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

Before the  
New York City Council Committee on Immigration

Hearing on Intro. No. 253  
To Create a New York City Identity Card Program



Good morning. Thank you, Mindy, for the introduction and for so clearly laying out the groundwork on the Municipal ID. Thank you again to Chairman Menchaca and Councilmember Dromm, members of the Committee, Speaker Mark-Viverito and Council for advancing such a critical issue. My name is Nisha Agarwal and I am the Commissioner of the Mayor's Office of Immigrant Affairs. I welcome the opportunity to speak further about the Municipal ID.

As the Commissioner of the Mayor's Office of Immigrant Affairs (MOIA), my role is to advance our City chartered mandate to work with the Mayor and Council to create policies and programs that improve the lives of immigrant New Yorkers. This mandate clearly encompasses today's legislation – for which we commend the Council's leadership – and Mayor de Blasio's charge to us of ensuring the creation and solid implementation of the Municipal ID card. My Office's work also includes collaborating across the administration to support programs that bolster access to services and well-being for all New Yorkers, whether their immigrant ancestry is recent or generations ago. In that light, we are clear that the Municipal ID is a ground-breaking program that will reach beyond immigrants to all of our communities.

Before I discuss the program in more detail, I would like to speak briefly about my own professional experience which has centered on increasing access to services for marginalized populations, including but not limited to immigrants. Before I joined the De Blasio administration, I worked on increasing access to legal services for immigrant New Yorkers and improving language access in pharmacies. As a civil rights lawyer, I worked on cases and campaigns to ensure that all New Yorkers, regardless of race, citizenship, language or disability, are able to access all our City has to offer on equal terms. Recently, I was part of the Center for Popular Democracy's research effort to study the implementation of municipal identification cards across the country, as a vehicle to understand how our city could learn and improve upon other cities' programs.

As such, increasing access to our city's services, attractions and spaces to more New Yorkers who currently struggle to obtain a basic entryway – a form of government identification – is a natural continuation of my work over the years and a key aspect of MOIA's leadership on issues of equality and unity. It's our view that the proposed municipal identification card will serve as a unifying force across many communities, providing valid identification to many who have lacked access to identification while providing meaningful benefits to those who already have access to identification. It is also our view that the Municipal ID would allow more New Yorkers of all backgrounds to more easily access City services, public and private programming, and increase participation in our local economy by accessing banking and financial empowerment services. Of course, part of our commitment is a response to the very harsh





realities faced by undocumented immigrants – estimated to number approximately 500,000 in NYC— who face numerous obstacles as a result of not having government issued identification. For example, undocumented immigrants and other communities without identification may fear law enforcement; are often afraid to report housing and labor violations; or have a harder time signing leases and opening bank accounts or visiting their children’s schools. I want to emphasize that these obstacles are not faced by our undocumented communities alone – it is a real issue for many marginalized communities such as our elders, victims of domestic violence, runaway and other disconnected youth, the disabled, transgendered individuals and those who are re-entering our society after incarceration. In other words, it is clear that many communities beyond immigrants will benefit from the Municipal ID and, indeed, to avoid a reality in which the card is viewed as an immigrant card, it is crucial that the card has widespread appeal and we support a program that meets this goal.

### **Benefits and Program Support**

One of the ways we will meet this goal is to build many benefits into the Municipal ID so that the card is meaningful to all New Yorkers. We are still in the early stages of planning for the Municipal ID, but I can share with you some of the benefits that we support. To begin, the Municipal ID should be broadly recognized and accepted by City agencies. We would like to ensure, for example, that parents will be able to use the Municipal ID to gain entry into their child’s school. Our goal is also that the Municipal ID will enable New Yorkers who previously lacked government-issued identification to better access private sector services. For example, our hope is that the Municipal ID will serve as the government issued photo documentation needed to get a bank account, so New Yorkers can avoid predatory financial services like check cashers.

These benefits and others will assist communities that have been needlessly marginalized in their day-to-day interactions with the City. But, again, I want to emphasize that the Municipal ID is an identification card that will benefit all New Yorkers, even those with government-issued photo ID. If this legislation is enacted, we would work with City agencies and private sector entities across the five boroughs to explore how we might embed the Municipal ID with benefits and discounts at educational, arts and cultural institutions, restaurants and other small businesses, transportation and an array of other services. Importantly, even after the Municipal ID program has launched, it would be important to continue working to expand the suite of benefits available to card holders, to ensure that this is a program that grows over the years. We are open to hearing ideas from the Council and others on additional benefits and services that could be attached to the card.



Beyond the benefits of the Municipal ID, I'd like to share our ongoing efforts to engage communities and learn from other cities' experiences. To this end, we have been hearing and learning from three layers of advisors – (1) community advocates representing diverse communities in New York, (2) other municipalities who have implemented similar programs across the country, and (3) our governmental partners to prepare to support the program.

On the community level, we have been in active conversation with the Arab American Association of NY, the New York Legal Assistance Group, Make the Road NY, the New Economy Project, Faith in NY, Center for Popular Democracy, Picture the Homeless, Northern Manhattan Coalition for Immigrant Rights, the New York Civil Liberties Union, the New York Immigration Coalition, and many other leaders from the advocacy, business and faith communities. These groups, along with many others, have been extremely helpful in informing our thinking. In terms of other municipalities, we have learned from the experiences of Oakland, Los Angeles and San Francisco in California, as well as New Haven in Connecticut. While the scale in these other cities is not comparable to New York, we have gleaned many important lessons that would inform our effort here. On the governmental side, we have spoken to the NYS Department of Motor Vehicles at the State level, governmental partners such as CUNY and all three of NYC's library systems and many City Agencies, including the Department of Homeless Services, Department of Corrections, the New York Police Department, Mayor's Community Affairs Unit, Department of Cultural Affairs, Department of Finance, Department of Environmental Protection, Department of Finance, Department of Consumer Affairs, Taxi and Limousine Commission, Small Business Services, Department of Transportation, Department of Parks and Recreation and others. Our Agencies have been incredibly committed to the success of this proposed program and I have no doubt that robust partnerships with our Agencies would be at the heart of the Municipal ID.

### **Outreach**

We are clear that widespread adoption is critical for the card to be most meaningful and have preliminary ideas for an expansive outreach strategy to reach every neighborhood through a citywide campaign. For any outreach effort on Municipal ID, MOIA would work closely with the Mayor's Community Affairs Unit and Operations, alongside our trusted community partners who have proposed working closely with us to accomplish our shared goals of seeing the Municipal ID get into the hands of as many New Yorkers as possible. We would look to partner closely with the Department of Education, City Agencies, and others with strong and widespread touch-points all across the five boroughs. We would also plan to leverage the capacity of our Agencies and the Mayor's Community Affairs Unit, who already have relationships in the community, to provide accurate information on the program and help





steer residents to efficiently accessing the card. We would anticipate promoting the card through social media, community and educational institutions, famous New Yorkers, foreign consulates, faith-based institutions and beyond. And, we look forward to the prospect of working with your local offices to help your constituents get the Municipal ID and make the program a resounding success.

Thank you again for inviting us to provide testimony today. I welcome any questions, now or any time after the hearing.