

Testimony Of Commissioner Steven Banks, New York City Department of Social Services

Before the New York City Council's Immigration Committee

HRA's Fiscal Year 2018 Preliminary Budget

March 22, 2017

Good morning Chairman Menchaca. Thank you for inviting me to appear before you today to discuss the programs and services for immigrant communities provided by New York City's Department of Social Services (DSS). My name is Steven Banks and I am the Commissioner of the Department of Social Services which oversees the work of the New York City Human Resources Administration (HRA) and the Department of Homeless Services (DHS). I am joined by Grace Bonilla, HRA Administrator.

HRA is the nation's largest social services agency assisting over three million New Yorkers annually through the administration of more than 12 major public assistance programs. With an annual budget of \$9.9 billion, HRA provides assistance and services to three million low-income children and adults. These programs and services include: Cash Assistance, Supplemental Nutritional Assistance Program benefits (food stamps), Medicaid, and Child Support Services; homelessness prevention assistance; educational, vocational and employment services; assistance for persons with disabilities; services for immigrants; civil legal aid; disaster relief; and for the most vulnerable New Yorkers: HIV/AIDS Services, Adult Protective Services, Home Care, and programs for survivors of domestic violence. DSS also administers the nation's largest and most successful municipal identification program, IDNYC. Since its launch in January of 2015, after the Mayor signed legislation sponsored by Councilmembers Menchaca and Dromm, IDNYC is a proven success with over 900,000 New Yorkers enrolled.

Additionally, HRA is committed to helping individuals gain access to comprehensive affordable health insurance; providing enrollment assistance through Certified Application Counselors placed at HRA's Medicaid offices citywide; and providing coordinated outreach, education, and training through DSS's Office of Citywide Health Insurance Access.

In providing these core services, each year HRA addresses the needs of three million low-income New Yorkers, including immigrants. Since 2014, as a means of enhancing client services, HRA established the Office of Advocacy and Access (OCAA) to ensure all New Yorkers have equal access to benefits and services. Following the integration at DSS, this office is now working to ensure equal access to benefits and services at both HRA and DHS. OCAA includes the Office of Refugee and Immigrant Affairs (ORIA), which is a unit exclusively dedicated to clients with limited English proficiency (LEP) and immigrants. OCAA also houses three additional teams: LGBTQI Affairs, Disability Affairs, and Special Populations, which focuses on youth, seniors, and justice-involved individuals.

Recognizing the positive outcomes of ensuring equal access to benefits, the goals of DSS's Language and Immigrant Access work are as follows:

- Providing guidance and expertise to HRA and DHS program areas to ensure access to services for immigrant and LEP New Yorkers;
- Ensuring that HRA and DHS's programs are in compliance with federal, state and local immigrant access and language access laws;
- Working with and supporting HRA and DHS programs to develop and promote policies and tools to help staff provide client services to immigrant and LEP New Yorkers; and
- Strengthening relationships with community groups to respond to inquiries and gather feedback on HRA and DHS services/programs.

Agency-wide, HRA accomplished the following last year:

- Technology improvements:
 - ACCESSNYC is fully translated into six languages: Arabic, Traditional Chinese, Haitian Creole, Korean, Russian, and Spanish.
 - The Agency also has new self-service procedures, including self-service check-in and scanning. These tools are available in the same languages as Access NYC (Arabic, Traditional Chinese, Haitian Creole, Korean, Russian, and Spanish).
 - New mobile document uploading, which allows clients to submit eligibility documents via a smart-phone, is available in Arabic, Traditional Chinese, French, Korean, Spanish, and Russian.
 - The SNAP on-demand phone system is fully functional in Arabic, Bengali, Cantonese, Haitian Creole, Korean, Mandarin, Russian, Spanish, and Urdu. The system also gives a static message about how to request interpretation services in Polish, Albanian, French, Hindi, Vietnamese, and Greek.
 - The Agency launched a pilot to gauge the effectiveness of using tablets with Video Remote Interpretation (VRI) services to communicate with limited English proficient (LEP) clients at Family Independence Administration (FIA) walk-in centers in Queens.

These technologies allow multilingual access and together these processes effectively reduce client wait times in the center and for benefits determinations.

Washington Heights Workforce1 Career Center

Last summer, a new Washington Heights Workforce1 Career Center opened. New York City is home to more than three million immigrants and this location is the first location to offer tailored employment, training, and supportive services to the City's immigrant workforce. The center's programming was developed through a partnership between the Human Resources Administration/Department of Social Services (HRA/DSS), the Department of Small Business Services (SBS), and the Robin Hood Foundation. It serves residents of all five boroughs, and

accepts referrals from the City's existing network of 17 Workforce1 Career Centers, as well as community-based organizations.

