

CITY COUNCIL
CITY OF NEW YORK

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TRANSCRIPT OF THE MINUTES

Of the

COMMITTEE ON IMMIGRATION

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January 25, 2021
Start: 10:05 a.m.
Recess: 1:03 p.m.

HELD AT: Remote Hearing - Virtual Room 2

B E F O R E: Carlos Menchaca
Chairperson

COUNCIL MEMBERS: Margaret S. Chin
Daniel Dromm
Mathieu Eugene
Francisco P. Moya

A P P E A R A N C E S (CONTINUED)

Farhana Choudhury

Caesar Vargas

Yliana Diaz

Bitta Mostofi
Commissioner at Mayor's Office of Immigrant
Affairs

Yasmine Farhang
Mayor's Office of Immigrant Affairs

Anissa Druesedow
Adoptee

Michael Mullen
President of Also Known As

Benjamin Lundberg Torres Sanchez

Adam Lee Goodman

Meetu Dhar
Citizenship Now

Terry Lawson
Unlocal

Alexandra Rizio
Safe Passage Project

Shawn Blumberg
Immigration Community Action Project

Sara Greenberg
Legal Aid Society

A P P E A R A N C E S (CONTINUED)

Ravi Reddi

Asian American Federation

Mae Lee

Chinese Progressive Association

Jeehae Fischer

Korean American Family Service Center

Anika Choudhury

Arab American Family Support Center

Minsun Kim

Museum of Korean American Heritage

Anika Sayed

Turning Point for Women and Families

Fernon Darnell [sp?]

Olivia Pearl

Adoptees for Justice

1 UNIDENTIFIED: Cloud recording started.

2 UNIDENTIFIED: Back-up is rolling.

3 UNIDENTIFIED: Thank you. Sergeant
4 Sadowsky, you may begin with your opening statement.

5 SERGEANT AT ARMS: Morning and welcome to
6 today's remote New York City Council hearing of the
7 Committee on Immigration. At this time, would all
8 Council Members and Council Staff please turn on
9 their video? To minimize disruption, please place
10 electronic devices on vibrate or silent mode. If you
11 wish to submit testimony, you may do so at
12 testimony@council.nyc.gov. Once again, that is
13 testimony@council.nyc.gov. Thank you, Chair
14 Menchaca, we are ready to begin.

15 CHAIRPERSON MENCHACA: And buenos dias
16 everyone. Carlos Menchaca, Chair of the New York
17 City Council Committee on Immigration. I want to
18 acknowledge that we've been joined by Council Members
19 Dromm, Chin, and Koo, and we are waiting for some of
20 the other members to come in, and I will give them a
21 shout out later in the committee hearing. Okay,
22 great. So, today, the Committee on Immigration will
23 be conducting oversight on reducing barriers to
24 citizenship. You'll also be hearing my colleague
25

1
2 Council Member Koo's Resolution Number 1229 which
3 calls on the United States Congress to pass and the
4 President to sign the Adoptee Citizenship Act of 2019
5 in order to secure US citizenship of internationally
6 adopted children who are now adults or aging into
7 adulthood. I will let the co-sponsor-- I will let
8 the sponsor speak on his resolution and want to thank
9 him for his commitment to this issue. It is a heart-
10 breaking ordeal to go through to be brought to the
11 United States as a child, only to find out later that
12 you are not guaranteed the rights of citizenship. We
13 must have immigration law updated immediately to
14 ensure this does not happen. The right to attain
15 citizenship is a sacred tenant of our nation's
16 foundational documents which it comes the privilege
17 of voting and running for office, but also the
18 permanent protection from deportation and the freedom
19 to travel within and outside the United States.
20 Citizenship allows individuals full access to this
21 nation's safety net benefits without fear of adverse
22 immigration consequences. In New York, more than
23 half of our 3.1 million immigrant neighbors are
24 naturalized citizens. The Mayor's Office of
25 Immigrant Affairs estimated in 2019 that another

1
2 622,000 immigrant New Yorkers could be potentially
3 eligible for citizenship. We are living in a new era
4 under new federal leadership and we are grateful for
5 that, and yet, we cannot ignore the carnage that is
6 wrought across our immigration system harming too
7 many lives over the last four years. We have a
8 mandate to do better, and as Chair of the Immigration
9 Committee today it's about calling attention to the
10 ways in which the Federal Government has failed our
11 immigrant communities and must immediately take
12 action to change the course. We are excited that a
13 pathway to citizenship is among President Biden's top
14 priorities, and I want to make sure to thank our
15 congressional representative Nydia Velazquez for her
16 persistent advocacy and leadership on this issue.
17 New legislation being proposed by the Whitehouse
18 would offer a pathway to citizenship for all
19 immigrants living in the United States as of January
20 1, 2021 and meeting certain criteria. This will
21 ultimately increase those New Yorkers who may be
22 eligible for citizenship. The Mayor's Office
23 estimates that there were approximately 504,000
24 undocumented immigrants in 2019, and many of them
25 could be newly eligible for naturalization under new

1 federal legislation. At the same time, the chilling
2 effect that the xenophobic and cruel former federal
3 administration has furthered, the active pursuit of
4 policies that would erect barriers to accessing
5 citizenship and the rapid spread of COVID-19 have
6 left our naturalization processes under-resourced,
7 and over-burdened. At the end of 2019, federal
8 fiscal year, there was a naturalization backlog of
9 644,000 with a potential additional 130,000 cases
10 backlogged due to suspension of most in-person
11 citizenship process. This is all in 2020. We have a
12 formidable task ahead to assist our many New Yorkers
13 with the process of naturalization, and I look
14 forward to hearing from our colleagues in the Mayor's
15 Office about the work they have continued to do to
16 ensure that barriers to citizenship are reduced as
17 much as possible. To the providers, including our
18 friends at CUNY, Citizenship Now, who have continued
19 to work throughout the last four years, but
20 especially in this last year with resources further
21 limited and the necessity of digital creativity, we
22 say thank you. We are here because of your
23 unwavering commitment to immigrant New Yorkers and we
24 know that you will rise to the challenge ahead. I
25

1
2 want to thank the Administration and service
3 providers for testifying today, as well as the staff
4 working behind the scenes making sure that the online
5 hearing runs smoothly. These things are not easy.
6 So thank you. I also want to thank the Immigration
7 Committee Staff for their work on this issue,
8 Committee Counsel Harboni Osja [sp?], Policy Analyst
9 Elizabeth Cronk [sp?], and my staff as well, Chief of
10 Staff Lorna Rosaro [sp?] and Caesar Vargas. And
11 before I hand it over to my colleague Council Member
12 Koo, I just want to give a moment for us to remember
13 all those that have died, the immigrant New Yorkers
14 who have been essential workers and that have carried
15 so much of the burden to keep the City moving. We
16 think about them as we think about citizenship, as we
17 think about the path to a better life here, not just
18 in our city, in our state, but in our country. And
19 with that, I want to turn it over to Council Member
20 Koo for remarks on his Resolution. Council Member
21 Koo?

22 COUNCIL MEMBER KOO: Thank you, good
23 morning everyone. Thank you, Chair, for hearing my
24 Resolution today 1229. Hello? Can you hear me?

25

CHAIRPERSON MENCHACA: We can hear you.

We got you, yes.

COUNCIL MEMBER KOO: Okay, yeah. So, let me start over. Thank you, Chair, for hearing my Resolution today, Reso. 1229. I introduced this resolution a year ago calling on the Federal Government to close a loophole in the Child Citizenship Act of [inaudible] which prevents internationally adopted children from receiving US citizenship despite being legally adopted by US citizens. Imagine, spending 99 percent of your life as an American only to have your country turn its back on you because of missing paperwork. The Child Citizenship Act of 2000 was supposed to allow foreign-born children of US citizens to acquire citizenship. Unfortunately, a loop hole in that left out. Thousands of adoptees from countries all over the world, because they were 18 years old by the time the law went into effect. Thousands of international adoptees have spent nearly their entire lives in America without citizenship rights, and many actually have no idea they are not really citizens. Such an oversight is colossal failure of our federal immigration policy. You should be prioritized as an

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2 urgent [inaudible] international adoptees should not
3 be granted and full and unequivocal citizenship. Last
4 week, we celebrated Korean-American Day marking seven
5 years as I introduced legislation to name January
6 13th after the first arrival of Korean immigrants to
7 the United States in 1903. But they also mark one
8 year since I introduced this resolution alongside
9 many advocates and immigration groups at City Hall.
10 An overwhelming number of adoptees affected by this
11 policy are Korean-American adoptees. We have spent
12 too long demonizing immigrants in this country. This
13 our-- these are our family members, our friends, and
14 our neighbors. It's time that we treat them with the
15 basic human dignity that they deserve [inaudible].

16 CHAIRPERSON MENCHACA: Council Member
17 Koo, you may have-- are you com-- did you complete
18 your remarks?

19 COUNCIL MEMBER KOO: Yes. Do you hear
20 me?

21 CHAIRPERSON MENCHACA: Okay, yes, yes,
22 thank you. I just wanted to just make sure if there
23 was something else you wanted to add, but thank you
24 so much for your resolution today and for your
25 commitment to this issue. And I wanted to say thank

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2 you to you, and we've also been joined by Council
3 Member Moya who is here and on the committee. I want
4 to hand it over to the Committee Counsel, Harbani
5 Hujah [sp?], to go over some procedural items to get
6 us started with our first panel, our public panel.

7 COMMITTEE COUNSEL: Thank you, Chair. My
8 name is Herbani Hujah, and I'm Counsel to the
9 Committee on Immigration for the New York City
10 Council. Before we begin, I want to remind everyone
11 that you will be on mute until you are called on to
12 testify when you will be unmuted by the host. I will
13 be calling on panelists to testify. Please listen
14 for your name to be called. I will be periodically
15 announcing who the next panelist will be. For
16 everyone testifying today, please note that there may
17 be a few seconds of delay before you are unmuted, and
18 we thank you in advance for your patience. All
19 hearing participants should submit testimony, written
20 testimony to testimony@council.nyc.gov. At today's
21 hearing, the first panel will consist of members of
22 the public followed by representatives from the
23 Administration followed by Council Member questions,
24 and then additional members of the public will
25 testify. I'd like to remind everyone that unlike our

1
2 typical council hearings, we will be calling on
3 individuals one-by-one to testify, and each panelist
4 will be given three minutes to speak. For panelists,
5 once your name is called, a member of our staff will
6 unmute you and the Sergeant at Arms will give you the
7 go-ahead to being upon setting the timer. Please
8 wait for the Sergeant to announce that you can begin
9 before delivering your testimony. Council Members
10 who have questions for a particular panelist should
11 use the raise hand function in Zoom, and I will call
12 on you after the panelist has completed their
13 testimony. We will now hear testimony from our first
14 panel. I'd like to welcome Farhana Choudhury to
15 testify. After Farhana Choudhury, I will be calling
16 on Yliana Diaz [sp?] to testify. Farhana Choudhury,
17 you may begin when you are ready.

18 SERGEANT AT ARMS: Time starts now.

19 FARHANA CHOUDHURY: Thank you Chairman
20 Menchaca and members of the Committee on Immigration
21 for allowing me this opportunity to speak at this
22 hearing today. I delayed my application for my
23 citizenship because I heard the cost of the legal and
24 application fees would run upwards of thousands of
25 dollars, and as a student with little means, I

1 certainly could not afford that. Then in 2018, I was
2 ecstatic to learn about the CUNY citizenship City
3 Council program free immigration services. I was so
4 excited that I showed up an hour early for my
5 appointment, which is very uncommon for me. However,
6 I was still pretty anxious about covering the
7 citizenship application fee. Then during the intake
8 process, Ellie [sp?], the incredibly intelligent
9 woman who helped me with my application said the two
10 most beautiful words that brought tears to my eyes,
11 fee waiver. As a student living on ramen noodles,
12 this was a huge burden lifted off my shoulder. I
13 hugged Ellie out of sheer excitement, although I
14 wouldn't really recommend it at this present time.
15 CUNY Citizenship Now has not only helped me, but it
16 has also helped my brother become citizens of this
17 great nation. My father is also currently in the
18 process of applying for his citizenship. My father's
19 case is a bit more complicated, and he has-- and he
20 wasn't sure if he could even apply. CUNY has helped
21 him obtain all the necessary paperwork in order for
22 him to proceed with this case. I'm eternally
23 grateful for the CUNY Citizenship City Council
24 Service Program, so much so that I became a volunteer
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1
2 with CUNY Citizenship Now, and I will continue to do
3 so for years to come. I want to make sure that I was
4 able to share the knowledge that I gained from CUNY
5 and other-- gain the knowledge and share with others--
6 - other immigrants. Because of this amazing program,
7 I was able to vote on November 2020 which is likely
8 one of the most significant elections of my time, of
9 my lifetime. Thank you again, City Council, for
10 allowing me this opportunity to speak today.

11 COMMITTEE COUNSEL: Thank you so much for
12 your testimony. I'd like to now welcome Yliana Diaz
13 to testify. Yliana Diaz will be accompanied by
14 Caesar Vargas who will be providing Spanish
15 interpretation. Yliana, you may begin when you are
16 ready.

17 SERGEANT AT ARMS: Time starts now.

18 CAESAR VARGAS: [speaking Spanish]

19 YLIANA DIAZ: Good morning, everyone.

20 Thank you NYC Council Members for letting me be here
21 to share my experience about the process of my
22 citizenship. First, I like to mention that I was a
23 proud volunteer in CUNY Citizenship Now. My friend,
24 Joseph Libisky [sp?], told me about the CUNY
25 Citizenship Now Organization, and he invited me to

1
2 become a volunteer. So I did it for two years, from
3 2016 to 2018, filling out citizenship application,
4 especially to people who speak Spanish, but then I
5 started working on Saturdays and for that reason I
6 couldn't continue volunteering. I got my residence
7 in August 2013 due to the application of my mother.
8 I applied for the citizenship with fee waiver because
9 I have Medicaid. It was May 30, 2018, and then I
10 have my appointment for interview on June 2019 in New
11 Jersey, in Newark. And finally, the ceremony was one
12 month later on July 26th. When I received my
13 schedule for the appointment, I was a little
14 surprised because it was in New Jersey, and not in
15 New York where I applied, because I was living in
16 Brooklyn. My appointment was at 1:00 p.m., and I was
17 planning to leave home very early because I had to be
18 there one hour earlier, and I didn't want to get
19 lost. So I was worried because I don't have a car,
20 and I didn't want to be late. Fortunately, Joseph
21 helped me in this process, because I fill out my
22 forms of application, but he read all the information
23 to check and put the signature. I told him that my
24 appointment was in New Jersey and he offer me to take
25 me there, and also, he was representing me while I

1
2 was with the interviewer. Even though the place of
3 my appointment was far from my house, the experience
4 was wonderful, because I became an American and I
5 felt support by Joseph in all the process. So, the
6 day of ceremony--

7 SERGEANT AT ARMS: [interposing] Time
8 expired.

9 YLIANA DIAZ: The day of ceremony was
10 easier because it was in the [inaudible] courthouse
11 in Brooklyn, so the time only I had to take a bus
12 because it was close to my area. The ceremony was
13 really good, but I didn't receive my little American
14 flag. I guess about that-- they told me that they
15 didn't have, so I got one later.

16 CHAIRPERSON MENCHACA: Thank you, Ms.
17 Diaz, thank you for your story today and your
18 testimony.

19 YLIANA DIAZ: Thank you.

20 COMMITTEE COUNSEL: Thank you for your
21 testimony. I'll now turn it over to Council Member
22 questions, starting with Chair Menchaca.

23 CHAIRPERSON MENCHACA: So, my only
24 question, and we're going to be hearing from the
25 Mayor's Office and we have a lot of Council Members

1 here today, and we'll be talking to a lot more
2 Council Members. When Biden came out with his-- what
3 we felt was an affirmation for a path to citizenship,
4 what do you feel like the most important thing that
5 the City can do to make lives better for anyone who's
6 going to be applying for citizenship. I just wanted
7 to give Ms. Diaz or Ms. Choudhury an opportunity to
8 talk about what the City Council needs to hear right
9 now and the Mayor needs to hear right now.

