

NYIC *Immigration News*

The New York Immigration Coalition

May 2008

Halfway There on Promises For Better School Funding

School kids and their advocates won a hard-fought victory on education funding in the New York State budget, but are still fighting to stop major cutbacks in New York City. The recent budget deal includes a record \$1.75 billion increase in funding for public education, over two thirds of which will be placed in "Foundation Aid" aimed at the districts that need it the most. The agreement also creates a new category for distributing funds for English language learners. Taken together, the reforms represent a major victory for the Keep the Promises! campaign waged by a diverse coalition of educators, community groups, and the NYIC.



A young New Yorker tells lawmakers to keep their word on school funding.

In New York City, however, schools are still facing proposed cutbacks that would total nearly \$720 million over the next two years. School budgets already were slashed by 1.75 percent earlier this year. Mayor Bloomberg blamed the reductions on the worsening economy and decreased aid from Albany to New York City.

Recently-arrived immigrant kids who are still learning English are among the hardest hit by the spending cuts. English Language Learners (ELLs) are already facing a dropout crisis – city statistics show that they are graduating at less than half the rate of other students – yet ELL programs are the first on the mayor's chopping block. Among the 15 schools with the highest numbers of ELL students, all are facing mid-year cuts ranging from \$100,000 to nearly \$450,000. And the mayor has proposed \$10 million in cuts to the crucial ELL teacher safety-net fund.

The cuts that have been imposed already, which total over \$100 million, have had an immediate impact on city schools. A survey of 384 schools compiled by the United Federation of Teachers found that 48 percent of schools surveyed have had to cut after-school classes, Saturday academies, and tutoring. If the mayor imposes the \$600 million in cuts that are looming for the next two years, the consequences for students would be severe.

In 2006, Mayor Bloomberg pledged to invest \$2.2 billion in new funding for city schools. Now that state officials have lived up to their end of the bargain, children and parents are demanding that the mayor stand by his promises to do the right thing for the students of New York City. For more information, contact Deycy Avitia at 212-627-2227 x231. ♦

City Council Confronts Housing Code Violations

Many immigrants live with unsafe housing conditions such as rat and vermin infestations and lack of heat and hot water, but language barriers prevent them from making complaints to the Department of Housing Preservation and Development (HPD). The City Council is now considering a bill that would help tenants with limited English get the help they need.



At City Advocacy Day on March 26, 2008, marchers called on the City Council to pass the Equal Access to Housing Services Act.

The Equal Access to Housing Services Act (Intro 596) would bridge the language gap by improving translation and interpretation at HPD. Important documents would be translated into the city's top nine

languages, and more bilingual inspectors would be hired to work with the local community. On March 27th, the City Council held its first public hearing on the bill, receiving testimony from a diverse coalition of groups in support of the measure.

A survey conducted in 2005–06 found that three out of five immigrant tenants were living with critical housing code violations such as crumbling walls, peeling paint, and inadequate heating. Despite the high rates of substandard conditions, only 18 percent of these tenants had reported their problems to HPD.

So far, Intro 596 has attracted 35 co-sponsors, more than enough to pass the 51-member City Council. Supporters are urging council members to approve the law by the end of the current fiscal year on June 30th, but a vote has not yet been scheduled. For more information on how to help pass Intro 596, call Ericka Stallings at 212-627-2227 x239. ◇

Communities Resist Local Anti-Immigrant Measures

Community leaders are taking a stand against local anti-immigrant measures, including efforts to ramp up employer sanctions in Suffolk County and turn local police into immigration agents in the Hudson Valley. In Suffolk, anti-immigrant legislators are pushing IR 1105, a bill that would take away the license of any contractor who employs undocumented immigrants.

On April 17th, supporters of IR 1105 used dubious tactics to push the bill out of committee to the floor of the Suffolk Legislature – despite the fact that the same committee had earlier voted down the bill. Exploiting the absence of a legislator opposed to the bill, Presiding Officer Bill Lindsay persuaded his momentary majority of anti-immigrant allies to sneak IR 1105 before the full legislature. In a dramatic last-minute development, however, the April 29th vote was halted by the issuance of a temporary restraining order by the Suffolk County Court on the grounds that Lindsay's tactics likely violated the legislature's rules. The TRO is likely to remain in effect at least until the next court hearing on May 15th.

Immigrant communities are also facing the first efforts in New York State to enlist local police to enforce federal immigration law. The town of Suffern in the Hudson Valley has signaled its intention to enter into an agreement with the federal government under section 287(g), the federal statute under which police departments can voluntarily take on the functions of Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) agents and arrest people for routine immigration violations.

Advocates from the Rockland Immigration Coalition and other local leaders are fighting back, pointing out that 287(g) agreements would undermine community-policing efforts and cause victims and witnesses not

to report crimes. At a March 29th town hall meeting in Suffern, Latino residents testified that they felt the program was an open invitation to racial profiling and would harm police-community relations.



Participants in City Advocacy Day sent a strong message of solidarity among immigrant communities in New York.

