

NYCitizenship puts thousands on the path to citizenship

Westat and Metis Associates' 2020 evaluation finds that the NYCitizenship program provides essential services to clients, who reported that they would not have otherwise been able to complete the naturalization process. The report also finds that the Community Navigator model improves program efficiency by providing necessary staff support with linguistic fluency and allowing attorneys to focus on more complex cases that required additional attention.

The evaluation used a robust mixed-methods approach, including 41 agency administrator and staff interviews, 36 client interviews, and site visits to three program locations between August and November 2019, combined with analysis of administrative data from the library systems, NYLAG, and DSS/HRA for the years 2017-2019.

“Honestly, it would have been very difficult for me [without the NYCitizenship program]. Just the legal fees would have been \$3,000 to \$3,500, from what I learned asking around.” –NYCitizenship Client

What Worked Well for NYCitizenship?

- **Partnering with credible institutions for outreach and engagement.** Both the library partners and DSS/HRA built on existing practices to engage residents in the program, leveraging roles as “safe spaces” and positive relationships with clients.
- **Engaging directly with community members.** Direct engagement with potential clients was found to be an effective messaging strategy. At the libraries, this included visits to local community groups, face-to-face engagement, and information sessions. At DSS/HRA, this included letters sent to clients and follow-up phone calls.
- **Community Navigator model.** Community Navigators model customized to meet the local context and the needs of the NYCitizenship program.
- **On-site legal services.** Providing legal services on-site at libraries and DSS/HRA was found to be critical to the program’s outreach and engagement strategies.
- **Effective coordination between primary program partners.** The NYCitizenship model was anchored by the partnership between MOIA, NYLAG (the legal service

What is NYCitizenship?

In 2016, NYCitizenship was established by the Mayor’s Office of Immigrant Affairs (MOIA) working in partnership with NYC’s Human Resources Administration (DSS/HRA) and the public library system to help immigrant New Yorkers complete the naturalization process. The program provides free legal services, financial counseling, and legal representation to eligible lawful permanent residents who have not yet applied for citizenship.

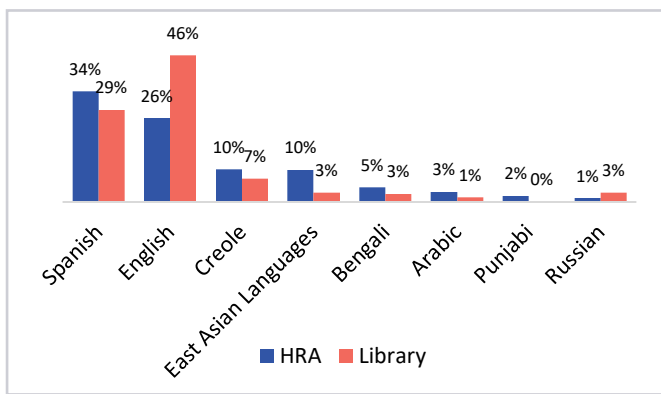
Outreach and services are provided to the community through DSS/HRA and the libraries systems, both credible institutions with established ties to the city’s immigrant population: the public library system: Legal assistance is provided by New York Legal Assistance Group (NYLAG), a legal aid group with ties to the immigrant community. Beginning in 2017, with support from the Mayor’s Office for Economic Opportunity (NYC Opportunity), the program incorporated Community Navigators: highly qualified paralegals with linguistic fluency who are equipped to interface directly with clients, support the completion of naturalization applications, and maintain ongoing oversight of open cases.

provider), and the credible institutions through which clients were reached.

Priority Components for Improvement:

- **Further develop outreach and engagement strategies in languages that match the needs of clients in each location.** For example, there were indications that East Asian immigrant communities may not be reached as effectively through the library partnership.

Preferred Languages of Clients Served in FY 2019



Languages included are those where either the library sites overall or the DSS/HRA site had at least 2% of the clients served represented. East Asian languages include Mandarin, Cantonese, and Korean. Percentages are based on overall clients served. NYCitizenship served many clients from English-speaking Caribbean countries.

- **Further empower Community Navigators to work independently of attorneys.** Due to their training and position as paralegals, Community Navigators provide a valuable but restricted scope of service. The addition of a Department of Justice (DOJ) Accreditation pathway for navigators may help to serve more people or yield greater efficiencies.
- **Consider full complexity of clients' legal needs.** The legal needs of clients were found to be more complex than expected for a variety of reasons: prerequisite renewal of client I-90/green cards, Freedom of Information Act (FOIA) requests, medical certification for disability exceptions. These cases required significantly more legal-service and administrative time to address.

Evaluation findings indicate that the program model did not account for this level of complexity with respect to thresholds and types of deliverables measured, which had a limiting effect on program capacity.

- **Identify and secure space suitable to legal teams' work.** Legal teams faced challenges that included difficulty obtaining the necessary privacy to effectively meet with multiple clients at once and inconsistent access to physical and technological resources.
- **Identify and map responsibilities among both primary and additional secondary partners.** Stakeholders described uncertain divisions of responsibility, ambiguous messaging between partners.

Priority Components for Replication:

- Strong legal services and administrative/paralegal assistants (referred to as Community Navigators in the current implementation) who are hired from within the communities they serve and that are well supported with proper space, technology, and other resources.
- Credible institutions as partners, which should be organizations that have an established and trust-based relationship with local immigrant communities.
- Strong partnerships with close communication, responsibility sharing, and clear lines of demarcation (and complementary skills as well as needs).
- Service targets and metrics calibrated to the complex nature of services provided.

Looking Ahead

One of the key learnings from the implementation of the NYCitizenship program is the diverse immigration legal services needs of immigrant communities at libraries, many of which required support with cases outside the scope of the program.

In January 2021, NYCitizenship will transition to ActionNYC in Libraries, which will not only continue to screen and handle naturalization cases, but also broaden capacity to handle other forms of immigration relief. ActionNYC is a citywide initiative that provides immigrant New Yorkers with free comprehensive legal screenings and provides application assistance for a wide range of cases, including green card renewals, Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals (DACA) renewals, Temporary Protected Status (TPS) applications, and citizenship applications. Individuals also receive other ancillary benefits, including referrals for non-immigration-legal needs including food assistance, education assistance and opportunities, housing support, non-immigration legal services, mental health services, and health care.

This transition will maintain partnerships with the Brooklyn Public Library, New York Public Library, and Queens Public Library, as well as DSS/HRA who will be providing administrative support. Services will be advertised within participating library branches, through traditional community outreach efforts in neighborhoods surrounding the library branches, and via the ActionNYC Hotline which is promoted citywide. For efficiency and cohesion, all staff will manage appointments using ActionNYC's system-wide scheduling infrastructure.

DSS/HRA will continue to conduct targeted outreach to individuals in their database and will provide citizenship services to ensure the continuation of this essential program for their clients.

Further Reading:

- **NYCitizenship Program Evaluation Report:**
<https://www1.nyc.gov/assets/opportunity/pdf/evidence/nycitizenship-evaluation-report-2020.pdf>
- **Further Information about DSS/HRA's Immigration Resources:**
http://www.nyc.gov/html/hra/html/services/language_services_en.shtml
- **Further Information about MOIA's Citizenship:**
<https://www1.nyc.gov/site/immigrants/help/legal-services/citizenship.page>