11 CAESAR VARGAS: [speaking Spanish]

12 YLIANA DIAZ: Okay. [inaudible] fee
13 waiver [speaking Spanish].

14 CHAIRPERSON MENCHACA: Muchas gracias
15 [speaking Spanish]. And Ms. Choudhury, do you want
16 to say anything else about what you think is the most
17 important thing for us to hear right now?

18 CAESAR VARGAS: Council Member, can I
19 translate for Ms. Diaz?

20 CHAIRPERSON MENCHACA: Yes, absolutely.

21 CAESAR VARGAS: I apologize. Ms. Diaz
22 testified that one of the things that could be
23 helpful for immigrants to have an easier process to
24 citizenship is continue the fee waiver that allows
25 many people who don't have the necessary funds to get

1
2 their citizenship. Sometimes the fee is more than
3 what people make-- more immigrants make in a month.
4 So, it's sometimes out of reach to pay for that fee.
5 Another thing that the citizenship process could make
6 it easier for immigrants is to hold the interviews,
7 the process where you actually do the civic exams, is
8 to hold it closer to where the person lives. Ms.
9 Diaz testified that she went all the way to New
10 Jersey and had to get up really early and go through
11 many different types of transportation to get there,
12 and it made it more difficult. So, those two are the
13 things that would make it easier for immigrants to
14 have an easier process to become citizens.

15 FARHANA CHOUDHURY: So, I completely
16 agree with Ms. Diaz. Like, the fee waiver is very
17 crucial. Like, that was one of the main deterrent
18 for me even applying. So when I found out that I
19 didn't have to pay and it was that much easier, it
20 made the process so much accessible. So, I feel that
21 to continue this, it would definitely get a lot of
22 people to step up and then go through with their
23 application. And also maybe spreading the word of
24 CUNY Citizenship. I think just getting the word out
25 there and what they're doing, and just you know,

1 spreading the word in the community I think I would--
2 that's my suggestion, but other than that, no
3 [inaudible]
4

5 CHAIRPERSON MENCHACA: Thank you. Thank
6 you, again. I am done with questions. I'll hand it
7 back to committee counsel.

8 COMMITTEE COUNSEL: Thank you, Chair.
9 I'd like to ask if any other Council Member
10 questions-- if there are any other Council Member
11 questions at this time. Seeing no hands, I'm going
12 to thank this panel for their testimony, and we'll
13 now be hearing from members of the Administration. I
14 will now call on members of the Administration to
15 testify. Testimony will provided by MOIA
16 Commissioner Bitta Mostofi. Additionally, the
17 following representatives will be available for
18 answering questions: Yasmine Farhang, Senior Advisor
19 for Legal Initiatives at MOIA. As a reminder, during
20 the hearing if Council Members would like to ask a
21 question of the Administration or of a particular
22 panelist please use the Zoom raise hand function, and
23 I will call on you in order. Before we begin, I
24 would like to administer the oath. Commissioner
25 Mostofi, Yasmine Farhang, I will be calling on each

1
2 of you individually for a response. Please raise
3 your hands. Do you affirm to tell the truth, the
4 whole truth and nothing but the truth in your
5 testimony before this committee and to respond
6 honestly to Council Member questions? Commissioner
7 Mostofi?

8 COMMISSIONER MOSTOFI: I do.

9 COMMITTEE COUNSEL: Thank you. Yasmin
10 Farhang?

11 YASMINE FARHANG: I do.

12 COMMITTEE COUNSEL: Thank you.
13 Commissioner Mostofi, you may begin your testimony.

14 COMMISSIONER MOSTOFI: Thank you and good
15 morning. Thank you to Chair Menchaca and member of
16 the Committee on Immigration and to Farahana and
17 Yliana for sharing your stories. I'm Bitta Mostofi.
18 I'm the Commissioner for the Mayor's Office of
19 Immigrant Affairs. In recognizing the many benefits
20 that spring from citizenship, including the economic
21 benefits to the person becoming a citizen in their
22 community. We at MOIA and the City have worked to
23 help create access to citizenship for New Yorkers,
24 and I'm excited to talk about that work today, and in
25 my testimony, I will also discuss the benefits of

1
2 naturalization, the barriers facing immigrants who
3 wish to naturalize, and how we work to reduce those
4 barriers. Naturalization or the process of becoming a
5 citizen has been an integral part of our work in past
6 few years. The population of lawful permanent
7 residents or green card holders who are eligible to
8 naturalize in our city is significant. We estimate
9 that about 622,000 New Yorkers are potentially
10 eligible to naturalize. Citizenship and
11 naturalization process reflect our American values,
12 inclusion and civic engagement. How we structure the
13 process of citizenship speaks volumes about what kind
14 of country we want to be, and as such, MOIA and the
15 City have consistently worked to ensure that
16 naturalization be as accessible as possible for those
17 who qualify. In addition, the City has long
18 recognized the benefits that accrue to naturalized
19 New Yorkers and the City when immigrants become
20 citizens. First, naturalization provides economic
21 benefits for the person who naturalizes. Naturalized
22 citizens earn about nine percent more a year than
23 those who are eligible to naturalize but remain non-
24 citizen. Naturalized citizens also are more likely
25 to be employed and own a home than green card

1 holders. Naturalization is a crucial tool for
2 fighting poverty. An analysis of New York City's
3 immigrant population shows that the poverty rate of
4 naturalized New Yorkers is seven percent lower than
5 those of lawful permanent residents. Second, when
6 immigrants become citizens, it provides economic
7 benefits for our community. Part of this benefit
8 comes from the increase in earnings that they receive
9 which lead to higher tax revenue. In the aggregate,
10 if all eligible to naturalized immigrants in New York
11 City were to become citizens, annual city, state, and
12 federal tax revenue would rise by 789 million, and
13 public benefit cost would decrease by 34 million, for
14 a net benefit of 823 million a year. Third,
15 naturalization helps strengthen our community civic
16 bond. Through citizenship, immigrants are more
17 directly connected to civic and community
18 participation. Citizens can vote in city, state, and
19 federal election. They can run for city, state, and
20 federal elected office. Studies also show that the
21 economic benefits of citizenship, especially
22 increased income and home ownership lead to higher
23 rates of participation and civic organization and
24 volunteer activity. Despite these myriad benefits,
25

1 less than 10 percent of those who are eligible to
2 naturalize in our city do so every year. There are
3 longstanding barriers to becoming naturalized,
4 including the relatively high cost of naturalization
5 and language barriers. MOIA's analysis of the
6 eligible to naturalize population found that about 45
7 percent of eligible New Yorkers are low-income,
8 meaning below 200 percent of the federal poverty
9 level, and that about 59 percent have limited English
10 proficiency. Unfortunately, these barriers have been
11 compounded by the last four years of actions of the
12 Trump Administration, which actively and openly
13 hostile to the idea of a welcoming, inclusive
14 America. The Administration sought to discourage and
15 impede naturalization at every turn. First, the
16 Administration proposed a rule targeting lawful
17 permanent residents with disability, impeding them
18 from obtaining a medical exemption to the citizenship
19 testing requirement. Second, the Administration
20 sought to make the requisite civic exam longer and
21 harder in an effort that was politicized in nature.
22 And they sought to institute a defacto wealth test to
23 citizenship by eliminating the fee waiver, and
24 disproportionately raising the application fee. The
25

1 fee schedule that they sought to enact would have
2 increased the cost of naturalization by an
3 unprecedented 83 percent, increasing the already high
4 cost of \$640 to over \$1000 and imposing an
5 insurmountable challenge to many families. Finally,
6 the Trump Administration showed their contempt for
7 naturalization even during the COVID-19 crisis by
8 halting oath ceremonies for naturalization and
9 refusing to institute remote ceremonies, despite
10 having the authority to do so and repeated calls from
11 bipartisan law makers. In effect, delaying the
12 naturalization of over 100,000 permanent residents
13 around the country in advance of an election. Given
14 these actions, it is no surprise that under the Trump
15 Administration, naturalization process has slowed to
16 a crawl. As of this month, the processing time for
17 naturalization application that USCIS New York City
18 field office ranges from 16.5 to 23. The City has
19 consistently worked to encourage naturalization, not
20 just in our city but across the country. As Chair of
21 the Cities for Citizenship, along with the Mayors of
22 Chicago and Los Angeles, we have worked with the
23 coalition for years drawing on experiences of
24 multiple jurisdictions to make the case for national
25

1
2 investments in citizenship. Prior to the trump
3 Administration, New York City also worked closely
4 with the federal taskforce for new Americans to raise
5 awareness about citizenship and the benefits of
6 naturalization, especially during Citizenship Day.
7 In 2015, for instance, Mayor de Blasio welcomed 100
8 new citizens in a citizenship naturalization
9 ceremony. City libraries also have ongoing
10 partnerships with USCIS to hold new American corners
11 [sic] which are dedicated spaces in libraries that
12 hold information about citizenship and immigration
13 issues more generally. The Trump Administration's
14 attempt to make naturalization beyond the reach of
15 many lawful permanent residents fundamentally
16 conflicts with the longstanding goals we have as a
17 city to encourage it. For this reason, MOIA has
18 shown leadership in fighting back against actual and
19 proposed changes in a variety of ways. First, by
20 submitting comments in opposition to proposed rules,
21 including comments opposing the changes to disability
22 exemptions and the new fee schedule. Second, by
23 leading on multi-city [sic] letters both opposing the
24 dramatic increase in naturalization fees and most
25 recently in calling for remote oath ceremonies during

1 the pandemic. And third, by leading and coordinating
2 a multi-city amicus brief in support of enjoining the
3 changes to the USCIS fee schedule. This we are
4 pleased to share supported a lawsuit which ultimately
5 stopped implementation of the entire rule nationwide,
6 and with the judge in that case siding to the amicus
7 brief that we submitted as evidence for the national
8 effect of the rule. MOIA's work with fellow cities
9 and counties across the country took place with our
10 leadership in two coalitions, Cities for Citizenship,
11 which I mentioned, and Cities for Action, where we
12 have been able to highlight both the local and the
13 natural interests at stake, gather with [inaudible]
14 municipalities to share strategies about how to
15 continue supporting our residents and celebrate
16 Citizenship Day by encouraging eligible New Yorkers
17 to naturalize. We believe that the Biden
18 Administration sees the value in supporting
19 naturalization as the Obama Administration did. We
20 have been communicating closely with the incoming
21 Administration including on issues related to
22 naturalization. Our hope is that the Biden
23 Administration will roll back the barriers erected by
24 the Trump Administration, and furthermore, take steps
25

1
2 to increase investments in promoting citizenship and
3 immigrant civic participation generally. We have
4 also asked for and the new Administration has
5 committed, to a Day One bill that provides dedicated
6 funding to cities and counties as well as libraries,
7 labor unions, employers, colleges and universities,
8 and other partners to expand programs to promote
9 integration and inclusion, increase English language
10 instruction, and provide assistance to individuals
11 seeking to become citizens. Finally, our belief in
12 the power of naturalization is also reflected in our
13 investment in legal services. Together, with the New
14 York City Council the City of New York invested tens
15 of millions of dollars in immigration services.
16 Since July 1st of 2016, Action NYC and other city-
17 funded legal services program have assisted low
18 income and other vulnerable immigrants in over 5,000
19 naturalization applications. From 2016 to 2020, MOIA
20 also partnered with the Human Resources
21 Administration, the Public Library system, and the
22 New York Legal Assistance Group and private funders
23 to implement NY [sic] citizenship, a legal services
24 program focused specifically on naturalization, which
25 has now been built upon and incorporated into the

1
2 Action NYC program, as Action NYC in libraries, as
3 well as a continued effort at HRA. Furthermore, we
4 continue with funding that addresses some of the most
5 vulnerable lawful permanent residents the need for
6 access to naturalization and to ensure continuation
7 of legal representation in cases that have been
8 delayed due to the pandemic. We further in response
9 to the COVID-19 pandemic and the economic challenges
10 that many New Yorkers face in the spring developed a
11 fee fund for New Yorkers to allow them to support
12 their applications, naturalization being one of the
13 many applications that would qualify. I'm proud to
14 say that these legal services have helped many
15 clients, including senior clients who have long-time
16 green card holders finally naturalized. One client
17 who received directed outreach from the program had
18 been a lawful permanent resident for almost two
19 decades. She previously tried to apply for
20 citizenship, but gave up after difficulty finding all
21 of her documents. With the help of the legal
22 services providers, she became a citizen in June of
23 last year. Another client from Trinidad and Tobago
24 had a green card for over 40 years and decided this
25 was the time to become a citizen, and with help from

1
2 our programs, she applied for naturalization in June
3 of 2018 and became a citizen in March. And as I
4 conclude my testimony, I just want to take a moment
5 to acknowledge that naturalization process is just a
6 microcosm of the immigration experience, and often is
7 needlessly bureaucratic, expensive and difficult, but
8 it is also beautiful. Through naturalization people
9 from all over the world with stories as varied as
10 they can be transformed into one nation. That's an
11 ideal certainly worth fighting for. Thank you,
12 again, for the Committee on Immigration for calling
13 this important hearing, and I look forward to taking
14 your questions.

15 COMMITTEE COUNSEL: Thank you for your
16 testimony, Commissioner. I will now turn it over to
17 questions from Chair Menchaca. Panelists, please
18 state unmuted as possible during this question and
19 answer period. Thank you. Chair Menchaca, please
20 begin.

21 CHAIRPERSON MENCHACA: Thank you, and I
22 want to say thank you to Commissioner Mostofi for
23 being here with your team and really joining us in
24 this larger conversation as we look at this next
25 chapter of federal policy that's on its way. New

1
2 York City has a big role to play in how we engage as
3 a willing partner and a partner that has been
4 committed to this larger struggle of building a
5 sanctuary city, and so I just want to say thank you
6 to that commitment and everything that you and your
7 team have done during COVID. I can't say it enough.
8 Any opportunity that we have to say thank you to that
9 service must be done, so thank you. And really with
10 that, as we really anticipate the transition from the
11 over-- with very xenophobic fuel under the Trump
12 Administration things became more complex. And so
13 how did these policies-- and I'm really looking at
14 things like the average time it took for legal
15 service providers to complete a case. That is
16 something that I think we have been in joint effort
17 funding for New Yorkers. How do these policies
18 affect the average time it took for our legal service
19 providers do complete a case?

20 COMMISSIONER MOSTOFI: Sure, I will start
21 and then invite Yasmine to share more out to sort of
22 the specifics. You know, it is-- it was and
23 certainly continues to be at this moment a
24 challenging legal landscape for our providers who are
25 serving immigrant New Yorkers. you know, you-- as I

1 noted, the huge increase in backlogs and waiting
2 times on average anything from 16 and a half to 23
3 months of waiting, and that means that your case is
4 pending during this period of time. There was a
5 myriad of additional policies that USCIS listed up
6 across the board that made sort of the adjudication
7 of what once may have been very straight forward and
8 simple application, more bureaucratic in nature, and
9 so certainly we recognize along with our providers
10 that that means an extended period of time, but cases
11 remain open that that means greater challenges in
12 coming to completion or closing out cases, and
13 perhaps additional legal efforts like replying to
14 what might be a request for evidence or additional
15 sort of back and forth that might come from the
16 immigration service. And we did work in coalition
17 and continue to [inaudible] citizenship, in
18 particular on a campaign called the Second Wall,
19 recognizing that all of the efforts that were brought
20 to reduce access to citizenship really fundamentally
21 were like the erection of another wall in the
22 immigration system. And so we will continue to focus
23 on those efforts at reducing those barriers, breaking
24 them down, but also looking forward to making the
25

1
2 process more accessible for everyone. Yasmine, do
3 you want to add specifics on the experiences [sic] of
4 providers.