For the first time, the Washington Heights Workforce1 center features an integrated team of SBS and HRA staff. The following Global Talent Pipeline services are available on-site at the center:

- Customized workshops to help foreign-born job candidates develop a better understanding of the workplace and conduct a successful job search.
- Pre-training programs featuring English as a Second Language (ESL) support.
- Advanced occupational training programs in key industry sectors – including healthcare, technology, transportation, food service and construction.
- Connection to living-wage jobs with employers who are seeking bilingual staff.
- Guidance and direct access to HRA benefits, such as cash and food assistance – including the ability to apply for SNAP (food stamps).
- Connection to social services provided by community-based organizations serving foreign-born New Yorkers.

NYCitizenship

Since the March 2016 launch of NYCitizenship, a collaboration between HRA and MOIA, HRA has conducted outreach to 1,300 immigrant clients with disabilities who are potentially eligible to become U.S. Citizens and thereafter able to receive federal disability benefits. As a result, 340 clients were found eligible to apply for citizenship.

In Year 2 of NYCitizenship, HRA will target senior clients for assistance, a group who would also greatly benefit from naturalization so that they can receive federal social security benefits based their past earnings.

IDNYC

As Commissioner Agarwal described, IDNYC, the largest municipal identification program in the country, is directly operated by DSS through a joint initiative with the Mayor's Office of Immigrant Affairs and the Mayor's Office of Operations.

Since its launch, more than 900,000 New Yorkers have obtained their IDNYC and we operate 22 permanent locations with four or five additional pop-up enrollment sites, at any given time, across the five boroughs. And earlier this month the IDNYC command center launched which will serve as a mobile enrollment center.

The baseline budget for IDNYC is \$18.7 million and with 241 positions in FY17, the Jan Plan reflects funding to support the continued operation of the IDNYC program with baseline funding at \$18.7 million in FY18.

The “back office” infrastructure for this program, which includes the front-facing enrollment staff as well as the back-end review staff and all equipment, sits within DSS; nearly every part of

our agency has contributed to the effort to make IDNYC the most successful municipal identification program in the country.

Legal Services Programs through the Office of Civil Justice

As we recently testified before the Courts and Legal Services Committee of the Council, this Administration has made an extraordinary investment in legal services to level the playing field for low-income New Yorkers facing potentially life-changing legal challenges related to housing and immigration. The Mayor and the Speaker just announced a further expansion of access to justice through the five-year phase-in of universal access to counsel in Housing Court eviction cases. The de Blasio Administration's support for and funding of civil legal services make New York City a national leader in providing such services for low-income families and individuals. The provision of civil legal assistance is a part of HRA's overall effort to address poverty, fight income inequality, and prevent homelessness.

In Fiscal Year 2017, for the first time, New York City's overall investment in civil legal services for low-income City residents exceeds \$100 million across a range of areas including immigration, access to benefits, support for survivors of domestic violence, assistance for veterans, and anti-eviction legal services and other legal assistance for tenants in need.

Specifically, the January 2018 Plan includes funding as follows:

- **\$14.0 million** for immigration legal assistance, which includes \$5.9 million for legal assistance programs including the Immigrant Opportunities Initiative (IOI); \$6.0 million for legal and navigation services as well as outreach through the ActionNYC program operated in partnership with MOIA and CUNY; and \$2.1 million in immigration legal programs funded by the federal Community Service Block Grant program, which last week the Trump Administration targeted for elimination – and we will oppose this counterproductive cut that will affect many other services;
- **\$62.2 million** for legal services programs for tenants facing eviction, harassment and displacement, which includes \$28.8 million for eviction defense legal services for low-income tenants in Housing Court and \$33.4 million for anti-harassment/displacement legal services, as well as administrative and staff support;
- **\$2.1 million** for civil legal services for seniors; and
- **\$1.9 million** for legal services for access to federal benefits such as SSI

In addition to the Administration's commitment to supporting civil legal services, I want to again acknowledge the ongoing commitment of City Council Speaker Melissa Mark-Viverito and the entire City Council to expanding access to justice by funding legal services. In FY17, HRA is overseeing \$24.5 million in funding added by the City Council for legal services for the working poor; immigration legal defense services for detained individuals, unaccompanied minors, and families with children facing deportation; assistance for survivors of domestic violence and

veterans; anti-eviction and SRO legal services; and general support for civil legal services providers.

Together with the Council, this year the City has committed over \$111 million for civil legal services for low-income New Yorkers. No other city allocates even a small fraction of what New York City is committing to provide access to civil justice.

