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Support English Classes & Legal Services for Immigrants

New Yorkers of all backgrounds feel the pain of our economic downturn, which has affected every community in our state with economic uncertainty, unemployment, and cuts in critical services.

More than 37 percent of New York City's population is foreign-born, and more than one million New Yorkers do not speak English well. A lack of proficiency in English remains one of the primary barriers to employment and economic mobility: 1 in 3 adults with limited English proficiency lives below 100 percent of the federal poverty guideline, and nearly 2 in 3 live below 200 percent of the poverty line.

Immigrant workers have been hit hard by the economic downturn, suffering significant job losses in the construction industry and allied trades as well as in the service sector. But creating new jobs is not enough. We must ensure that New Yorkers have the skills and education they need to *get* those jobs. The city can address the needs of immigrant communities by investing in adult English classes, job training, and legal services to help immigrants protect themselves from employment-related abuse.

English Language Classes and Workforce Development

Immigrants recognize that learning to speak English is the single most important thing they can do to succeed in America. As New York struggles to get through the economic downturn, government should do more to help the city's most disadvantaged workers gain the English language skills they need to advance up the economic ladder.

Recommendations

- Fully Restore the Immigrant Opportunities Initiative (IOI) in the FY'11 budget.
- Deliver on the \$3 million ESL commitment to serve an additional 5000 immigrant New Yorkers and develop the 10-year ESL blueprint.
- Fully Restore the Adult Literacy initiative at \$1.5 million in the FY budget.
- Begin the process of institutionalizing the Immigrant Opportunities Initiative.

Many immigrants' desire to learn English is stifled by the lack of opportunities to do so. Currently, only about 50,000 New Yorkers receive ESL classes, but there are nearly 2 million New Yorkers who do not yet speak English well or at all. Insufficient funding and long waiting lists for English classes prevent immigrants from learning the language and fully participating in our society.

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, including a better-trained and more competitive workforce.



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 “services.”

Immigrants in New York City desperately need affordable and trustworthy immigration legal services. Applicants for citizenship require legal assistance to complete the application and interview process. As application fees have skyrocketed, more applicants are seeking fee waivers, which require additional legal assistance to complete.

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.

Detailed Recommendations:

Fully restore the Immigrant Opportunities Initiative (IOI) in the FY 2011 budget. These funds support English classes, immigration legal services, and immigrant worker legal services to help immigrants on the road to citizenship and better jobs. The Mayor’s FY 2011 executive budget proposal completely eliminates the Immigrant Opportunities Initiative. As is the case every year, it is now up to the City Council to restore these critical programs. Funding for IOI was grossly inadequate to begin with; adding insult to injury, these services have been cut by more than 50 percent in the last three years.

Deliver on the \$3 million ESL commitment to serve an additional 5,000 immigrant New Yorkers and develop the 10-year ESL blueprint. During the 2009 mayoral race, Mayor Bloomberg committed to increasing funding for English classes by 10 percent and working with immigrant communities to develop a comprehensive blueprint for ESL education in New York City. We urge Mayor Bloomberg to deliver on that promise and work with communities on the most effective use of the \$3 million toward ESL.

Fully restore the Adult Literacy Initiative at \$1.5 million in the FY 2011 budget. The Adult Literacy Initiative supports community-based adult education programs that provide English classes, adult basic education, general-equivalency-diploma classes, and basic education in native languages for adults.

Begin the process of institutionalizing the Immigrant Opportunities Initiative. Over the long term, the continuity and success of quality English classes and legal services requires that IOI funding be institutionalized. We urge the City Council to work with Mayor Bloomberg to develop We urge the NYC Council to work with us to develop a fair, transparent, and expedient process for allocating IOI funds to the highest need areas.