5 CHAIRPERSON MENCHACA: Thank you,
6 Commissioner.

7 YASMINE FARHANG: [inaudible] clients with
8 fee waivers, which is obviously critical in the
9 naturalization context. That one of the barriers
10 under COVID, in particular, was that clients were
11 unable to get the proof that they needed to qualify
12 for those fee waivers. So, you know, one of the most
13 critical paths to qualifying for a fee waiver is
14 [inaudible] that the applicant receive the
15 [inaudible]. Previously, the way that, you know, the
16 clients of so many legal service providers would be
17 obtaining that was by going in-person to obtain those
18 proofs [sic] or drafting them by mail. So, you know,
19 that was-- that's one example of sort of a proof that
20 was much more onerous for folks to obtain during
21 COVID. So, at MOIA we actually worked with HRA to
22 come up with a streamlined system for applicants and
23 their legal representatives to be able to get those
24 electronically to try to address the additional delay
25 that applicants were facing and filing their

1
2 naturalization applications. So, we really have to,
3 you know, work with partners and think creatively
4 about ways that the, you know, additional delay that
5 was being caused by COVID and the inability to get
6 those critical documents could be, you know, could be
7 made more accessible.

8 CHAIRPERSON MENCHACA: And I guess what--
9 so you're kind of really looking at the-- and you're
10 kind of exposing the hurdles. Do you have a sense of
11 timing, like how the legal service providers were--
12 was there any kind of data of how long it took and
13 the impacts on local service providers?

14 YASMINE FARHANG: So, from March to June
15 the USCIS field office had suspended all in-person
16 activities including the application-- the interviews
17 as well as the oath ceremonies. You know, which--
18 you know, some of the advocacy that Commissioner
19 Mostofi spoke to was how to overcome some of the
20 unnecessary cases that were in limbo during that
21 time, advocating for remote oath ceremonies. Once
22 they reopened, they did so extremely gradually, in
23 part due to social distancing protocol at the local
24 office, so those delays significantly continued, and
25 the number of people who were able to go for their

1
2 in-person interview than for their oath ceremonies
3 was really a fraction of what it should have been.
4 So, you know, we don't have those numbers in front of
5 us of how many it was in comparison to how much it
6 would normally be, but could get that.

7 CHAIRPERSON MENCHACA: Okay. Thank you.
8 So, let's move on to a couple more question is, and
9 I'm going to hand it over to my colleagues, before I
10 finish off with another round. But the-- thinking
11 about the annual report, the 2019 annual report, is
12 MOIA conducting outreach to these individuals to
13 inform them of their ability to naturalize and the
14 city services they may use to complete that process?

15 COMMISSIONER MOSTOFI: sure. I can start.
16 We have-- we do and conduct outreach in a number of
17 ways, I think, notably on the front of citizenship.
18 Specific efforts, we have two that are really
19 dedicated and intentional for naturalization. One is
20 through our library system. That will not change.
21 We have supported the library system and having
22 outreach, an outreach effort in each system that is
23 able to do intentional and targeted outreach related
24 to citizenship and/or including citizenship to ensure
25 that as people are coming through the libraries or

1 receiving information about library services,
2 included in that is Naturalization and Citizenship
3 access. And so that's something that is ongoing, and
4 as a part of our continued efforts to continue the
5 library systems and doing that work. Additionally,
6 we have worked intentionally, as I said, with the
7 Human Resources Administration to establish the NYC
8 Citizenship work that really is designed to reach the
9 most vulnerable immigrant New Yorkers who are
10 eligible to naturalize, and that includes the
11 dedication of a staff member who does affirmative
12 outreach to-- as HRA clients that are believed to be
13 eligible for naturalization. They do so through
14 letters. They do so through telephone calls.
15 They're really intentional and individual outreach
16 with HRA clients to bring them into and connect them
17 to naturalization services. And then additionally as
18 part of our work more broadly as an agency we include
19 immigration legal services including naturalization
20 and all of the virtual engagement that we do and on
21 the ground engagement when we're able, and letting
22 folks know about what's available to them. That's
23 also included in the Know Your Rights programming
24 that our community-based providers do that the city
25

1 funds and supports. So, there's a lot of different
2 channels that we utilize for on-the-ground and direct
3 outreach and engagement, including very hyper
4 individualized engagement for people who we know are
5 eligible in addition to sort of the more macro-level
6 work that we do, every year celebrating Citizenship
7 Day with a series of digital sometimes ads. We've
8 done partnerships with LinkNYC on this. I have
9 attended an oath ceremony to amplify the importance,
10 as has Mayor de Blasio. We have additionally written
11 op-eds and ensured that we are communicating through
12 as many channels as we can about the ability to
13 naturalize and the ways in which city-funded
14 resources can be utilized for that purpose.

16 CHAIRPERSON MENCHACA: And Commissioner,
17 this is a really robust operation, and I think we're
18 very familiar with it in Sunset park, because I think
19 we partner up on a lot of these, and even just today
20 for example, the St. Michaels spot is opened, and we
21 want to say thank you again for that incredible focus
22 on the IDNYC center, just because these are really
23 tough times to engage in, and we're all trying to
24 figure out how to be safe during COVID. And you
25 mentioned libraries which have been closed most of

1 the last year as another spot for communication. So,
2 I guess I just want to follow up on that as you
3 referenced libraries and we're struggling to really
4 reopen IDNYC spots for more enrollment. This is
5 going to be a big issue, and I just wanted to kind of
6 get a sense about how MOIA's really retooling in a
7 time of COVID to ensure that we can keep up with the
8 pace of engagement.
9

10 COMMISSIONER MOSTOFI: Sure, so in terms
11 of citizenship, the libraries have, as many, many
12 folks have, retooled, as you said, to ensure that
13 they're doing digital outreach and engagement to New
14 Yorkers, and so, you know, I think certainly from our
15 perspective as the funder here we are trying to be
16 flexible and acknowledge the difficulty of the moment
17 and the challenges that are faced. We want all of
18 the workers to be safe in the work that they are
19 undertaking. So we have been very sort of open to
20 all of the alternative methods of communication,
21 outreach, and engagement that can be undertaken in a
22 moment in which as you rightly know there isn't such
23 ready access to the physical locations. As of
24 January 1st, I'm very happy to report that our new
25 ActionNYC in libraries programming began, and that is

1
2 happening at this moment. So the outreach is
3 happening by the library system and the provider is
4 able to take-- continue to take cases with, you know,
5 a virtual or initial phone intake, and then follow up
6 as needed.

7 CHAIRPERSON MENCHACA: Okay. Let's keep
8 lines open on that. I think-- I'm thinking about
9 some of the projects we joined efforts in, in big and
10 small ways like working with mutual aid
11 organizations, other places where people are going to
12 so that we can bring good information and build out
13 infrastructure and support that infrastructure. So,
14 let's go offline on some of those ideas. We're very
15 interested in this new proposal, which is my second
16 question. This new proposal to extend pathway to
17 citizenship for all undocumented individuals living
18 in the US as of January 1st, 2021. How many New
19 Yorkers does MOIA believe to be estimated that could
20 be eligible for this citizenship and how soon?

21 COMMISSIONER MOSTOFI: Yeah, I certainly
22 want to start by saying how incredibly exciting it is
23 to see this proposal on day one of the Biden
24 Administration and the commitment that is very well
25 earned by so many who have been advocating for and

1
2 really fighting for the inclusion of communities in
3 our immigration system. and so, you know, we're
4 incredibly excited about this, as I note we have
5 engaged already with the Biden team, first through
6 the transition team and now continuing conversations
7 in the new Administration, and we-- we have estimated
8 in the past, believe approximately half a million New
9 Yorkers are undocumented, and that estimate includes
10 individuals who lack a path to permanent status. So
11 it's inclusive of our dreamers, of our TPS
12 recipients, and those-- and our essential workers who
13 are undocumented immigrants and those who would be
14 eligible based on what we know of this legislation,
15 both for an expedited pathway to permanent residents
16 is following within some of those categories as well
17 as a more lengthy, but still a pathway to permanent
18 residence and citizenship. So, you know, our hope is
19 that it is inclusive of-- for the most part, that
20 larger number, that outside number of about half a
21 million New Yorkers, but certainly of our TPS
22 communities, our DACA community and many of our
23 essential workers. Anything you want to add,
24 Yasmine, to that from what we know of the
25 legislation?

1
2 CHAIRPERSON MENCHACA: Yasmine, we cannot
3 hear you.

4 COMMISSIONER MOSTOFI: I think she said
5 no.

6 CHAIRPERSON MENCHACA: Oh, she said no.
7 Okay, great. Then that's-- that makes sense. My
8 last question for my first round before I hand it
9 over to Council Members. Are the programs and the
10 new processes that may not exist right now, that need
11 to be in place so we can assist newly eligible
12 individuals? Has MOIA thought about that, and can we
13 work together to really build some of that out
14 together.

15 COMMISSIONER MOSTOFI: Yeah, thank you
16 for the questions. I'll say a couple of things about
17 efforts that we've undertaken to sort of look at this
18 question. One is in doing the incredible research
19 that the team did and analysis of understanding the
20 legal permanent resident population that might be
21 eligible to naturalize. We spent a lot of time
22 thinking about that need and that effort and sort of
23 what might be the right ways to sort of boost or
24 increase the naturalization rates that the city has,
25 which remains something that we're in ongoing

1
2 conversations around. We really appreciated
3 conversations that we've had with community
4 citizenship now and understanding their model and the
5 way that it works and certainly it's one of the many
6 goals or priorities that we introduced and published
7 in the New York City OneNYC goals as the recognition
8 of how important we act-- we believe and know it to
9 be to the city. So those efforts and understanding,
10 sort of the CUNY model and increasing the rates of
11 naturalization have continued. Additionally, we
12 conducted an evaluation of NY citizenship in the last
13 year to understand sort of what were the sort of
14 positives and accomplishments of the program and how
15 is we're sort of looking to fine-tune and address or
16 pivot it to be more efficient and successful, what
17 are some of the learnings that we can build upon in
18 all this effort? The third thing I'll say is, as you
19 might recall, when we established and initially
20 dedicated funding to ActionNYC was in response to
21 President Obama at the time proposals around DACA and
22 DAPA expansion. And so we feel very strongly that
23 the program that we've established has proven itself.
24 It's been incredibly successful program, one that has
25 demonstrated time and time again its ability to reach

1
2 New Yorkers and to do in a way that is inclusive, is
3 accessible and yields tremendously high touch points
4 and applications for our community. And so, we are
5 certainly monitoring the legislative process keeping
6 our eyes understanding-- on understanding what to
7 anticipate and to expect and looking at these various
8 efforts on where we would need to build upon and
9 where we could do so in a quick and efficient manner
10 to be responsive.

11 CHAIRPERSON MENCHACA: Thank you, and as
12 I ask all our other Council Members if they have any
13 questions. Let me know, otherwise, I'm going to keep
14 going. I don't think we have anybody signed up yet.
15 And so let me follow up, Commissioner, and
16 remembering Obama's initial presentation and then the
17 City's response. The City has been incredibly
18 responsive to the winds of change at the federal
19 level, and part of that was also the massive increase
20 in deportations that we saw in Trump's Administration
21 and the moratorium on deportations are going to
22 impact how we respond. And so, is MOIA yet thinking
23 through, and will they-- could you work with us at
24 the Immigration Committee and really with the City
25 Council to rethink where all the funding that we're--

1
2 that we have built up in support for our immigrant
3 neighbors can be retooled, and be in support of this
4 new process that will be in front of us. And I'm
5 keeping it very general. I'm keeping it very general
6 because I have some ideas, specific ideas, but I just
7 want to see if we can very publicly let everybody
8 know that we're going to be working on that together.

9 COMMISSIONER MOSTOFI: For sure. I'll
10 start by saying we're of course not even a week into
11 these proposals in the new Administration and we've
12 already seen-- you know, it's going to take a minute
13 to get us on the right road, and hopefully to realize
14 some of these changes most effectively. We have
15 internally begun these conversations about how to
16 look at more broadly our landscape of legal services
17 and to think about, as you said, a new moment and
18 what it might mean to be responsive either by
19 adjusting or increasing that we may have. I'm happy
20 to say that Yasmine is leading that effort for our
21 office, and certainly as we, you know, begin this
22 work, we hope to be able to partner with you all on
23 the thinking and looking at the path forward.

24 CHAIRPERSON MENCHACA: Wonderful, and
25 some of that might be legislation, but most of it

1
2 will probably be budget, and as we anticipate the
3 budget and the incredible tension and pressures that
4 we're going to have in the budget. I think having a
5 plan early that we can all digest and work on
6 together will give it a- I think the most kind of
7 success, the best kind of success in partnership.
8 So, I'm really, really looking forward to that. And
9 Council Member Chin? I think you have a question,
10 too, but I'll hand it over to Committee Chair,
11 Committee Counsel.

12 COMMITTEE COUNSEL: Thank you, Council
13 Member. Council Member Chin? You may go ahead.

14 SERGEANT AT ARMS: Time starts now.

15 COUNCIL MEMBER CHIN: Thank you, Chair
16 and thank you Commissioners. Great to see you.
17 Well, my questions is, you know, relating to our
18 seniors. One if it is like, you know, how close did
19 you work with he Department for the Aging to help
20 encourage more seniors to apply for citizenship. And
21 the other thing is that in terms of the advocacy,
22 right now-- correct me if I'm wrong-- that in order
23 to take the citizenship test in your own language you
24 have to be here for a long period of time. I mean, I
25 think, for what, 55 and older, you have to be here

1 for at least 20 years, and 65 and older you have to
2 be here for at least 15 years. I don't remember the
3 exact years from my advocacy days. For seniors, I
4 think if there's a way that we can advocate to
5 shorten that time, because even though they struggle
6 to learn English, it's not that easy, and they get
7 nervous and I know seniors who failed the test, you
8 know, a couple of times, and if they weren't able to
9 get the fee waiver, that's a lot of money. So, I
10 wanted-- my question is that in terms of, you know,
11 advocacy on shorten the period of time that-- for
12 seniors who have been here so that they will have the
13 opportunity to take the test in their own language
14 where they will feel more comfortable. I mean, look,
15 they'll-- you know, a lot of seniors could
16 communicate with the basic English, but in a
17 situation when they have to take an exam and they're
18 asking them historic questions [inaudible] for the
19 test, they get nervous or it's not easy to really
20 learn all the specific questions. So, that's one
21 thing. And the second thing is that to really look
22 at encouraging more seniors, older adults that are
23 eligible to apply. Then oftentimes the fee is the
24 barrier, language is a barrier, and they may not have
25

1
2 the assistance to help them, you know,-- like all the
3 issues that the first panel raised, you know,
4 traveling to take a test and all those barriers to
5 help them sort of overcome. So, you know, that is my
6 concern.

7 COMMISSIONER MOSTOFI: Thank you for the
8 question. I'll start and Yasmine, if you have
9 anything further to add, please do. one of the
10 things that I want to share is just the findings that
11 our team produced related to kind of better
12 understanding the population that we believe are
13 eligible to naturalize are in our city, and I think
14 it's helpful in somewhat being responsive to your
15 question, Council Member. The average years in the
16 US of an eligible to naturalized immigrant in our
17 city is about 18 years. So, it's an incredibly long
18 period of time. Additionally, they are an older
19 population with a median age of about 47. So,
20 recognizing-- and as I said in the testimony, we
21 estimate that just under 60 percent, almost 60
22 percent of legal permanent residents that are
23 naturalization eligible or potentially eligible are
24 limited English-proficient. So, I think I just want
25 to underscore based on our own analysis what you're

1
2 sharing, and the challenge that you're raising,
3 Council Member. Further, I want to state that the
4 work that we've done specifically that I spoke to
5 with our Human Resources Administration in developing
6 and creating a program that is very intentional and
7 affirmative in reaching out to lawful permanent
8 residents that are clients of HRA really does target
9 that older population. These are folks who by all
10 accounts are fee waiver eligible, you know, low
11 income, older, some who may have challenges as it
12 relates to English, but who may, as you know, given
13 their average years here and their age, be eligible
14 for a waiver of those requirements and might not know
15 that, right? So, it's a very intentionally designed
16 program to engage folks that we know and believe to
17 be eligible or have a pathway for them to know what
18 their rights are and how to have direct
19 representation in carrying forward on those cases
20 [sic].