A key focus of our civil legal services program is legal counsel for immigrants. HRA oversees an array of legal services programs for immigrant New Yorkers in need of legal advice, assistance, and representation. We work in close partnership with our colleagues at the Mayor's Office of Immigrant Affairs (MOIA) and with the legal services providers and community-based organizations (CBOs) to understand the legal needs experienced by immigrant New Yorkers and the fastest and most effective service responses to these needs.

Through our immigrant legal assistance programs, we are making available qualified and culturally competent attorneys to help immigrant New Yorkers navigate the immigration legal system, achieve status, protect the rights of immigrant workers, and provide counsel and support for immigrant survivors of trafficking and domestic violence.

In FY17, the Administration baselined \$3.2 million in funding for the Immigrant Opportunity Initiative (IOI). Through IOI, networks of legal providers and CBOs, which were selected through a competitive bidding process, conduct outreach in immigrant communities across the city, and provide legal assistance to low-income immigrant New Yorkers in matters ranging from citizenship and lawful permanent residency applications, to more complex immigration matters, including asylum applications and deportation defense work. In FY17, in recognition of the need for quality legal representation for immigrant New Yorkers in more complicated legal cases, IOI providers received supplemental Mayoral funding of \$2.7 million to provide representation in 1,000 complex immigration cases. The Council similarly added \$2.6 million to support immigration legal services as part of the IOI program. In total, IOI is funded at approximately \$8.5 million for FY17 and is expected to serve approximately 5,000 New Yorkers in need of immigration legal advice and representation.

Importantly, the IOI program is flexible and can respond to emergent needs. Our contracts with the IOI service provider consortia allow for rapid deployment of staff and resources to address legal needs of the immigrant community across the continuum of service, from brief legal counseling sessions to full legal representation in deportation and asylum matters. In addition, our agreements with the providers include funding and support for outreach and case management, which are critical components to creating meaningful access to justice for immigrant New Yorkers.

In addition to IOI, HRA oversees immigration legal services programs funded through Community Service Block Grants, administered by HRA in partnership with the Department of Youth and Community Development (DYCD). With CSBG funding – that the Trump Administration proposes to eliminate – community-based legal services organizations provide a range of services such as legal assistance to help immigrant adults and youth attain citizenship and lawful immigration status; legal and social services for immigrant survivors of domestic

violence and human trafficking; and services designed to provide information, education, advocacy and legal services to protect low-wage immigrants from exploitation and violations of their employment rights. These services are expected to serve approximately 2,000 individuals in FY17, funded at \$2.1 million.

OCJ also oversees immigration legal services programs funded through Council discretionary grants. The New York Immigrant Family Unity Project (NYIFUP) is funded by a City Council discretionary grant providing legal representation for detained immigrants in the United States. This in-court legal representation for immigrant New Yorkers in detention facing deportation assists those who cannot afford an attorney. NYIFUP is funded at \$6.2 million for FY17 and is expected to serve approximately 1,250 individuals in FY17. OCJ is also administering a \$247,000 Council discretionary grant to the Vera Institute of Justice to support the creation of a report and evaluation of the NYIFUP program, due in June of this year. The report is expected to shed new light on the impact of the program, the immigrants facing deportation who have been served by the providers and other aspects of the program's first two-and-a-half years.

OCJ also administers the Unaccompanied Minors Initiative (UMI) / Immigrant Children Advocates Relief Effort (ICARE) which was developed by the City Council in partnership with the Robin Hood Foundation and the New York Community Trust to provide legal and social services to address the surge of immigrant children living in New York City. The program provides unaccompanied immigrant and refugee children in New York City with counsel, the opportunity to apply for relief from removal, and the opportunity to receive much-needed social, medical and mental health services. Many of these children are eligible for a range of statutory protections, including asylum, for those fleeing past and future persecution; Special Immigrant Juvenile Status (SIJS) for children who have been abused, neglected, or abandoned; U or T visas for those who have been victims of certain crimes or human trafficking and the favorable exercise of prosecutorial discretion resulting in administrative closure. With \$1.5 million in City funding for FY17, the program is expected to serve approximately 900 individuals.

Finally, I would like to provide a brief update on the implementation of HRA's Employment Plan. As HRA no longer takes a one-size-fits-all approach to employment, we will be matching clients with opportunities which suit their skills and give them the best chance for long-term career pathway success. Accordingly, HRA will begin on April 3 new career services programs for HRA Cash Assistance clients, including those who have limited English proficiency and/or are immigrants. These are our CareerCompass, CareerAdvance and YouthPathways programs.

In addition to these programs, the career services contractors will be able to leverage an array of HRA employment programs for clients served through the new contracts as well as external sources for program services from partners.

Within our new ESL employment services, through our Career Advance program, we will work with more than 600 LEP clients, who have a federal or state work activity requirement. These new client-centered employment programs will address their particular needs as ESL clients.

Thank you for this opportunity to testify and we look forward to your questions.