for confidentiality protections that remain in place today. The law also required all City agencies to accept the card to access services, and directed the Administration to continue to build the program by increasing access and securing acceptance by other entities, including financial institutions, private businesses, and non-local government agencies.

We worked quickly to get the program up and running in a matter of months, partnering closely with the City Council, advocacy organizations, and community groups to inform the process. We hired and trained a remarkable and diverse staff, promulgated rules and regulations, built computer systems, worked with designers and artists, developed a massive public education campaign, negotiated benefits, and much more.

In January 2015, the Mayor and then Speaker Melissa Mark-Viverito launched IDNYC at the Flushing branch of the Queens Library and we opened our doors to applicants. Demand quickly exceeded our capacity. The Human Resources Administration, which was tasked with administration of the program, rapidly hired more staff and opened more enrollment centers. In our first year alone, we enrolled more than 700,000 cardholders – including former United Nations Secretary-General Ban Ki-Moon and, on an honorary basis, Pope Francis.

Importantly, we took care to build the program to deliver on our promise to New Yorkers to create a card that works for everyone, while addressing the needs and concerns of those most vulnerable amongst us. One of the crucial early decisions in program development was the imperative of creating a card program that would prove valuable to all New Yorkers, and not just undocumented immigrants or the homeless or other underserved groups. This decision avoided stigmatizing the use of the card as a symbol of populations that have traditionally been the victims of discrimination. Among the best examples of this was our partnership with the members of the Cultural Institutions Group, the several dozen museums and theaters and other cultural institutions that operate on City property. These institutions, such as the American Museum of Natural History, the Metropolitan Museum of Art, El Museo del Barrio, BAM, and many more CIG institutions and others were crucial early partners, and played an indispensable role in our efforts to demonstrate that IDNYC is for all New Yorkers.

I personally spent considerable time at enrollment centers at the beginning of the program—days, nights, and weekends. I helped our staff as they were beginning this incredible initiative and working through challenges; working with our wonderful on-the-ground partners to ensure efficiency and cooperation as we looked at a quick expansion and response to the demand; and, of course, assisting New Yorkers who were coming in to learn about the program, determine their eligibility, and share with me why this was so significant for them.

### **The growth of the IDNYC program**

The IDNYC program grew dramatically over the several years following the launch. We now have 20 permanent enrollment centers across the city and five pop-up enrollment teams to host temporary sites in additional locations—a significant increase over the 18 that were in operation at the launch in 2015. We have also created a “homebound” system to bring enrollment equipment to those applicants who need a reasonable accommodation due to their inability to visit an enrollment center, as well as a Mobile Command Center to bring IDNYC enrollment wherever it is needed—particularly areas in the city where we do not have permanent locations.

The IDNYC program became an important part of the life of the city, facilitating access to City services and other benefits for a huge number of residents. This would not have been possible without the exceptional and careful attention paid to privacy and confidentiality protections throughout the development and administration of the program. These protections have remained and will remain intact, and they stand as a lesson for other cities and counties seeking to replicate a measure of IDNYC’s success: the first priority must be the protection of cardholder information. In line with this goal, at the end of 2016, Commissioner Banks made a determination pursuant to the Local Law that it was no longer necessary for the program to retain copies of the documents submitted by applicants after they have been evaluated and authenticated by our staff, further building on our privacy and confidentiality protections.

In 2016, we brought in outside researchers to conduct an evaluation of the program and share their findings. Their report, which is available on our website, helped to confirm that the program had succeeded in many, many respects. Some of the results that have stayed with me the most are that:

- 94% of cardholders surveyed reported that it was easy to go through the enrollment process;
- 72% of those who used IDNYC to access public benefits said that the card had helped them do so;
- 59% of those who expressed concerns about interactions with police said that having an IDNYC made them feel more confident about doing so; and
- 77% of immigrants said that IDNYC had increased their sense of belonging in New York City.

These results demonstrated that, even just a relatively short time in to the life of the program, IDNYC had already had achieved real, positive outcomes and made a difference in the lives of New Yorkers.

IDNYC has continued to expand. A few salient examples: We established a fruitful partnership with the Department of Education to conduct enrollment at high schools, where we have been able to expand access to thousands of students. We worked with the Department of Homeless Services and the New York State Office of Mental Health to help enroll shelter residents and individuals with mental health disabilities. We launched an online portal, to make the program easier to access online and on mobile devices.

Our successes span multiple areas: We have connected cardholders to 646,942 cultural institution memberships, saved shoppers more than \$1.9 million in groceries at Food Bazaar and more than \$800,000 on prescription medications, connected 87,000 cardholders' library accounts to their IDNYC cards, and more. As I travel across the city and meet people of all walks of life, I am continually gratified that the program has remained popular and appreciated, and has been embraced by both community members as well as by organizational partners.

In recent months, we have made a number of new advancements. Those include opening eligibility to children age 10 to 13, building an electronic verification system for certain categories of information, completing our integration with all NYC Health + Hospitals facilities, and, just a few weeks ago, changing our application system to allow cardholders to identify their gender as "X" if they desire.

### **The future of IDNYC**

As IDNYC approaches its fifth birthday in January 2020, we have been considering the ways in which the program can continue to improve and to serve residents in new ways.

Based on our learnings working in communities and with partners, at our enrollment centers and through our customer service line, as well as from surveying our cardholders, we strive to continue to build on the promise we set forth at the outset of the program, through innovation and new partnerships. Accordingly, we have worked in tandem with the City's Chief Technology Officer, our sister agencies, and external partners to explore new opportunities for the card. We are looking to address key issues and challenges set out in the local law, elevated to us by community partners, elected officials, and advocates, and expressed to us by cardholders. These include: (1) expanding access to banking; (2) integrating this card further in to other systems so that it can function in a range of circumstances, including the option of using it to enter the MTA; and (3) full acceptance by pharmacies as identification to pick up prescriptions.