21 SERGEANT AT ARMS: Time expired.

22 COMMISSIONER MOSTOFI: I'm going to-- so,
23 I'll turn to Yasmine maybe to build on or add to
24 that. She's muted, though. If we could unmute her,
25 that would be great.

1
2 YASMINE FARHANG: There we go. Thank
3 you. No, thank you for raising that. I just wanted
4 to add that there's no question that the barriers
5 that-- that some of the barriers to naturalization
6 under the Trump Administration has had a
7 disproportionate impact on seniors. So, in
8 particular the changes to the disability exemption
9 absolutely has, as has the changes to the exam,
10 right? So, some of the-- some of the changes that
11 we've see have already disproportionately affected
12 seniors, and so I think that from the-- you know,
13 from a policy side, you know, obviously we want to
14 continue to push back against those changes and seek
15 to undo some of the damage that has been done, while
16 also seeking to create much more accessibility and
17 rethink some of the arbitrary requirements to waive
18 some of those exceptions that you noted earlier.

19 COUNCIL MEMBER CHIN: I guess one of the
20 other thing is that in terms of the possibility of
21 really advocating to push back on the number of years
22 that you have to be here in order to take the test in
23 your own language. If we could shorten that time, I
24 think that would be more helpful, also, to a lot of
25 seniors. Like, why do you have to wait 20 years, you

1
2 know, just to be able to take the test in your own
3 language? So, I think that's something that we
4 should be advocating, showing that time frame. Thank
5 you. Thank you, Chair.

6 CHAIRPERSON MENCHACA: Thank you. Thank
7 you, Council Member Chin, and the-- I guess the real
8 opportunity that we have here also in the Council is
9 to figure out how we can promote this larger agenda
10 as well and join the Mayor's office in that agenda,
11 and so I look forward to working with you and other
12 members of the Committee to really force these
13 questions that only I think New York City can with
14 the power that we have and the long history that we
15 have in supporting our immigrant communities,
16 especially our seniors here in this city. I have a
17 couple more questions, or actually a few more
18 questions. And for MOIA, what is the interaction
19 between ActionNYC and New York Citizenship?
20 According to the MOIA report of 2019, the annual
21 report, the citizenship program was to be
22 transitioned into the ActionNYC model in 2020, I
23 think it was July, as part of the ActionNYC in
24 Libraries, which would be more embedded into the
25 city's legal services infrastructure through the HRA

1 and MOIA collaboration. So, considering that COVID-
2 19 pandemic hit at that same time we were
3 experiencing, what was the actual transition? What
4 happened?

6 COMMISSIONER MOSTOFI: Yeah, thank you
7 for the question and the opportunity to piece it
8 together, because [inaudible] giving answers that
9 speak to it. So, we did continue and complete the RFP
10 process for the ActionNYC program during the
11 pandemic, which is a very good thing, and we're happy
12 to say that as of January 1st, our providers have
13 been able to continue, or in the event of new
14 providers, begin their work related to this program.
15 I want to sort of note that what we-- what our
16 learnings were in the library model, there was a lot
17 of requests to the outreach workers at the library
18 and to others to provide legal services that were
19 more broad, so not just citizenship or recognition
20 that citizenship while very important and should be a
21 part of that program, shouldn't be the only service
22 that was offered through those efforts.
23 Additionally, NYC Citizenship was privately funded.
24 If the Committee recalls, it was a public/private
25 partnership, non-baselined funding and our goal was,

1 as you rightly note, to ensure that we were
2 institutionalizing both what was most effective about
3 the work, but the continuation and importance of
4 doing naturalization in an intentional and
5 affirmative way. So we've done that in a couple of
6 ways, bringing this fully into city-funded efforts
7 while the private funding came to an end last year.
8 So, the first was in yielding savings of
9 administrative costs in ActionNYC and increasing
10 those dollars through the RFP, and awarding ActionNYC
11 libraries to our new provider, which is the Immigrant
12 Justice Core, but continuing that additional support
13 to libraries to undertake the outreach that as I said
14 was such a critical and continues to be a critical
15 component of that work. The second was recognizing
16 that what was very unique about the program was the
17 way we had embedded it into the Human Resources
18 Administration and its ability to really reach most
19 vulnerable populations in a very targeted and
20 affirmative way to move them through the process.
21 And so we did through the partnership with the Human
22 Resources Administration this fiscal year, allocate
23 city funding to that effort to continue that program
24 in this fiscal year. Additionally, we worked with
25

1 the Office of Economic Opportunity, recognizing that
2 the-- some of the challenges that you rightly raised
3 because of the pandemic and the length of time that
4 cases were taking, necessitated the continuation of
5 many of the cases in this fiscal year, so providing
6 additional resource for that for this budget cycle.
7 So, that is sort of a long version of saying we're
8 very happy to say that now this work is codified in
9 city funding, that we were able to do that through
10 the ActionNYC work, but also to further realize it in
11 HRA's budget this fiscal year to continue that part
12 of the program and that's something that we look
13 forward to being able to continue to do.

14
15 CHAIRPERSON MENCHACA: Thank you. Thank
16 you for piecing that together, and it's a big feat,
17 no doubt, and I think-- we'll hear from providers,
18 because I want to kind of get a sense about what else
19 we can keep doing to build that synergy, but I'm
20 going to move on to a couple other pieces that we
21 wanted accomplished in the hearing, which include
22 fluctuations in the naturalization cases over the
23 last three years, and the 2019 annual report talks a
24 little bit about that, that ActionNYC provided for
25 citizenship increased from 861 applications to 958

1
2 applications from 2017 to 2018, and then there was a
3 decrease to 864 applications in 2019. There's a
4 couple other more data pieces, but what do you think
5 led to the decrease in naturalization applications
6 between 2018 and 2019?

7 COMMISSIONER MOSTOFI: Sure, I can, you
8 know, share my own thoughts, and Yasmine, please
9 build on this with anything additional that we know
10 or are aware of, but I think you've heard us speak
11 numerous times to the challenges presented by
12 naturalization in terms of the barriers that were
13 lifted. I think very often you see in cyclical
14 cycles that elections are a way to bring into
15 people's awareness. One of the many benefits of
16 citizenship, to be able to access, and unfortunately
17 what we saw in the last year were so many different
18 barriers to citizenship were lifted up, that that
19 length of time, you know,-- say you were in-- you
20 started to think about it and became interested in
21 naturalizing at the end of 2019. It was clear you
22 would not have completed that process for over a
23 year. And so I'm sure without-- you know, having
24 research and analysis that points directly to it in
25 front of me, that that was one of the barriers.

1
2 Additionally, and we've heard this across the board,
3 just an increased fear or concern in, you know,
4 enforcement being the priority of the previous
5 Administration, including looking at in a sort of
6 more negative instead of welcoming way, applications
7 for things like naturalization. So, in the past
8 where there might have been less reticence to try and
9 confidence that you will be able to go through
10 because the system wasn't so designed to be
11 enforcement focused or punitive. Many may have been
12 advised that this was maybe not the right moment to
13 apply, but really the administration's intentionality
14 to be trigger happy with deportation was one that
15 perhaps wasn't worth it for individuals and their
16 families and may have received advice to holds or to
17 wait based on the facts of their particular case to
18 hopefully a better more sunshine-oriented moment in
19 our immigration system. Those are, you know, some of
20 what I surmised both from what I've heard and read are
21 some of the reasons that we probably saw a decline in
22 applications, but I don't know, Yasmine, if you want
23 to add anything to that.

24 YASMINE FARHANG: Yeah, I would just add
25 that, you know, the-- some of the barriers that have

1
2 made naturalization applications more challenging
3 under the Trump administration were created in a much
4 more onerous systems for the legal service providers
5 and for the applicant themselves, right? So the
6 process that may have been previously somewhat
7 straightforward of filing a fee waiver or filing a
8 disability exemption have required much more follow-
9 up by providers and advocates and much more, you
10 know, document collection by applicants themselves,
11 sometimes going back and forth numerous times with
12 USCIS after having a fee waiver rejected erroneously,
13 for example, right, by the HMC or having a disability
14 exemption denied. So, the work itself became much
15 more [inaudible] pending cases, you know, and the
16 amount of labor that that took I think also
17 contributed to a decrease in new filings.

18 CHAIRPERSON MENCHACA: Okay. You cut off
19 or you cut out a couple points in the full testimony,
20 but we'll follow up with you later to just get a
21 better sense about how we can get that information,
22 but I want to go to the next question, Commissioner.
23 In really understanding whether or not MOIA tracks
24 successful completions of naturalization through
25 ActionNYC, and if you do, what are those approval

1 rates of the cases that have gone through ActionNYC?
2 And let's take the 864 applications that were filed
3 in 2019, how many of those were approved?
4

5 COMMISSIONER MOSTOFI: sure, I can
6 provide you what I have, and if there's something
7 that's missing, we're happy to circle back. So, I
8 want to start by saying there are many programs, not
9 just the two or three that we've mentioned here
10 today, but others in the Administration including
11 IOI, both the Mayoral and City Council funded
12 efforts, as well as CSVG, the community block grant,
13 that support naturalization efforts. So, we estimate
14 with our Office of Civil Justice that there are
15 approximately 3,000 applications for citizenship that
16 have been filed in that universe of mayoral and city
17 programs. And for ActionNYC, as you note, in the
18 calendar year last year, we estimate about 864
19 applications were filed. That doesn't include the
20 number of folks that we engaged or that began
21 processes who may otherwise be delayed or prevented
22 from filing in this moment. It is literally the
23 number of cases that were filed. On average we do
24 collect the approval rates from our providers for the
25 program, and we have about a 95 percent approval rate

1
2 across the board. I don't know-- I don't have it in
3 front of me, the-- actually, I do. Thank you, team.
4 The individual granted citizenship in fiscal year
5 2019 were 700, and of course, given the delays from
6 year to year, that's not an apples to apples number,
7 right. Those could have been cases that were filed
8 in 2019 but got adjudicated in-- sorry, in 2018 or
9 2017 that got adjudicated in 2019.

10 CHAIRPERSON MENCHACA: Got it. Thank you.
11 Thank you for that. There might be some follow-ups,
12 but we can keep moving. I think we're really
13 interested in just understanding what's working, and
14 as we want to partner in the retooling component and
15 the funding conversation, this is going to be, I
16 think, important. Including this next piece of
17 information about the flow of the requests for
18 assistance, how does MOIA receive those request for
19 assistance with naturalization applications? Is it
20 primarily coming through MOIA hotlines-- or the MOIA
21 hotline or the ActionNYC hotline or other referral
22 services? Where is that coming in? And then once
23 you get that request for assistance, where does MOIA
24 refer everyone to?

1
2 COMMISSIONER MOSTOFI: Yeah, thanks for
3 the question. So, there are a number of entry points
4 that exist, everything from 311 to MOIA's own hotline
5 to the ActionNYC hotline to directly to the
6 immigration legal services providers as well, and
7 depending on sort of the originating issue, we at
8 MOIA our best practice is that we direct to the
9 ActionNYC help line, and the reason is because there
10 you have the bigger picture view of what's available
11 across providers, and the ability to directly make
12 the appointment so that folks don't have to sort of
13 jump. They kind of have both options. You can go
14 directly to the provider, but we're also able to make
15 the appointment for you, right? We did create a
16 system with the program with NY Citizenship last year
17 with the-- in the libraries to be intentional about
18 which providers were getting the citizenship
19 requests. First, just to more efficiently allocate
20 resources in the right way, and so that was sort of
21 for the helpline to figure out, sort of a back bend
22 efficiency mechanism, and for NY Citizenship at HRA
23 they work directly with NYLAG. So, that is a direct
24 communication with the provider on a hand-off that's
25 more to ensure that the individual has the support

1
2 from who will be eventually there lawyer right out
3 the gate. So, those are sort of the mechanisms that
4 we utilize for those purposes.

5 CHAIRPERSON MENCHACA: Thank you for
6 sharing that. I'm going to take a pause here, and
7 hand it back to our counsel. I think Council Member
8 Chin has a question.

9 COMMITTEE COUNSEL: Thank you, Chair.
10 Turning to other Council Members for questions.
11 We'll start with Council Member Chin.

12 SERGEANT AT ARMS: Time starts now.

13 COUNCIL MEMBER CHIN: Thank you. I have a
14 follow-up question. In terms of, you know, outreach
15 and letting people know that all these free programs
16 are available, I want to know, like, is MOIA and the
17 advocates utilize the ethnic media outlet to really
18 let people know that these services are available?
19 Because one of the issues that we have faced is that,
20 you know, often times in ethnic community you have
21 these informal agencies or whatever that advertise
22 that they help people with citizenship and they do
23 charge a lot of money, and then people, you know--
24 didn't happen and got cheated and all those problems,
25 often times because they don't know that government

1 or nonprofit have these programs that are available.
2 So, has MOIA really looked at helping, opening
3 resources to help, you know, utilizing the media,
4 ethnic media, to really let the community know that
5 these resources and programs are available to help
6 them?
7

8 COMMISSIONER MOSTOFI: Yeah, thank you so
9 much for the question. We wholeheartedly, as you
10 know, believe in partnering effectively with
11 community and ethnic media, and so it has been a
12 focus of ours to do so. We do it in a number of
13 ways, not exclusively for immigration legal help, but
14 immigration legal help and naturalization are always
15 pieces of what we focus on in almost every
16 communication that we have. So, we have a news blast
17 that we share with community in ethnic media with
18 updates. We do regular community and ethnic media
19 roundtables. We also public op-eds in different
20 languages that often get reprinted in community and
21 ethnic media, and additionally, particularly on
22 legal-- immigration legal help, we've done a number
23 of things. One is partner with community and ethnic
24 media for key or really important priority or
25 critical announcements. So we've done that a myriad

1
2 number of times around public charge and ensuring
3 we're effectively reaching folks to understand sort
4 of what does this mean and get legal advice before
5 making any determination or decision as to their
6 personal immigration case or status before
7 withdrawing from benefits. Additionally, we launched
8 last spring a Support Not Fear campaign, and the call
9 to action there was around immigration legal help.
10 That campaign we ran in community and ethnic media,
11 both prints, but also radio and television, and it's
12 something that we are looking at reviving again this
13 year, hopefully in the spring. And one of the calls
14 to action, as I said there, is around immigration
15 legal help. So connecting people directly to our
16 hotline to receive those services. So, those are
17 some of the ways that we do see community ethnic
18 media as a really, really important channel to do
19 outreach and get information out in a trusted
20 fashion, but always welcome other ideas.

21 COUNCIL MEMBER CHIN: I guess the thing
22 is like on a regular basis, so it's not like, you
23 know, an action here or a blast here, in terms of
24 regular, weekly, or something that keep it out there
25 in the media and the-- a lot of the ethnic community,

1
2 that's what they rely on like ethnic radio, the
3 newspaper. So I think that is something that the
4 Administration should look at, you know, maybe
5 putting some resources in there and not just only
6 rely on, you know, free advertising just an article
7 here and there, but regular kind of information that
8 people see, because sometimes they miss it and then
9 they don't hear it, because there's still so many
10 immigrants that's getting taken advantage of,
11 especially with legal services and immigration.
12 Unfortunately, you know, that's what's happening in
13 the community, and it's just so sad that people don't
14 know about, you know, fee waiver, citizenship
15 classes, all these things available to them. And
16 often times, even when we try to publicize
17 Citizenship Now, and it just-- not that many people
18 take advantage of it. And so I think that's
19 something that we need, more resource, to really
20 help, you know, get the word out regularly so that
21 people can get this information. Thank you. So that
22 will be in the budget, right? I think Chair--

23 SERGEANT AT ARMS: [interposing] Time
24 expired.

25

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2 COUNCIL MEMBER CHIN: We will have to
3 look at--

4 CHAIRPERSON MENCHACA: [interposing] Yeah,
5 exactly.

6 COUNCIL MEMBER CHIN: ESL [sic] classes
7 and you know, money for education and outreach and
8 all that to make sure that our community knows about
9 all these good things that they should take advantage
10 of. Thank you.