The idea of deputizing state and local police as immigration agents is being promoted by State Assemblyman Greg Ball (R-Carmel), who convened a forum with ICE officials, police officers, and anti-immigrant activists on April 19th to sell the idea. Community groups held a press conference before the forum to explain why Ball's proposal threatens to make all us less safe. For more information, contact Milan Bhatt at 212-627-2227 x233. ◇

Immigrants Fight the SAVE Act

Advocates across the country are fighting back against the SAVE Act (H.R. 4088), a package of immigration enforcement proposals introduced in the House of Representatives by Reps. Health Shuler (D-NC) and Brian Bilbray (R-CA). Most notably, the bill would require all employers to check the immigration status of new workers against notoriously inaccurate government databases, increase the number of enforcement agents, and expand detention facilities.

Leaders from the immigrant, labor, and business communities have joined forces to oppose the bill, which seeks to mandate a federal employment verification system that is riddled with so many flaws that millions of immigrant and native-born workers could suddenly find themselves on a "no-work" list, unable to get a job or change jobs.

The database that would be used to enforce the "E-Verify" (formerly Basic Pilot) employment verification program is known to have an unacceptably high error rate – 4.1 percent – potentially exposing millions of Americans to false findings of work ineligibility. Of the 17.8 million mistakes in the database, 12.7 million apply to U.S. citizens. The SAVE Act contains no assurances that government databases will be accurate and updated, no privacy protections for the

vast amounts of personal information to be handled by employers, and no recourse for workers who are wrongfully denied employment.

The Democratic leadership of the House is currently holding the line by keeping the SAVE Act from coming to a vote. But the bill's supporters are petitioning to try to force the issue to the floor. Their petition now has 186 signatures, dangerously close to the 218 needed to force a vote. Among the bill's supporters are many so-called Blue Dog Democrats, including New York's own Reps. Kirsten Gillibrand, Michael Arcuri, and Brian Higgins. For more information on stopping the SAVE Act, call Javier Valdes at 212-627-2227 x234. ♦

Bill Offers Relief For Restaurant Workers

New York restaurant workers are hoping the City Council will turn up the heat on exploitative owners by telling them to get labor law violations out of the kitchen. The Responsible Restaurant Act would put licenses on the line for owners who fail to live up to legal standards for wages, hours, overtime pay, and employment discrimination.

On Monday, March 31st, the City Council held a public hearing on the bill, which is supported by an alliance of over 25 unions and community groups. The proposal has 25 co-sponsors in the Council, one vote short of the 26 that are needed to guarantee passage when the legislation comes to a vote.

A survey conducted last year by the Restaurant Opportunities Center (ROC-NY), the leading advocate for the bill, found widespread exploitation of New York City restaurant workers. Their study found that a substantial percentage of food service employers pay no overtime; 10 percent of food service employers pay below the federal minimum wage; and there is rampant discrimination against immigrants and people of color in the industry.

As of 2004, nearly three-fourths of New York City restaurant workers were immigrants. These immigrant workers have been prime targets for exploitative owners because many are afraid to confront abuse for fear of losing their jobs or risking deportation.

While the Responsible Restaurant Act has gained majority support on the Health Committee, where the bill is currently being considered, it needs two crucial converts in order to be passed. Health Committee Chairman Joel Rivera and Speaker Christine Quinn are uncommitted, and their support is needed to move the bill through the Council.

For more information on the Responsible Restaurant Act, contact Milan Bhatt at 212-627-2227 x233. ♦

New York Hospitals Improving Communication With Patients

A new study reveals that New York hospitals are doing a better job of communicating with limited-English-speaking patients after state regulations were adopted in 2006 governing hospital communication assistance.

The state health department regulations were the result of a multi-year campaign waged by the NYC and other immigrant and health advocates, and were prompted by documented cases of serious medical harm resulting from language barriers between doctors and patients.

The study, which monitored 10 hospitals in New York City, revealed improvements and promising practices at many hospitals in communicating with limited-English patients, particularly Spanish speakers. The report revealed persisting language barriers facing Korean-speaking New Yorkers, however, pointing to the need for hospital communication assistance to be expanded beyond Spanish to other languages commonly spoken in New York City.

The report, entitled, *Now We're Talking: A Study on Language Assistance Services at Ten New York City Public and Private Hospitals*, was released by Make the Road New York, Korean Community Services of Metropolitan New York, and the NYC. For a copy of the report, please visit www.thenyc.org.



ACTIONS YOU CAN TAKE RIGHT NOW TO HELP PROTECT IMMIGRANTS' RIGHTS

1. Support Equal Access in Housing Services!

Urge your city council member to sign onto Intro 596, the Equal Access to Housing Services Act, to improve access to housing services for millions of limited-English-speaking New Yorkers. City Council switchboard: 212-788-7100.

2. Oppose 287(g) deputization of local police!

Have your organization sign on to a letter opposing state and local police acting as immigration agents. Call Milan Bhatt at 212-627-2227 x233.

3. Stand Up Against the SAVE Act!

Tell your representative to reject the SAVE Act, which threatens all workers throughout the nation. House switchboard: 202-224-3121.

4. Keep an Eye on Suffolk County, Be Ready to Help!

Follow the latest developments on the Long Island Wins blog at www.longislandwins.com.

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