

2009 CITY BUDGET & LEGISLATIVE PRIORITIES Issue Backgrounder: IMMIGRANT SERVICES

SUPPORT ENGLISH CLASSES & LEGAL SERVICES FOR IMMIGRANTS

Immigrants recognize that learning to speak English is the single most important thing they can do to succeed in America. New York City is home to more than 3 million immigrants, with 100,000 newcomers arriving each year, including many who have not yet had the opportunity to learn English. As New York struggles to get through the economic downturn, government should do more to help the city's most disadvantaged workers to gain the English language skills that they need to hold onto jobs and advance up the economic ladder.

Currently, fewer than 60,000 spots are available in affordable, government-funded adult English classes, at the same time there are nearly 2 million limited-English-proficient adults residing in the city. **For every New Yorker enrolled in a government supported ESL class, there are 20 more who need to learn but can't afford classes.** While New York remains the world's greatest gateway for migration, the city is failing to provide the supports that newcomers need in order to integrate fully into society and succeed in the workforce.

Immigrant workers have been deeply impacted job losses in the construction industry and service sector. The city must address immigrants' needs by investment in adult English, job training, and civics classes, as well as legal services to help immigrants protect themselves from employment-related abuse.

English Language, Civics, Literacy, GED Classes

As New York City's population becomes more diverse, mastering the English language is not only

RECOMMENDATIONS

Fully restore the Immigrant Opportunities Initiative (IOI) at \$11.25 million in the FY 2009 budget.

Fully restore the Adult Literacy Initiative at \$1.5 million in the FY 2009 budget.

necessary for immigrants to become citizens, but also enables them to access quality health care, increase their safety at the workplace, move from low-skilled jobs to higher-skilled and higher-paying jobs, and play an active role in their children's education.

Many immigrants' desire to learn English is stifled by the lack of opportunities to do so. **Only 3.4% of New York City's estimated need for adult English classes is**

being met. Insufficient funding and long waiting lists for English classes prevent immigrants from learning the language and fully participating in our society.

English language and civics instruction has become more vital than ever to helping immigrants become U.S. citizens. The recent changes to the citizenship naturalization exam make it much harder to pass without adequate language and civics instruction. Without support for adult education funding, citizenship will increasingly be out of reach for much of the immigrant population.

As a vehicle for economic recovery, New York City needs to place greater emphasis on ESL and adult education; these programs require only modest government investment and produce tangible, immediate economic benefits. Immigrants help fill jobs in growing sectors of the city's economy – retail, customer service, healthcare, construction, and small business – when they are equipped with the language skills to do these jobs. And immigrant parents can better communicate with teachers and health care providers about their children's education and medical needs when they have the language skills to do so.

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Immigration Legal Services

Immigrants are frequently the victims of scam artists and other self-styled “experts” who, in exchange for huge sums of money, promise work permits and green cards to anyone, regardless of the person’s eligibility. Too often, immigrants end up facing deportation as a result of these scams.

Immigrants in New York City desperately need affordable and trustworthy immigration legal services. The process of applying for permanent resident status, sponsoring family members, and becoming a naturalized U.S. citizen are complex and filled with legal and bureaucratic pitfalls that can derail a family’s ability to stay together. The city can help address this situation by funding competent and reputable nonprofit immigration service providers. The city should also fund community education and outreach, so that basic legal information is available not only to individuals actively seeking help but to immigrants who too often fall prey to scam artists.

Immigrant Worker Legal Services

Immigrant workers continue to be vulnerable to exploitation, discrimination, and wage-and-hour violations in the workplace. Unscrupulous employers frequently violate overtime, minimum wage, workers’ compensation, and anti-discrimination laws, knowing that immigrant workers are generally reluctant to seek justice out of fear of retaliation and deportation. Too many employers simply refuse to pay immigrants the minimum wage, and many fail to pay day laborers any wages for the work they’ve completed. Free and low-cost legal services help put an end to these abuses by enabling workers to file wage-and-hour complaints, report health and safety violations, and access workers’ compensation benefits.

An innovative Immigrant Worker Legal Services program funded by the city supports training and technical assistance for community-based organizations that provide legal services to low-wage workers. As a result of this program, one group in Queens won a judgment for \$192,000 in back pay for an immigrant worker after years of exploitative wage violations. All told, nearly \$1 million in unpaid wages has been recovered during the three years this program has been funded. Funding is set to expire at the end of FY 2008 and should be extended.

Detailed Recommendations:

Immigrant workers are an essential component of New York’s labor force, and the city has an historic opportunity to address their needs in its use of federal economic stimulus funds.

Fully restore the Immigrant Opportunities Initiative (IOI) at \$11.25 million in the FY 2009 budget. Provide English and civics classes, immigration legal services, and immigrant worker legal services. These services should be institutionalized by base lining IOI in the city budget. There should be a competitive and transparent request for proposals process to promptly allocate IOI funds to nonprofit organizations that can best deliver services.

Fully restore the Adult Literacy Initiative at \$1.5 million in the FY 2009 budget. The Adult Literacy Initiative supports community-based adult education programs that provide English for speakers of other languages, adult basic education, general equivalency diplomas for adults.