11 CHAIRPERSON MENCHACA: Exactly, and to
12 your point, Council Member Chin, and if you have any
13 other questions, let's keep teaming up here in this
14 hearing, because I think we're really revealing this
15 honor of retooling our city agency responses,
16 understanding the flow, the changes in the flow, the
17 fact that we're going to be in COVID operations for
18 some time as we get relief from the Federal
19 Government. But the next question I had is not just
20 about creating spaces like adult literacy classes and
21 all that, there's also a lot of misinformation, and
22 so how is MOIA working with all the city agencies to
23 combat the misinformation regarding naturalization
24 application from Notarios [sic] and other predatory
25 businesses and bad actors? We know that world really

1 well. We combat that all the time, but in this new
2 positive response from the Federal Government we know
3 we're going to have those bad actors come back. And
4 so how are you working to anticipate that and to
5 combat that?

7 COMMISSIONER MOSTOFI: Yeah, thank you
8 for the question. We are a part of, as are many city
9 agencies, the Protecting Immigrant New Yorkers
10 Taskforce, the PINY Taskforce, that brings together
11 stakeholders that share this interest in ensuring
12 that we're effectively combatting immigration fraud
13 including the Attorney General's Office, the District
14 Attorney's Offices, New York Immigration Coalition,
15 and many other partners, and from the City, the NYPD,
16 the Department for Consumer Affairs, and our team as
17 well, and this is an issue that is-- this is really,
18 really critical. It's one of the many reasons that
19 we've together created, you know, a universal entry
20 point that we can push out without confusion about
21 where people can go for legal advice, and the fact
22 that its city-funded support and that people do not
23 have to worry about quality, but the city is actually
24 paying for incredibly high-quality immigration legal
25 help. We have worked to do a few different things to

1
2 try and both elevate the concerns around this, but
3 also to get information out about this issue, this
4 really important issue. One is our team developed a
5 one-pager that we had translated into many different
6 languages about how to avoid fraud, so what are some
7 of the best practices. You know, sometimes simply
8 saying, "No, no, go here," isn't the best answer for
9 people, right? Maybe you want to go to the provider
10 that supported somebody that you know or that's being
11 recommended to you by a community member, which is
12 often what we hear, and so we developed a best
13 practice, so what to ask for in terms of contract,
14 what to look for in terms of being a reputable legal
15 services organization, all of the sort of tell-tale
16 so that in our efforts to educate people not just
17 about the legal services that are available to them,
18 but just making sure they know what their rights are
19 and how to be a smart consumer in engaging with any
20 immigration legal practitioner. So, we've developed
21 that and translated into many if; languages. It's
22 part of our efforts in getting information out and
23 doing outreach about this work. We also held a
24 hearing last year on immigration fraud, joined by our
25 taskforce members to sort of hear and better

1
2 understand the experiences, community members, and
3 legal services providers have in this space to inform
4 the taskforces work now and in the future, and that
5 will be a part of ongoing conversation through those
6 efforts. And further, we-- through the ActionNYC
7 hotline which is a hotline that is operated by
8 Catholic Charities. There's a backend partnership
9 with the Office for New Americans that receives many
10 of these complaints. So that team is fully trained
11 on this and has the ability without having somebody
12 drop from the call to ensure that they're being
13 handed off appropriately to report or share any
14 information about immigration fraud. But it is such
15 an important issue and question. It is a very hard
16 one to undercut given, you know, the import of
17 getting relief that people feel, and sometimes
18 hearing no from a reputable provider about the
19 ability to move forward in a case might make you
20 desperate and go to somebody who's not the reputable
21 and will take a lot of money in filing a fraudulent
22 case, and that's not a good thing. So, we really,
23 really, really want to get good information out as
24 much as possible, and one of the first things that I
25 did last week when the announcement came from

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2 President Biden was to go on Univision and ask people
3 to not go to any providers the next day, to be very
4 clear that this was a declaration of an intention to
5 go through legislation, but nothing was yet available
6 for folks. And so they might hear, come and we can
7 apply for a pathway to citizenship, but that is a
8 false and illegal conduct that should be reported,
9 and our team has amplified that message in various
10 channels as well.

11 CHAIRPERSON MENCHACA: I'm really excited
12 to hear from the providers as well to see if there
13 are any other ideas that can come from their work
14 being on the ground, and to your point, and this just
15 reminds me of DACA when it came out and there were a
16 lot of questions about the application process, and
17 Notorios [sic] were out and about, and so many
18 families were impacted, some communities more than
19 others. I know in Sunset Park from our Chinese-
20 speaking community, we had a lot of issues that came
21 out, and so we-- this is not new to us, and I'm
22 really happy that you are kind of advocating for a
23 responsible and thoughtful response from our
24 immigrant communities. And I'm thinking about free
25 tax return support that the city kind of puts

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2 together every year, and whether or not you're
3 thinking about or do you currently have anything in
4 that form that can be really more robust in ensuring
5 that people can have that support to pull those
6 documents together as we anticipate a pathway, and
7 what you might be thinking about in terms of creating
8 something similar that can get rolled out so that
9 people can connect to city-trusted partners.

10 COMMISSIONER MOSTOFI: I'm not sure I'm
11 appreciating your question, but I'll try to-- and
12 maybe it's because we haven't thought of it yet. As
13 you noted, the Department for Consumer Affairs
14 annually does free tax prep which is a tremendous
15 program and important one that we partner in
16 amplifying with them and have made sure that IDNYC
17 can be used for purposes of accessing that program
18 and sort of partner in the effort to get the word
19 out. We have not thought about, at least I, not to
20 my knowledge, ways to partner with DCW3 actually now
21 to leverage that program or to build upon it in this
22 moment, and certainly that's a conversation that we
23 can have. We do know-- I believe that-- you know,
24 their-- all of their financial counseling centers
25 remain open or available to New Yorkers at this

1
2 moment. I don't think any of that has been impacted
3 in a way where it's shut down by the pandemic. So my
4 anticipation without knowing more is that includes
5 all of the efforts around tax prep that will happen.

6 CHAIRPERSON MENCHACA: And really, it's
7 creating a separate, but very much like tax prep,
8 citizenship prep program that you're--

9 COMMISSIONER MOSTOFI: [interposing] Oh,
10 I'm sorry, I misunderstood your point. Yes. You
11 know, this is part of what we had talked about and
12 discussed in response to DACA and DAPA was in the
13 creation of that program, and in the first year I
14 believe we operated it in this way. It also included
15 a clinic model like a tax prep model for purposes of
16 the application process, and given where things ended
17 up with that effort and of course with the Trump
18 Administration it was retooled to be more responsive
19 to the needs that we have, but in the very, very,
20 very early conversations that we had about looking at
21 this new moment and what might be necessary, we have
22 revived some of that, those initial thinking on
23 point.

24 CHAIRPERSON MENCHACA: And again, this is
25 another place we can partner in helping roll that

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2 out, and maybe the last comment I want to make, and
3 if Council Member Chin doesn't have another question-
4 - I just want to double check. Yes or no? No?
5 Okay. We'll move on, and this will be my last
6 comment for you Commissioner and your team who came
7 here. Just thank you again for the work, and I know
8 that we're all experiencing no matter what, and where
9 we are with this pandemic and public service is-- it
10 continues to be something that will be changing
11 people's lives, and as we see this new Administration
12 bring life to something that we've been all fighting
13 for for such a long time, the local infrastructure is
14 going to be critical to the success of this federal
15 program, and we're going to have to meet them, and so
16 it's going to require a lot of creativity. It's going
17 to require new ideas and funding, and so this is not
18 a budget hearing, but very soon we're going to have a
19 budget conversation, and I hope we can work in
20 anticipation for that so that we can retool and grow
21 where we need to, and redistribute what we need to
22 ensure that we're getting as much support to what we
23 need. And so-- and I think a lot about census and
24 what we did together, and the Council bringing in a
25 lot more resource to ensure that we can get to more

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2 people at a time where we could not knock on doors
3 the way we wanted to and spread COVID. We were able
4 to create new relationships with trusted partners,
5 and so I think we're building upon a lot of really
6 great infrastructure already, and so I have a lot of
7 good feelings about that and I welcome that
8 partnership to bring all those learnings together.

9 COMMISSIONER MOSTOFI: That sounds great.
10 Thank you.

11 CHAIRPERSON MENCHACA: Thank you,
12 Commissioner.

13 COMMISSIONER MOSTOFI: Thank you.

14 CHAIRPERSON MENCHACA: I'm going to hand
15 it back to our Committee Counsel.

16 COMMITTEE COUNSEL: Thank you, Chair. At
17 this time we've concluded Administration testimony.
18 So thank you to Commissioner for testifying. We will
19 now be turning to public testimony. I'd like to
20 remind everyone that we will be calling on
21 individuals one by one to testify, and each panelist
22 will be given three minutes to speak. For panelists,
23 after I call your name, a member of our staff will
24 unmute you. There may be a few seconds of delay
25 before you are unmuted, and we thank you in advance

1
2 for your patience. Please wait a brief moment for
3 the Sergeant at Arms to announce that you may begin
4 before starting your testimony. Council Members who
5 have questions for a particular panelist should use
6 the "raise hand" function in Zoom, and I will call on
7 you after the panel has completed their testimony in
8 the order in which you had raised your hand. I would
9 now like to welcome our first panel. In order, I
10 will be calling on Anissa E. Druesedow, followed by
11 Michael Mullen, followed by Benjamin Lundberg Torres
12 Sanchez, followed by Minsun Kim. Anissa E.
13 Druesedow, you may begin when you are ready.

14 SERGEANT AT ARMS: Time starts now.

15 ANISSA DRUESEDOW: Hi, my name is Anissa
16 Druesedow. I am an adoptee. I was adopted in 1982 by
17 Sergeant Major First Class Denver Druesedow, and my
18 mother, his wife, Vicki Druesedoow. In 2003 I broke
19 the law. I pled guilty of falsifying business
20 records to the tune of \$3,400 and change. In 2006
21 after my immigration lawyer, Monica Reed, died of an
22 asthma attack, I was deported because I had no more
23 money and no more support. I have been separated from
24 my family since 2006. I couldn't afford to keep my
25 daughter, so I had to send her back to the US. I get

1
2 to see her every two to three years. Sorry. My
3 oldest sister died of cancer, and I got to say
4 goodbye to her in March of last year over a video
5 call similar to this. Adoption promised me a family.
6 They promised me a home. They promised me not to be
7 thrown out again. This resolution is something that
8 is a life-saving resolution and a life-saving bill
9 once it gets introduced, again, not just to me, to
10 many deportees like Mike in Ethiopia, Mauricio in
11 Costa Rica. I ask you guys to please help us, not
12 only with this resolution, but also when the bill
13 comes in to urge Congressman [inaudible] please help
14 us and to please get as much weight on this bill so
15 that it can be introduced. I've watched three to four
16 bills during my time out here go in and die, and I
17 don't understand why. I did not ask to be adopted.
18 I'm very thankful to be adopted, because without
19 adoption I would have died from cancer. After
20 getting adopted, I lost my leg to cancer, synovial-
21 cell sarcoma. The amputation was done in Walter Reed
22 Medical Hospital. I am here with a prosthetic leg due
23 to organizations in the US. I have running water,
24 thank you to Adoptees for Justice and their support
25 that they have been for me and their platform that

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2 they have given me to have a voice back in the states
3 because without them I would be silenced forever. I
4 am not in hiding like most of the deported adoptees
5 because here in Central America, you cannot be very
6 out-spoken and let people know that you have been
7 deported from the United States. I, on the other
8 hand, this is all that I have. This is my only hope
9 to be able to go home and not have to assist my
10 parent's funeral through a video call like I am doing
11 right now. I thank you all. I thank you, Chairman
12 Menchaca, for the time that we have been given,
13 although I think three minutes is way too short for
14 everything that I really want to say to you. It's
15 not just me out here. It's many of us. And also, in
16 the US, those that are trying to retire and access
17 benefits that they have paid into have been--

18 SERGEANT AT ARMS: [interposing] Time.

19 ANISSA DRUESEDOW: Totally limited on
20 what they have to do. Thank you so very much.

21 CHAIRPERSON MENCHACA: Thank you, Annise
22 [sp?] for your words and the connection to the human
23 life that will be impacted by not just a bill, but by
24 a change in mentality for our most vulnerable
25

1
2 community members and the promise that is given to
3 them. So, thank you so much for that.

4 ANISSA DRUESEDOW: You're welcome.

5 CHAIRPERSON MENCHACA: And that is what's
6 going to go into this resolution when we debate it on
7 the floor and pass it on the floor of the City
8 Council and send that to Washington. Thank you.

9 ANISSA DRUESEDOW: Thank you.

10 COMMITTEE COUNSEL: Thank you for your
11 testimony. I would now like to welcome Michael
12 Mullen to testify. You may begin when you are ready.

13 SERGEANT AT ARMS: Time starts now.

14 MICHAEL MULLEN: Thank you, Council, for
15 hearing us today and we appreciate Council Member Koo
16 for introducing this resolution into part of the
17 Adoptee Citizenship Act. I also want to thank Anissa
18 for your strength. You know, it inspires all of us
19 to keep fighting for you, so thank you for joining us
20 today also. My name is Michael Mullen. I'm the
21 current President of Also Known As. We're a New York
22 City based nonprofit now in our 25th year of building
23 community for international adoptees. If you ask any
24 common person, you'll find 100 percent agreement that
25 when a child is adopted they become a full member of

1
2 their new family, and they become a full citizens of
3 their new country. So, you know, it's a little crazy
4 that-- you know, it's like strange that we're talking
5 now about this Adoptee Citizenship Act as a pathway
6 to citizenship, it was called adoption. So it's just
7 crazy that they're now being excluded from that. I
8 think one thing that I just want to, you know, make
9 clear is that this is really a clarification to
10 existing law that should already exist. This is not
11 like a new kind of carve-out that we're trying to ask
12 for, something that we're trying to get some special
13 benefit. It's just a collection of unintended
14 consequence of the way the adoption process works.
15 It's really a bug in that process. Like we all have
16 experienced bugs in the software when we-- you know,
17 I'm sure there's bugs in the software you're trying
18 to use when you're trying to run your City Council
19 meetings, but-- and which, you know, those bugs are
20 very frustrating and annoying, but this bug is
21 destroying lives. It's breaking up families.
22 Imagine waking up tomorrow and finding out that you
23 cannot get a driver's license suddenly and that you
24 are no long-- you know, all your work, all your years
25 of work, you suddenly cannot qualify for Social

1 Security, just very basic things like that, much
2 less, of course, victims such as Anissa [sp?] who
3 have been deported very unjustly and denied their
4 rightful citizenship. Resolutions have been passed
5 in many cities such as Houston, Los Angeles, and so
6 now we're asking for New York to be part of this
7 country's leadership that will support the Adoptee
8 Citizenship Act and bring justice for these adoptees.
9 Thank you very much.

11 CHAIRPERSON MENCHACA: Thank you,
12 Michael, for your testimony today, and we want to
13 join all those cities with New York's loud and
14 important voice, and I also thank Council Member Koo
15 for this resolution and this committee for that work,
16 and I also want to acknowledge that we've been joined
17 by Council Member Mathieu Eugene from Brooklyn,
18 member of the committee.

19 COMMITTEE COUNSEL: Thank you, Chair, and
20 thank you for your testimony. Next I'd like to
21 welcome Benjamin Lundberg Torres Sanchez to testify.
22 You may begin when you are ready.