As I described above, expanding New Yorkers' access to financial services has always been a goal of the program. During the development of IDNYC, the Administration met with a range of banks and credit unions and obtained positive written guidance from federal and state financial regulatory agencies. This effort has yielded us 14 financial institutions that accept IDNYC as a form of primary identification to open an account—including the addition of a new bank, People's United Bank, as recently as last month. We have conducted significant public education and outreach about the opportunities for financial access afforded by IDNYC, including multilingual informational materials, pop-up enrollment services offered at bank and credit union branches, and a major transit-based advertising campaign in conjunction with the Department of

Consumer Affairs. We are pleased that we have been able to assemble these 14 options for cardholders, and we hope to continue to add more. However, we have heard repeatedly from cardholders that access to banking remains a major unmet need for too many.

We simply have not yet been able to fully achieve our goal of achieving broad access and making a large-scale dent in the size of the unbanked and underbanked populations in the city. As a result, we are now in the process of exploring the possibility of adding a payment and banking feature on a “smart chip” on the IDNYC card. It is important to note that exploring means just that—we have taken this process seriously and understand the importance of engaging an array of voices to inform any decision. We began learning about technology options, including financial services, for future integrations, in 2017. We briefed elected officials and many organizations critical to the program in the summer of 2018 before deciding to launch a challenge with the Chief Technology Officer, and we shared updates in the late summer on what we had learned from our exploration. We then informed stakeholders in late 2018 that we would continue this process through a notice of intent to enter in to negotiations and that we would invite ongoing discussion as we learn more. In our notice, we asked interested parties to explain whether and how they could broaden financial access for New Yorkers while protecting cardholders’ information and offering a consumer-friendly financial product. That exploration is the process that is currently underway. We will continue to engage in conversations, and we appreciate and value the questions and concerns that have been raised throughout this process. We look forward to ensuring that all voices are heard, and that we can bring to any decision-making the voices of our partners as well as New Yorkers more broadly. I want to make very clear that if we are not satisfied that we can obtain the protections and benefits that we seek for IDNYC cardholders, we are not under any obligation to award a contract and will not do so.

In addition to seeking options for how we can expand access to financial services, we are also examining methods to increase integrations and access through IDNYC. By way of example, we are looking at how the IDNYC can serve as a contactless-payment Metrocard on MTA subways and buses. This is a function we have always hoped to be able to provide and has been one of the most consistent requests from cardholders and New Yorkers broadly. Now the MTA is in the process of adopting a contactless-payment turnstile system, slated to be in place citywide as early as 18 months from now. We have taken this opportunity into consideration in this process.

We have also been exploring how we can secure full acceptance of the IDNYC card by pharmacies for pick-up of prescription medications. Currently, the IDNYC is widely accepted by pharmacies for most purposes and pick-up of most prescription medications, thanks in part to a “Dear Pharmacist” letter from the commissioners of MOIA, DSS, and the Department of Health and Mental Hygiene and a notice we placed in the New York State *Medicaid Update* newsletter in 2016. However, because of technological card-scanning requirements imposed by pharmacies in response to federal methamphetamine control laws, the IDNYC has generally not been accepted for purposes of registration of a purchase of pharmaceutical products that contain methamphetamine precursors, like common medicines that include the very common decongestant pseudoephedrine. We are exploring whether this problem could be addressed by

adopting a 2D bar code on the IDNYC card, rather than the 1D bar code currently on the back of the card.

We also hope to expand the functionality of the IDNYC card through new state legislation. Although we have secured acceptance with a number of state agencies, including the Education Department, the Department of Health, and the Department of State, there are a number of areas in which state agencies' and private businesses' acceptance of the card has been limited by state laws that, in most cases, simply did not anticipate the creation of a municipality-issued identification card. We look forward to working with the City Council and others to explore possible state legislative solutions in these areas.

Lastly, among the most important and most immediate future needs of the IDNYC program will be card renewals, beginning just 11 months from now. We are well underway in the process of developing an efficient and easy-to-use renewal system, and we will share more information on that soon so that cardholders can plan to get their new IDNYC cards and continue to take advantage of the program.

It is important to reiterate that every decision that is made around IDNYC has held at its core a few key values and goals:

- ensuring access for vulnerable NYers who have been left without identification for too long;
- a commitment to protecting the privacy of cardholders;
- a commitment to program integrity and safety in partnership with NYPD and HRA's Investigation, Revenue and Enforcement Administration;
- a program that works for all New Yorkers to ensure no one is isolated or stigmatized for use of the card; and
- fulfilling our obligation to ensure the continued growth of the program, in consultation with myriad crucial voices, from the Council and advocates to cardholders and community-based organizations and other partners.

I want to end by thanking you for the opportunity to testify today and for the Council's partnership. And, if I may, I would like to add how deeply proud I have been to be a part of this program and how grateful I am to so many for these experiences. In particular, I want to say to the many staff who worked day and night to get things right and who continue to show up with the spirit of the program day in and day out, and to the over 1 million New Yorkers who have embraced IDNYC in ways that may have seemed unimaginable and those who enrolled in solidarity with those who lacked other options for identification: You have demonstrated that collectively we are New Yorkers and we all belong here, regardless of language, gender identity, homelessness, immigration status, and all of the other things that make us all unique New Yorkers.