

2009 CITY BUDGET & LEGISLATIVE PRIORITIES: Issue Backgrounder: HEALTHCARE

ASSURE IMMIGRANTS' ACCESS TO HEALTH CARE: UPHOLD THE LAW AND PRESERVE THE SAFETY NET

In this time of fiscal crisis, access to health care is a critical issue for all New Yorkers. Immigrants are particularly vulnerable to the current economic downturn because they are much less likely to work in jobs that provide health insurance benefits. Noncitizens are three times more likely than citizens to lack insurance and are less likely to seek medical care, including emergency care. Many immigrants lack clear information about their rights to health care, and are either barred from enrolling, or are afraid to use, government insurance programs.

As the government expands health insurance programs using the federal economic stimulus funds, it is critical that New York do more to bring immigrants into the health care and insurance systems. Immigrants need accurate information from trusted sources in a language they can understand, in order to overcome their fears about enrolling in public health insurance programs and to manage their chronic conditions before they become emergencies. New York City should invest in community-based consumer assistance programs that serve the uninsured. The failure of hospitals, pharmacies, and Medicaid offices to communicate with limited-

English-proficient New Yorkers remains a serious problem that results in medical harm and lack of access to care. More resources must be devoted to improving communication in the City's health care and public benefits systems. With better communication, New York can prepare for public health emergencies, deliver high quality, cost-effective care, and reduce medical errors.

The City must place a higher priority on providing communication access to the two million New Yorkers who cannot access city services using English. The Mayor's Executive Order 120, and Local Law 73 must both be fully phased in by 2009 and together cover the Human Resources Administration's public benefits and Medicaid offices, as well as the NYC Health and Hospitals Corporation. The City also has a new opportunity to increase language access services in pharmacies by passing Intro 859 (Public Advocate Gotbaum), which requires pharmacies to provide free language assistance about medications.

The city must continue to invest in the health care safety net to provide uninsured New Yorkers with the preventive, primary and specialty care they need to stay healthy. In the face of the deepening economic crisis, the need for the Health and Hospital Corporation's services will only increase as more New Yorkers lose their jobs and insurance coverage, and face declining incomes. New York City must safeguard HHC's vital services. The City's Child Health Clinics provide children and adolescents a "medical home" and help enroll more children in public health insurance coverage. While a recent Primary Care Assessment found that half of New Yorkers report that dentists are the most difficult type of provider to find, the Mayor has proposed to eliminate the city's Oral Health Services.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Require HRA to Meet Its Communication Assistance Mandates.

Fund the New York Immigration Coalitions' Immigrant Health Access and Advocacy Collaborative

Pass Intro 859 (Gotbaum) to improve language access at NYC pharmacies.

Restore \$6.5 million for Child Health Clinics and preserve funding for Oral Health Clinics

Safeguard HHC funding in the budget

Allocate an additional \$1 million for interpreting services

Restore \$2.4 million for fee waivers for medications

Invest \$3 million in Primary Care Services

Create a Workforce Development Initiative.



The NYIC seeks support from the City for its *Immigrant Health Access and Advocacy Collaborative*, a unique and highly effective model for helping thousands of newcomers to navigate the health care and insurance mazes. The Collaborative—a partnership with the NYIC, legal service groups, and diverse immigrant community organizations—helps newcomers to resolve medical

billing and health insurance problems, obtain health care discounts and navigate the health care and public benefits systems. This consumer advocacy program has provided education and assistance to tens of thousands of New Yorkers, connecting them to health care and insurance in Spanish, Russian, Chinese, Korean, Haitian Creole, Bengali, Arabic, Urdu, Serbo-Croatian, English and Tagalog.

In line with the Mayor’s goal of creating jobs to get New Yorkers through the economic crisis, a workforce development initiative is needed to bring more bilingual New Yorkers into the health and mental health fields. Thousands of New Yorkers have the desire to enter the healing professions and the City should provide training and scholarships to grow a culturally and linguistically competent health care workforce.

Detailed Recommendations:

Require HRA to Meet Its Communication Assistance Mandates. Hold HRA accountable for providing appropriate communication with limited-English-proficient New Yorkers who seek public benefits, including Medicaid, as required by Executive Order 120 and Local Law 73.

Restore \$6.5 million for the City’s Child Health Clinics and preserve funding for Oral Health Clinics. This funding provides necessary health services to uninsured New Yorkers, and supports partnerships with community-based organizations conducting outreach and connecting community members to health care, especially in linguistically isolated, immigrant, and other underserved communities.

Safeguard Health and Hospitals Corporation funding in the budget.

- ***Allocate an additional \$1 million for interpreting services.*** Expand the TEMIS system – an effective and cost efficient electronic, simultaneous interpreting system used within HHC.
- ***Restore \$2.4 million for fee waivers for medications.*** This funding is crucial to guarantee that uninsured low-income outpatients are able to obtain their medications in HHC facilities by providing a waiver of the medication administrative fee.
- ***Invest \$3 million in Primary Care Services.*** New York City should continue to identify underserved communities and invest in new primary care resources, so that all New Yorkers can stay healthy. The NYIC recommends \$3 million in new funds to expand primary care and to implement the recommendations of the Primary Care Initiative, to be allocated through HHC.

Fund the New York Immigration Coalitions’ Immigrant Health Access and Advocacy Collaborative. Provide funding for community organizations to participate in the NYIC’s consumer assistance program to connect thousands of uninsured New Yorkers to a regular source of quality, affordable medical care, and resolve insurance and billing problems.

Pass Intro 859 (Gotbaum) to improve language access at pharmacies in New York City. The legislation would mandate that pharmacies in New York City translate important medication information and provide free communication assistance to limited-English-proficient patients.

Create a Workforce Development Initiative. Fund training and scholarships to enable bilingual and bicultural individuals to enter the health, mental health, and social work professions.