23 SERGEANT AT ARMS: Time starts now.

24 BENJAMIN SANCHEZ: Good morning City
25 Council Members and speakers. Thank you so much

1 Council Member Koo. I really appreciate everybody's
2 focus and attention so much today on considering
3 accessibility. I also want to thank Anissa and Mike
4 for your testimony and just express appreciation for
5 time to speak today. My name is Benjamin Lundberg
6 Torres Sanchez. I use they/them pronouns, and I'm
7 joining you from Unseated and Occupied [inaudible]
8 known to many as Brooklyn. I'm an arts educator who
9 has worked in New York City public schools for 10
10 years and currently work with Pathways to Graduation
11 students in New York City District 79. I was
12 separated from first family in Columbia for 28 years
13 through private trans-national adoption process
14 initiated in New York State. We know that adoption
15 and foster care industries as well as systems of
16 family regulation and surveillance like the
17 Administration of Children's Services
18 disproportionately impact black and indigenous
19 families, immigrant families, and the children who
20 are separated from those first families. My adopting
21 parents are white, English-speaking, and wealthy
22 enough to afford a lawyer to make sure that my
23 paperwork was in order and that I was granted
24 citizenship through naturalization. Of course, not
25

1
2 all families have the means to have a legal expert
3 aide them in this process. Despite all of these
4 supports and despite the fact that I was issued a US
5 American passport as a teen, I was erroneously
6 classified as an illegal immigrant with the ability
7 to work and was initially unable to access financial
8 aid when I applied to college, requiring me to spend
9 more time at Social Security Administration to fix
10 this error. A relatively small impact for me, but of
11 course there are many more severe potential impacts
12 that folks can face, including deportation as Anissa
13 [sp?] mentioned in her own case. Just like our
14 comrades for DACA and TPS recipients, US American
15 citizenship is a huge support to our mental,
16 emotional, and spiritual wellbeing, and that's what
17 importantly mentioned by the commissioner the support
18 to our material wellbeing as well. The movement to
19 guarantee citizenship for people separated from their
20 families from international adoption processes should
21 be undertaken alongside the fight to secure
22 citizenship and other rights and protections for TPS
23 recipients, DACA recipients, and their undocumented
24 family members who are historically under supported
25 by policy-makers nationwide. Given the many dynamics

1
2 of choicelessness [sic], displacement, and
3 dislocation that adopted and foster people face, the
4 situation of being denied citizenship and its
5 benefits only adds to the unnecessary obstacles put
6 in our lives. I'm calling on policy-makers at all
7 levels to act to readdress this easily-remedied
8 issue. Thank you so much for the time.

9 COMMITTEE COUNSEL: Thank you for your
10 testimony. I'd like to now welcome Minsun Kim to
11 testify. After Minsun Kim we'll be hearing from Adam
12 Lee Goodman. Minsun Kim, you may begin when you are
13 ready.

14 SERGEANT AT ARMS: Time starts now.

15 COMMITTEE COUNSEL: I believe we might be
16 having some technical issues, so we will turn back. I
17 will now be calling on Adam Lee Goodman to testify.
18 You may begin when you are ready.

19 SERGEANT AT ARMS: Time starts now.

20 ADAM LEE GOODMAN: Thank you very much
21 City Council Chair Menchaca, Committee Council Member
22 Koo, and my previous panelists. My name is Adam Lee
23 Goodman. I was adopted from South Korea, and I was
24 lucky enough to have-- to be given citizenship and to
25 have family member, my adopted father, have the

1
2 knowledge and the wherewithal to go through the
3 process, but like Mike said, this shouldn't be about
4 luck, right? And this shouldn't be-- this issue is
5 an issue of fixing a mistake. It's a bug in the
6 system. it should be remedied because of the severe
7 impact that stateless people have on their lives, and
8 this isn't just an issue of citizenship, it's an
9 issue of justice, and you know, I appreciate all the
10 time that we've been given, but-- you know, and to
11 hear this testimony, but you know, we really need to
12 get this done because we need to put these families
13 back together, and we need to sort of fix the
14 mistakes that we've made. You know, I really don't
15 have much more to add than that, but thank you for
16 your time, and hopefully we can get this resolution
17 passed and just continue to push this forward. Thank
18 you.

19 COMMITTEE COUNSEL: Thank you for your
20 testimony. I'd like to now welcome Minsun Kim to
21 testify. You may begin when you are ready.

22 SERGEANT AT ARMS: Time starts now.

23 COMMITTEE COUNSEL: I believe we're still
24 having audio issues. In the meantime, I'm going to
25

1
2 ask if Council Member Menchaca-- if Chair Menchaca
3 has any questions for this panel?

4 CHAIRPERSON MENCHACA: No questions.

5 Thank you. I want to say thank you to the panelists
6 who are here, and again, we want to hear as many New
7 Yorkers as possible. So, I hope that you can stay,
8 even if you have any technical issues. We want to
9 make sure we hear your voice as we send all this
10 testimony to and with the resolution.

11 COMMITTEE COUNSEL: Thank you, Chair. As
12 a reminder for anyone who is not able to testify
13 today, you can submit written testimony at
14 testimony@council.nyc.gov. We're now going to move
15 onto our next panel. So I'd like to thank this panel
16 for their testimony. In order of testifying, our
17 next panel will be Meetu Dhar, followed by Terry
18 Lawson, followed by Alexandra Rizio, followed by
19 Shawn Blumberg, followed by Sarah B. Greenberg.
20 Meetu Dhar, you may begin when you are ready.

21 SERGEANT AT ARMS: Time starts now.

22 MEETU DHAR: Good morning, Chairman
23 Menchaca and members of the Committee on Immigration.
24 Thank you for inviting me to speak on this very
25 important topic. My name is Meetu Dhar and I'm the

1
2 Managing Attorney for the CUNY Citizenship Now City
3 Council Immigration Services Program. I'm here on
4 behalf of Allan Wernick, our Executive Director.
5 CUNY Citizenship Now started in 1997 providing free
6 high-quality and confidential immigration services to
7 individuals and their families on their path to US
8 citizenship. We have eight centers located through
9 New York City and are in 34 City Council offices.
10 Our partnership with the City Council began in 2012,
11 and thanks to the generous support of the City
12 Council, we served over 51,000 individuals and
13 families at City Council sites and offices. Due to
14 the pandemic, we've adapted our services to reach
15 constituents remotely. Similar to Farhana Choudhury
16 and Yliana Diaz who had testified earlier today, I
17 began as a volunteer with CUNY Citizenship Now. This
18 was about 10 years ago. I realized then there were
19 and continues to be a large number of immigrants who
20 cannot afford the cost of private attorneys and/or
21 immigration fees. Because of this, and because
22 they're unaware of other options, immigrants often
23 have to turn to notaries or unethical businesses for
24 help. These entities would take advantage of the
25 immigrant's vulnerability and make false promises,

1
2 which often resulted in the immigrant's removal from
3 the United States. At CUNY Citizenship Now we offer
4 high-quality free services that provide another
5 choice for immigrants. Our services eliminate the
6 need for an immigrant to rely on these unscrupulous
7 individuals and businesses. Until meeting with us,
8 individuals that we heard from, such as Farhana
9 Choudhury and Yliana Diaz, were unaware that filing
10 fees for naturalization can be reduced or completely
11 waived. Fee waivers have made it possible for many
12 to apply for naturalization. The Trump
13 Administration announced last summer that they would
14 move forward with their plan to substantially
15 increase immigration application fees and eliminate
16 fees-- and eliminate fee waivers especially in
17 certain limited circumstances. This would have had a
18 crippling effect on the poor and low-income
19 immigrants and their ability to become US citizens.
20 In response to this, CUNY increased work and staff
21 hours in order to assist more applicants before the
22 deadline. Thankfully, the court blocked the
23 Administration from increasing fees and eliminating
24 fee waivers. While some constituents are deterred by
25 cost, others do not apply for naturalization because

1
2 they're overwhelmed or fearful of the process,
3 especially because of the last Administration's
4 restricted administrative-- immigration policies.
5 CUNY Citizenship Now serves to alleviate these fears
6 by providing information through our media outlets,
7 Facebook live series, and by speaking at various
8 forums. The pandemic has had a debilitating effect
9 on those applying for citizenship. Processing times
10 for those waiting for naturalization interviews and
11 oath ceremonies has increased. Further, just last
12 month, USCIS made the civics test longer and more
13 difficult to pass. There's a pressing need in New
14 York City to continue and expand the services we
15 provide. I thank you, Chairman Menchaca and the
16 Immigration Council, for inviting us to testify
17 today, and I will be submitting written testimony.

18 SERGEANT AT ARMS: Time expired.

19 MEETU DHAR: Thank you.

20 COMMITTEE COUNSEL: Thank you for your
21 testimony. I'd like to now welcome Terry Lawson to
22 testify. You may begin when you are ready.

23 SERGEANT AT ARMS: Time starts now.

24 TERRY LAWSON: Good morning. My name is
25 Terry Lawson and I'm an Executive Director of

1
2 Unlocal, a community center nonprofit organization
3 that provides direct community education, outreach,
4 and legal representation to New York's undocumented
5 immigrant community, including those seeking
6 citizenship. This hearing is about reducing barriers
7 to citizenship, and I want to take this time to talk
8 about what New York City can do and specifically what
9 happened to our client, Javier Castillo Nardiaga
10 [sp?], a Bronx resident who was in the news this
11 weekend. Javier, a 27-year-old Bronx resident who
12 came here with this family when he was seven years
13 old was referred to Unlocal and the Rapid Response
14 Legal Collaborative, which is funded by the Mayor's
15 Office of Immigrant Affairs, by the hotline operated
16 by the Immigrant Defense Project. Back in 2019,
17 Javier was stopped and frisked on a Bronx street by
18 the NYPD. While in DOC [sic] custody, Javier was
19 unlawfully transferred to ICE custody by DOC in
20 violation of NYC detainer laws. After 14 months in
21 custody, Javier's criminal case was finally dismissed
22 by the Bronx DA in January 2021. During this time,
23 Javier was unable to renew his DACA status due to
24 being in ICE detention. Days before the inauguration
25 Javier was transferred from an ICE detention center

1
2 in New York to an ICE staging facility operated by
3 GEO in Alexandria, Virginia-- I'm sorry, Louisiana,
4 and told that he would be deported on Friday, January
5 22nd on the second full day of the Biden
6 Administration. After Unlocal intervened we were
7 informed on Thursday that Javier's flight was
8 cancelled and that he would not be removed. The
9 following day, Javier was informed by GEO that he
10 would be deported at 2:00 a.m. today, Monday, January
11 25th. In response, we organized a rally and a press
12 conference yesterday, and in the hours before the
13 scheduled deportation, his mother Alma Maridiaga
14 [sp?] who was an essential worker in the Bronx told
15 reporters that she has not been able to hug her son
16 or make him a meal in 14 months, a direct result of
17 DOC's illegal transfer of Javier to ICE custody. In
18 late breaking news, we were informed late last night
19 that Javier was not on the flight manifest for this
20 morning following intervention by Unlocal,
21 Representative Ritchie Torres, Senators Gillibrand,
22 and Majority Leader Schumer. And while we are
23 relieved about this news, we know that much work
24 remains. We cannot end the policing to deportation
25 pipeline without talking about the historic

1
2 persistent and [inaudible] brown communities, and we
3 cannot talk about citizenship either without talking
4 about that. We cannot talk about what happened to
5 Javier without talking about what happened to Eric
6 Gardner, [inaudible], George Floyd, Breonna Taylor,
7 and too many others. What we've seen over and over
8 again is that the criminal legal system and
9 deportation industrial complex are not about public
10 safety. These systems have deep roots in white
11 supremacy, and we have seen over and over again how
12 they have been used by Trump and many before him to
13 reinforce xenophobia and dangerously hateful racism,
14 a tremendous human cost.

15 SERGEANT AT ARMS: Time expired.

16 TERRY LAWSON: As for what the City can
17 do in the months and years ahead, we are calling for
18 an end to the over policing of black and brown
19 communities, which means taking funding away from the
20 NYPD investing that funding into black and brown
21 communities in the initiative that they identify and
22 ending the criminal carve-outs in the detainer law
23 that continue to allow New York City to transfer
24 people to ICE custody. Finally, Javier's mother told
25 me yesterday that they have spent 20,000 dollars in

1 legal fees for herself and her family in fighting
2 their immigration cases. She told me about her
3 family, how her family was taken advantage of by
4 unscrupulous providers and how hard it was for them
5 to find free high-quality legal representation.
6 Their case came to our attention just days before
7 Javier was transferred to Louisiana. If the events
8 of this past weekend have taught us anything, they
9 have taught us that while the Trump Administration is
10 no longer in power and there is a 100-day moratorium
11 on deportations for some, the work is far from over.
12 Deportation flights are still taking off every day,
13 and Unlocal and Immigration Advocates across the City
14 are working tirelessly alongside immigration New
15 Yorkers to ensure that they remain here with their
16 families. Javier is DACA eligible. His siblings have
17 DACA. His parents have TPS, but they and 11 million
18 others should have the full citizenship rights that
19 you and I enjoy. We call on the City Council and the
20 Mayor's Office to use all of its resources to make
21 that happen. Thank you.

23 COMMITTEE COUNSEL: Thank you for your
24 testimony. I'd like to now welcome Alexandria Rizzio
25 to testify. You may begin when you are ready.

SERGEANT AT ARMS: Time starts now.

ALEXANDRA RIZIO: Thank you to the Council for convening this hearing and inviting the public to speak this afternoon. My name is Alexandra Rizio, and I'm a Managing Attorney at Safe Passage Project, a nonprofit legal services organization that provides free representation to immigrant children facing deportation. We serve children who live in the five boroughs of New York City and in the two counties of Long Island. No immigrant, not even a child, is appointed a lawyer in Immigration Court. If the child cannot afford to hire a lawyer, they'll be forced to defend themselves alone against a trained government prosecutor and a judge with deportation back to dangerous conditions as the likely outcome. Safe Passage Project helps correct this injustice by providing free attorneys to kids. Beyond legal services our social work team address the broader needs of clients such as school enrollment, homelessness, access to healthcare, psychological services, and public benefits. The New York City Council is instrumental in our work. You fund our work through the Unaccompanied Minors Initiative in the IOI grand stream. Without your

1
2 unwavering support, which we've had since 2014, we
3 would not be able to serve the over 1,200 clients
4 that Safe Passage serves now. In fact, the City
5 Council support for the I Care collaborative is
6 ground-breaking on a national level and has shown
7 that local initiatives support universal
8 representation for immigrants, potentially filling a
9 gap where the Federal Government refuses to act is
10 not only possible, but successful. Thank you. After
11 four long years where our clients, young,
12 undocumented, immigrants were constantly at the tip
13 of the Trump Administration's fear, we are feeling
14 some degree of hope this week. Of course, the New
15 York City Council has long been a leader on
16 immigration issues with legal representation in
17 Immigration Court. We hope that in the coming years
18 we'll witness the change. Our dream is to create a
19 city where all New Yorkers, regardless of immigration
20 status, can realize sanctuary. The topic of this
21 hearing, "Barriers to Citizenship" is a salient one.
22 We're hopeful that the changes at the federal level
23 will open pathways to our clients and their families.
24 At the same time, US citizenship is difficult to
25 achieve, expensive, and roadblocks litter the way

1
2 even for someone with a straightforward case. The
3 following are issues that the City Council could
4 insert influence over and help correct: Over-policing
5 of communities of color. Even a simple or minor
6 interaction with police can derail a person's
7 citizenship application. Policing in communities of
8 color is truly the intersection of racial and
9 immigration justice. This summer's racial justice
10 protests have only highlighted the brutal and unjust
11 way police treat peaceful protestors. Until the City
12 reckons with the NYPD's legacy of violence, and until
13 black and brown communities are no longer the subject
14 of over policing, young people will be caught in a
15 dragnet that affects their lives up to and including
16 their safety in the United States. The City Council
17 should work to reform policing in New York City. It
18 is the right thing to do. It is overdue, and it
19 will--

20 SERGEANT AT ARMS: [interposing]

21 ALEXANDRA RIZIO: [inaudible]

22 citizenship. One more point is that naturalization
23 applications are extremely expensive. To become a
24 lawful permanent resident, the cost is over a
25 thousand dollars. The fee waivers are sometimes

1
2 available. The Federal Government under the Trump
3 Administration made it a point to limit the
4 availability of fee waivers and increase fees. City
5 Council could establish a fund to assist low income
6 residents to help them pay for these applications.
7 Thank you for the opportunity to testify.

8 COMMITTEE COUNSEL: Thank you for your
9 testimony. I'd like to now welcome Shawn Blumberg to
10 testify. You may begin when you are ready.

11 SERGEANT AT ARMS: Time starts now.

12 SHAWN BLUMBERG: My name is Shawn
13 Blumberg, I'm a Supervising Attorney in the
14 Immigration Community Action Project of Brooklyn
15 Defender Services. I want to thank Chair Menchaca
16 for holding this important hearing today. BDS's
17 immigration practice works to minimize the negative
18 immigration consequences of criminal charges for non-
19 citizens, representing people and applications for
20 immigration benefits. We defend our clients against
21 ICE detention and deportation. Our immigration
22 community action program represents people in non-
23 detained removal proceedings, as well as applications
24 for immigration benefits including family based
25 adjustment of status applications, fair based

1 applications, U and T visas, special juvenile
2 immigration status applications, DACA and related
3 applications. People we serve face many barriers to
4 citizenship, including criminalization as a result of
5 racist policing, in ability to pay exorbitant lang--
6 excuse me, exorbitant filing fees and language
7 access. We elaborate on these challenges in our
8 written testimony, but today I will focus on the
9 criminal legal system as a barrier to citizenship.
10 Broken Windows Policing and similar racist policing
11 results in criminalizing even the smallest offenses.
12 [inaudible] arrests even in cases that are later
13 dismissed or resolved with a non-criminal violation
14 can lead to denials of citizenship as a result of
15 inability to prove good moral character. Denial of
16 citizenship based on having an open criminal charge
17 or pending probation, deportability, or mistakes in a
18 citizenship application resulting in denial. For
19 example, I give you an example of Edward Conner
20 [sp?]. Mr. Conner is a 52-year-old legal permanent
21 resident. He was convicted almost 30 years ago of
22 drug and prostitution-related offenses. Since then,
23 Mr. Conner has not had a criminal conviction. He's
24 worked as a buyer and window display designer for a
25

1 clothing retailer for nearly two decades. He's
2 deeply involved in New York's vibrant Caribbean-
3 American community, running a company that designs
4 elaborate costumes for Carnival celebrations in New
5 York and around the world, and participating in
6 cultural, educational events. However, because of
7 his prior criminal history, Mr. Conner could not
8 apply for US citizenship for many years, resulting in
9 him being in a legal limbo. After a lot of advocacy
10 last December, Mr. Conner was finally granted a
11 pardon by Governor Cuomo. As a result, Mr. Conner
12 was able to move forward with his life to apply for
13 citizenship and visit his family abroad, finally
14 unafraid of deportation. Without years of advocacy,
15 Mr. Conner would not have been able to move forward
16 in this way. Some important benefits of citizenship
17 include enfranchisement, stable status without risk
18 of deportation, ability to sponsor family members,
19 and travel freely. With the new Administration in
20 Washington we are hopeful that pathways to
21 citizenship will open up. We want to make sure that
22 people we serve are able to be included without the
23 barriers of exorbitant language access--
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2 SERGEANT AT ARMS: [interposing] Time
3 expired.

4 SHAWN BLUMBERG: and difficult access--
5 difficulty accessing legal services. BDS'
6 immigration work is made possible through the funding
7 of a New York City Council. As a result of these
8 barriers to citizenship and the high stakes involved,
9 there is continued need for funding for legal
10 services, especially for affirmative applications
11 such as citizenship. We hope urgent and critical
12 immigration reform happens rapidly at the federal
13 level and more people become eligible for affirmative
14 relief, free immigration legal services will be more
15 important than ever. Our specialization in
16 immigration consequences of criminal, legal, and
17 family court systems is critical due to the higher
18 risk applicant's face of denial with any criminal or
19 family court history. Thank you again for the
20 opportunity to testify. I welcome any questions.

21 COMMITTEE COUNSEL: Thank you for your
22 testimony. I'd like to now welcome Sara B. Greenberg
23 to testify. You may begin when you are ready.

24 SERGEANT AT ARMS: Time starts now.
25

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2 SARA B. GREENBURG: Good afternoon and
3 thank you for the opportunity to present testimony.
4 My name is Sara Greenberg, and I am a Staff Attorney
5 in the Domestic Violence Immigration Project at the
6 Legal Aid Society. Legal Aid encourages the Council
7 to pass Resolution number 1229 in support of the
8 Adoptee Citizenship Act. Currently, a child born
9 outside the US to non-US citizen parents can become a
10 US citizen by deriving citizenship through adoption
11 by one or two US citizen adoptive parents. The Child
12 Citizenship Act, or CCA, simplified derivative
13 citizenship for most children, particularly adopted
14 children. From the time it went into effect on
15 February 27th, 2001, it prospectively granted
16 automatic citizenship to adoptees and to those who
17 are under the age of 18 on that date. For adoptees
18 born before February 28th, 1983, their citizenship
19 was dependent on whether their adoptive parents had
20 taken the affirmative steps to naturalize them. The
21 onus was on parents, but some never completed the
22 process. Some adult adoptees, now 37 years old or
23 older, bear the deleterious consequences. For those
24 unaware that they are not US citizens, many find out
25 when they're applying for a passport or required by

1
2 an employer to provide proof of their immigration
3 status. They're unable to vote, travel, or attain
4 financial aid for college. More critically, without
5 citizenship, adult adoptees are vulnerable to being
6 removed from the US for criminal offenses or non-
7 criminal grounds of deportability. As we heard
8 earlier, in Ms. Druesedow's heartbreaking testimony,
9 this loophole in the CCA has resulted in the
10 deportation of numerous adult adoptees to countries
11 where they have no memory, relatives, or ability to
12 speak the language, and cuts them permanently off
13 from their US citizen families. The Adoptee
14 Citizenship Act would extend automatic citizenship to
15 inter-country adoptees who were older than 18 when
16 the CCA came into effect and the meet the
17 requirements. Would-be citizens who linger in the
18 CCA's loophole include those who form the fabric of
19 our dynamic city. On Korean American Day in 2000, US
20 Congresswoman Grace Mang [sp?] stated on the House
21 floor, "Today, there are 35,000 adult international
22 adoptees who are in the US without citizenship and
23 are at risk of deportation." This includes thousands
24 of Korean adoptees who are undocumented in New York.
25 The Legal Aid society urges the Council to pass

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2 Resolution Number 1229, ensuring that all
3 intercountry adoptees are granted citizenship and
4 enjoy the rights and privileges conveyed therein--

5 SERGEANT AT ARMS: [interposing] Time
6 expired.

7 SARA GREENBERG: in the country they call
8 home. Thank you.

9 COMMITTEE COUNSEL: Thank you for your
10 testimony. I'd like to now turn it over to Chair
11 Menchaca for questions.

12 CHAIRPERSON MENCHACA: Thank you to this
13 panel. All of you represent so much of what we are
14 trying to build in partnership with all of you who
15 are engaging directly and providing services. Much
16 of that provided through a financial funding
17 mechanism, and that needs to continue, and there's no
18 doubt in the conversations we just had with our
19 Commissioner, that we're going to have to do this
20 together, and so the importance of this resolution
21 and this larger conversation about ensuring that
22 every New Yorker has what they need to break through
23 the barriers. A lot of it is assistance, legal
24 assistance; it's financial assistance; it's getting
25 through the notarios [sp?] that are going to try to

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2 take advantage of our community. All of this is
3 going to be really important. And I think what I
4 want to ask all of you is the following: As you
5 anticipate some of these issues, can one of you or
6 two of you talk a little bit about how you're
7 anticipating the flow coming in, how you're going to
8 feel it, and through what kind of mechanisms. And
9 what I'm looking for are things that we haven't
10 spoken to, and that's just really I think where we
11 need to focus the conversation here. Like, how are
12 people you connect with and are trusted partners in
13 the community connecting with LPR's and other
14 community members, how are you going to expect that
15 flow? Does anybody want to take that?

16 TERRY LAWSON: I can start. I'm sure
17 others will join in. You know, I think the
18 conversation for us right now at Unlocal is starting
19 with DACA, right, because so many people are reaching
20 out to us [inaudible] wanting to understand what
21 their options are now the advance parole is another
22 option, being able to travel out to the country to
23 become a lawful permanent resident through their DACA
24 status and then ultimately gain citizenship. It's
25 very real. We don't have to wait for new legislation

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2 for that to happen, right? That is a pathway now to
3 citizenship. And so people are reaching out to us,
4 and we are doing our best to create community clinics
5 throughout the city, but of course it's a capacity
6 issue, right? All of our organizations rely on
7 funding to be able to make those clinics possible, to
8 be able to be in the community with people answering
9 their questions. And of course, you know, I know
10 that this hearing is about citizenship, but every
11 time we meet with somebody in community, we are
12 talking to not just that person, but their friend,
13 their family members, their parents, and talking to
14 them about what their issues or what their barriers
15 are. So, we-- you know, just as a quick answer to
16 the question, we are doing our best to partner with
17 groups on the ground. Of course, we're on the ground
18 as well, about what it is that they need and trying
19 to operate in a COVID world as best as possible.

20 MEETU DHAR: And then, Chair, if I could
21 just add to that. At CUNY Citizenship Now this week
22 we'll be actually holding a Facebook live session. I
23 think it's at 6:30 on Wednesday evening for the
24 public so they can have a better understanding of
25 what Biden hopes to pass in anticipation of what they

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2 could maybe start collecting and what they can
3 expect. We plan on having Zoom borough-wide events.
4 So that's definitely going to help educate the
5 public, because I think what we need to do is just
6 make sure we're giving the correct information out to
7 the public and then having them come back and make
8 more specific appointments with us.

9 CHAIRPERSON MENCHACA: Thank you for
10 that. And I think what we want to keep obviously
11 talking, and so we can get some more panels in this
12 discussion, I just want to really dedicate an open
13 line of communication with all of you and maybe set
14 up another conversational space so that we talk
15 through some of these things. Because the other
16 thing that I want to lift up from the testimony that
17 most of you really pointed to was that this
18 liberation that we're trying to fight for in response
19 to COVID and the incredible movement that Black Lives
20 Matter brought to our attention, this intersection
21 between what has happened with our-- the
22 criminalization of poverty and the engagement that so
23 many of our institutions need to change, and what I
24 just want to-- and that seems really big. It's a
25 national conversation, but in the City of New York we

1
2 have the opportunity to change that through this
3 budget and bring justice to this budget. And so as a
4 Council Member I want to extend that invitation to
5 work together to actually make that happen in the
6 next five months as we finalize the budget and how do
7 we do that. How do we shift funds from the carceral
8 [sic] state and into our communities? As we see
9 opportunities come in for justice for so many
10 immigrant communities that have been targeted and
11 deported, and those that we could save, we did it
12 because of you, and in partnership with you. So
13 that's going to take a lot of courage, and we did not
14 take that courage last summer, and that's just going
15 to require more organizing and more work. And so I
16 just want to be open about that, that I will be with
17 you, and we're going to need the City Council to make
18 that happen, and that can't happen without you. And
19 so if we are serious, let us work together. let us
20 build that power and exercise it through this
21 council, and we have that obligation to really make
22 the connections about what we're trying to dismantle
23 and what we're trying to-- what we're trying to feed
24 in terms of finance, attention, restructuring, and
25 that's going to take a lot of time, and we have

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2 months. We have months to do this, and so let's work
3 on that together. That is all for me. Thank you so
4 much again.

5 COMMITTEE COUNSEL: Thank you, Chair.

6 I'd like to ask if there were any other Council
7 Member questions at this time. Seeing no hands, I'd
8 like to thank this panel for their testimony, and now
9 we'll be moving on to our next panel. In order, I
10 will be calling on Ravi Reddi, followed by May Lee,
11 followed by Jeehae Fischer, followed by Anika
12 Choudhury. Ravi Reddi, you may begin when you are
13 ready.

14 SERGEANT AT ARMS: Time starts now.

15 RAVI REDDI: Thank you. I want to thank
16 Committee Chair Menchaca and Council Members Chin,
17 Moya, Dromm, and Eugene for holding this hearing and
18 for previous speakers for humanizing this issue. I'm
19 Ravi Reddi, and I'm the Associate Director for
20 Advocacy and Policy at the Asian American Federation.
21 Our organization represents a collective voice of
22 more than 70-member nonprofit serving 1.3 million
23 Asian New Yorkers. We want to first acknowledge
24 Council Member Koo's resolution 1229 calling for the
25 passage of Adoptee Citizenship Act of 2019. Part of

1
2 the work that will need to be done moving forward is
3 acknowledging and remedying systemic faults in our
4 citizenship and naturalization processes, especially
5 as it comes to adoptees from other countries who
6 deserve the benefits and security of citizenship.
7 When it comes to our immigrant community broadly,
8 restoring trust is critical. Overall, Asians make up
9 16 percent of the City's population, approximately
10 seven in 10 were born abroad, and about one in five
11 Asian immigrants may be undocumented in New York
12 City. Ninety-six percent of Asian seniors and 88
13 percent of our Asian small business owners are
14 immigrants as well. And let's be clear, it's our
15 immigrant communities who have served on the front
16 lines and sustained our city's economy since the
17 beginning of the pandemic. None the less, many Asian
18 immigrant New Yorkers are worried about what role
19 their immigration status will have as they navigate
20 already onerous appointment and vaccination
21 processes. The city must prioritize language access
22 and timeliness in this effort by supporting
23 community-based organizations and utilizing their
24 existing communication channels that have been built
25 over the last year in many of most vulnerable

1 communities. And while we're on the topic of trust,
2 the last President's Public Charge Rule must go
3 unequivocally. According to a study by MOIA and DSS,
4 Asian non-citizens dis-enrolled from SNAP benefits at
5 eight times the rate of Asian citizens after the
6 proposed Public Charge Rule was announced. The City
7 must take proactive steps in conjunction with
8 community-based organizations to validate and address
9 concerns of community members who have been forced to
10 make the false choice between becoming a new American
11 and getting their next meal. From the Muslim ban to
12 an increase in deportation rates to unjust
13 restrictions on student visas and un-American
14 restrictions on family immigration, the Asian
15 American community needs all the legal help it can
16 get. City agencies must prioritize immigration legal
17 services funding for CBO's with a track record of
18 providing not only immigration legal services, but
19 also case management services to connect community
20 members to legal services. Without Asian CBO's
21 ability to provide language and navigation support,
22 few people would be able to access these legal
23 services at all. It's also high time for City
24 Council to finally fund a community legal interpreter
25

1 bank [sic] so those needing legal services and social
2 services can access qualified interpreters across the
3 communities of color, as well as worker co-ops which
4 will focus on recruitment of -- recruitment training
5 and dispatching of qualified interpreters and
6 increasing job opportunities for multi-lingual
7 immigrants. Local Law 30 must also be fully and
8 consistently implemented across the agencies, as many
9 are front line workers, immigrants shouldn't be the
10 last to learn of critical safety and benefit
11 information. And finally, as our immigrant community
12 also bears a disproportionate burden--

14 SERGEANT AT ARMS: [interposing] Time
15 expired.

16 RAVI REDDI: insecurity-- just one more
17 point-- basic need insecurity brought on by the
18 pandemic, the city must increase investment in safety
19 net programs such as community health centers and
20 clinics and food pantries, in part due to continue
21 after effects from the previous Administration's
22 Public Charge assault. While Asian New Yorkers
23 comprise at least 10 percent of the population, more
24 than half of city districts with the other half
25 having some of the fastest growing Asian populations

1 from FY2002 to 2014, the Asian American community
2 received a mere 1.4 percent of the total dollar value
3 of New York City social services contracts, a
4 reflection of broader, long-term trend. Processes
5 must prioritize the community-based organizations who
6 have the expertise, but might not have the capacity
7 to monitor for and respond to RFPs they may be
8 eligible for. It's a two-way street and the city
9 must more proactively seek out and support community-
10 based organizations while our CBOs use the capacity
11 they have to work within RFP processes as it
12 currently stands. It'll be our CBOs who will be
13 instrumental in restoring trust between our
14 immigrants and our cities. We understand the city is
15 in dire financial straits, but the CBOs have led by
16 example in how to spend city dollars effectively, and
17 this moment presents an opportunity for this City
18 Council to show that New York City can still lead by
19 example in protecting its most vulnerable. We at the
20 Asian American Federation thank you for allowing us
21 to speak, and look forward to working with all of you
22 to make sure our immigrant communities get the
23 protections they deserve. Thanks.
24

1
2 COMMITTEE COUNSEL: Thank you for your
3 testimony. I'd like to now welcome Mae Lee to
4 testify. You may begin when you are ready.

5 SERGEANT AT ARMS: Time starts now.

6 MAE LEE: Okay. Hi. Good afternoon. My
7 name is Mae Lee. I'm with the Chinese Progressive
8 Association. I also wanted to thank the Immigration
9 Committee and Chair Menchaca for having this hearing
10 that is all about citizenship. So I'm with the
11 Chinese Progressive Association, and we're based in
12 Manhattan's China Town in the Lower East Side. We
13 primarily serve the Chinese community there, but we
14 are-- and we run the citizenship program, but the
15 citizenship program also serves black and Latino
16 immigrants, as well as Chinese Immigrants who are,
17 you know,-- who are in our area. We run the
18 citizenship classes. We help the stu-- we assist
19 students with citizenship application, and we have
20 held these group application events. You know, I
21 guess a little similar to those tax prep events where
22 many people and volunteers come together, the trained
23 volunteers who help with the application. We have
24 not tried to do this on Zoom yet, so we actually
25 have-- it's always been in-person, in-doors. So we

1 haven't done it since early last-- 2020. And I'd
2 like to say that we've had it at many different
3 community sites, including the public library. The
4 local library we partnered with one of the Settlement
5 Houses, Educational Alliance, Amani Canner Center
6 [sic], and we also partnered with Chong Ha [sic]
7 which is a senior housing complex where everybody is
8 at least 85 years old. All these events were also
9 opened to the public as well as the residents or
10 participants of that particular organization or
11 complex. So I'd just like to make a few-- I'm not
12 going to repeat what other people said, but just make
13 a few comments from our experience. I think
14 continuing education about Public Charge is really
15 important. I thought it was all done, everybody knew
16 about it, but today we still meet people who are
17 hesitant to apply for citizenship or citizenship
18 applicants who are hesitant to apply for benefits
19 which they are eligible for, and it is because of
20 Public Charge. You know, they're told they shouldn't
21 do it, or they think they shouldn't do it. Just
22 about the fee waiver, the-- even though USCIS still
23 offers the fee waiver and the fees have not yet gone
24 up to a thousand dollars and the fee waivers are
25

1 still there, it is still not within reach for many.
2 So for example, if you're a family of two and your
3 income is anywhere-- if it's below \$34,480 you can
4 get a partial fee waiver or the full fee waiver, but
5 if it's just one dollar over that, you know, you pay
6 the full price, which is \$725. I think that's still
7 a lot of money and with, you know,-- it would be a
8 barrier. So I'm not familiar with the feed fund that
9 the Commissioner was talking about, but it certainly
10 needs to be expanded and continued.

12 SERGEANT AT ARMS: Time expired.

13 MAE LEE: I'll submit the rest of my
14 testimony.

15 COMMITTEE COUNSEL: Thank you for your
16 testimony. I'd like to now welcome Jeehae Fischer to
17 testify. You may begin when you are ready.

18 SERGEANT AT ARMS: Time starts now.

19 JEEHAE FISCHER: [inaudible]

20 CHAIRPERSON MENCHACA: Ms. Fischer, there
21 is an issue with the audio. Is it just me?

22 SERGEANT AT ARMS: Not you, sir.

23 CHAIRPERSON MENCHACA: Okay. I want to
24 make sure that we hear your full testimony.

25 JEEHAE FISCHER: Can you hear me?

1
2 CHAIRPERSON MENCHACA: There we go, yes.
3 Thank you.

4 SERGEANT AT ARMS: Time starts now. Go
5 ahead.

6 CHAIRPERSON MENCHACA: You can begin
7 again, Ms. Fischer.

8 JEEHAE FISCHER: I would like to thank
9 Chair Menchaca and the members of the Committee on
10 Immigration for the opportunity to testify. My name
11 is Jeehae. I'm the Executive Director at the Korean
12 American Family Service. We provide social services
13 to immigrant survivors and their children who are
14 affected by domestic violence, sexual assault, and
15 child abuse. All of our programs are offered in a
16 culturally and linguistically appropriate setting.
17 Ninety-eight percent of our clients are immigrants
18 and some of them are undocumented. Over 95 percent
19 of our client's first language is not English and
20 come from low-income background. During New York's
21 state [inaudible] throughout the COVID-19 pandemic
22 crisis, KAFSC responded to a 300 percent increase in
23 calls to our 24-hour bilingual hotline, 88 percent
24 were related to domestic violence and sexual assault
25 and child abuse. In time, immigration policies such

1 as the Public Charge Rule on our immigrant community
2 caused devastating and tragic effects, preventing
3 many from reaching out for help for fear of
4 negatively impacting their future legal status in
5 America. Misinformation and lack of native language
6 resources exacerbated the problem even further.
7 Current policies do not account for immigrant workers
8 who lost their legal employment status as a result of
9 the COVID-19 pandemic. These gaps result in
10 uncertainty and fear of deportation as another hurdle
11 to overcome in an already overwhelming and desperate
12 situation. Furthermore, the sharp rise in anti-Asian
13 bias and hate crimes caused additional layers of fear
14 and trauma for the Asian American immigrant community
15 who had to face both the deadly virus and risk of
16 [inaudible] check anytime they left their home. Our
17 immigrant survivors were disproportionately impacted
18 and further traumatized by policies and responses
19 that excluded them from emergency relief efforts.
20 Many of our survivors are undocumented and are
21 excluded from accessing unemployment insurance and
22 all other income supports. They lost their financial
23 means resulting in loss of livelihood and unable to
24 support themselves and their children. These
25

1
2 consequences are exacerbated as they are ineligible
3 for unemployment benefits and other labor protections
4 by law from which they are excluded. Additionally,
5 the immigrant survivors of domestic violence that we
6 serve faced re-victimization on the path to
7 citizenship. Many of our survivors are without legal
8 status and their abusers use threats and fears of
9 deportation to maintain power and control over them.
10 Current laws do provide a path for some survivors to
11 apply for--

12 SERGEANT AT ARMS: [interposing] Time
13 expired.

14 JEEHAE FISCHER: but they have very rigid
15 guidelines that require cooperation with law
16 enforcement and other barriers that often are not
17 available to our survivors. We need to expand
18 protections for survivors of violence and enact
19 common sense immigration laws that will incorporate
20 and work with the nuances and complex situations
21 presented by immigrant survivors of domestic
22 violence, sexual assault, and child abuse. Thank
23 you.

24

25

1
2 COMMITTEE COUNSEL: Thank you for your
3 testimony. I'd like to now welcome Anika Choudhury
4 to testify. You may begin when you are ready.

5 SERGEANT AT ARMS: Time starts now.

6 ANIKA CHOUDHURY: I want to begin by
7 thanking the Committee on Immigration, the Committee
8 Chair Menchaca and the entire New York City Council
9 for holding this important oversight hearing on
10 reducing barriers to citizenship. My name is Anika.
11 I'm the Priority Area Specialist External Engagement
12 at the Arab American Family Support Center. I'm
13 honored to testify today alongside Asian American
14 Federation on behalf of marginalized immigrant and
15 refugee families throughout New York City. At the
16 Arab American Family Support Center we have dedicated
17 ourselves to creating an inclusive haven for
18 immigrants and refugees for over 25 years. While we
19 serve all who are in need, we have gained cultural
20 and linguistic competency serving New York's growing
21 AMEMSA population, Arab, Middle Eastern, and Muslim,
22 and South Asian communities. Additionally, our team
23 now speaks over 27 languages and over 30 different
24 dialects. Although today's focus shows a step in the
25 right direction for expanding citizenship for

1
2 adoptees, there's much work to be done to reverse the
3 effects of anti-immigrant policies and rhetoric.
4 Immigration policies such as the Public Charge Rule
5 continue to cause angst among our immigrant community
6 members. Many feel reluctant about enrolling in the
7 services and benefits they need for fear of
8 discrimination or deportation. We have received
9 numerous calls and visits from individuals concerned
10 about the implications on themselves and their family
11 members, particularly those who are now being forced
12 to decide between feeding and housing their families
13 or seeking legal permanent status in the US,
14 especially during this deadly pandemic. In light of
15 the new Biden/Harris Administration, there has been
16 conversation about an eight-year pathway to
17 citizenship for those currently living in the United
18 States without legal status. Although we are hopeful
19 to seeing such changes in federal policies, we urge
20 the City to address the immediate needs of our
21 immigrant communities. The chilling effect caused by
22 the Public Charge Rule continues to hurt our
23 vulnerable immigrant communities and changes at the
24 city and state level are needed to protect them. AFSC
25 alongside the Asian American Federation requests that

1 the City expand language access to our marginalized
2 immigrant communities in a culturally and
3 linguistically competent manner, keeping in mind that
4 content in different languages must be translated in
5 the correct dialect and tone. As Council Member Chin
6 mentioned, we would very much love to see ethnic
7 media also being used to spread information. We also
8 request that we continue to help mitigate the impacts
9 of the disastrous federal policies like Public Charge
10 Rule on our immigrant communities during the ongoing
11 pandemic by spreading information to distill the
12 fear-based rhetoric and myths. We also request that
13 we provide more legal defense funding to allow
14 immigrant communities to reach out about their legal
15 status and have access to their rights remain with
16 their families and understand immigration laws. We
17 would also like for City Council to commit to
18 supporting immigrants and refugees with trainings and
19 additional resources. The Arab American Family
20 Support Center is already working to educate
21 community members about the implications of Public
22 Charge.
23

24 SERGEANT AT ARMS: Time expired.
25

1
2 ANIKA CHOUDHURY: But with your support
3 we can amplify our impact. We thank you for your
4 attention today.

5 COMMITTEE COUNSEL: Thank you for your
6 testimony. I'd like to now welcome Minsun Kim to
7 testify. You may begin when you are ready.

8 SERGEANT AT ARMS: Time starts now.

9 COMMITTEE COUNSEL: Ms. Kim, I think you
10 need to accept the unmute.

11 UNIDENTIFIED: Can you ask them to call
12 on you-- wait hold on. I'm going to just [inaudible]

13 MINSUN KIM: Hello?

14 COMMITTEE COUNSEL: Yes. We can hear
15 you.

16 MINSUN KIM: Oh, you can hear me. Oh,
17 thank you. I'm so pleased to see all of you here to
18 show your support to the adoptee issue [sic]. I'm
19 Minsun Kim and the first of all, I would like to
20 thank Councilman Peter Koo for taking charge of this
21 issue. His strong leadership made this possible. As
22 the President of Museum of Korean American Heritage,
23 our mission is to teach our history and heritage for
24 our future generations. Furthermore, as the Nassau
25 County Human Rights Commissioner, I believe that all

1 human beings must be treated equally regardless of
2 gender, race, religion, or background. The foremost
3 value of a democracy is to take care of our most
4 underprivileged community. I am here today to fight
5 and support for adoptees to be able to live as proud
6 citizens. Passing this legislation is a priority for
7 this humanitarian issue. Thank you to everyone
8 involved, and I sincerely hope all our efforts will
9 bear fruit in Congress. Thank you.

11 COMMITTEE COUNSEL: Thank you for your
12 testimony. I'd like to now welcome Anika Sayed to
13 testify. You may begin when you are ready.

14 SERGEANT AT ARMS: Time starts now.

15 UNIDENTIFIED: Hello?

16 ANIKA SAYED: Hello? Can you hear me?

17 SERGEANT AT ARMS: Yes.

18 ANIKA SAYED: Okay. Good afternoon. My
19 name is Anika Sayed and I'm the Outreach Coordinator
20 at Turning Point for Women and Families. Thank you
21 so much for the opportunity to testify today.
22 Turning Point for Women and Families was founded in
23 2004 and is the first nonprofit to address domestic
24 violence in New York City's Muslim community.
25 Turning Point helps Muslim women and girls affected

1
2 by domestic violence empower themselves and transform
3 their lives through a wide range of culturally
4 competent services focused on safety and self-
5 sufficiency. To date, we have worked directly with
6 over 3,000 women, as often girls and children. One
7 of the pressing issues affecting many of our clients,
8 especially senior women includes the lack of
9 resources they need to acquire citizenship. Federal
10 policies including the Public Charge Rule have
11 adversely impacted the future of countless people.
12 Additionally, the Public Charge Rule created fear,
13 apprehension, and uncertainty for the immigrant
14 community, made worse by the pandemic. Fearful of
15 the Public Charge Rule, many of our DV survivors and
16 seniors we work with chose not to apply for benefits
17 they are entitled to that would have helped them
18 during the pandemic. It is our collective duty to
19 ensure not only access to public benefit and
20 citizenship, but to break the barriers that prevent
21 our clients from applying in first place. Our
22 clients and program participants were already
23 challenged by their lack of security have been
24 further traumatized by the prolonged pandemic. The
25 new policies that redefined domestic violence have

1
2 actually reduced the scope of the crime and affects
3 survivors directly. Due to suppressed reporting, few
4 statistics on domestic violence are available, and a
5 narrow definition becomes even more harmful,
6 including a large number of survivors we work with,
7 creating new barriers and ultimately halting their
8 progress. Public Charge Rule and limits to
9 citizenship to seeking asylum exacerbates the
10 existing issue many immigrants face today, leading
11 community-based organizations with limited legal
12 funding with few sustainable function. Elected and
13 appointed officials who are passing laws must
14 consider the detrimental effects of these policies on
15 the immigrant community. Emergency Medicaid, cash
16 assistance, and food stamps are all ways this nation
17 fights against poverty, food insecurity and lack of
18 healthcare. Turning Point for Women and Family
19 strongly advocates for fair access to these basic
20 human rights. The issues affecting our community
21 have materialized into something far greater than
22 shelter and safety. Access to these benefits are
23 limited when technology is inaccessible. We have
24 seen through this pandemic the far-reaching effects
25 of the data divide. After the courts closed, many

1 times when limited to phone calls to agencies that
2 would leave their complaints unaddressed. Sharing
3 information over the phone to complete documentation
4 for citizenship application, to applying for public
5 benefits, seems taxing [sic] due to lack of
6 information security. Clients who were close to
7 leaving their abusers and senior women in the
8 pipeline for citizenship now have to navigate this
9 difficult world virtually. Community-based
10 organizations like Turning Point for Woman and
11 Families are committed to teach English to our
12 community members and help them do something powered
13 [sic] and integrated in this--

14
15 SERGEANT AT ARMS: [interposing] Time
16 expired.

17 ANIKA SAYED: [inaudible] we live in.
18 Our classes are an entry point for seniors to learn
19 English, learn about their rights, receive counsel
20 and emotional support, especially if they're facing
21 elder abuse. We urge each of you on the committee to
22 please do all you can to find resources to support
23 the work of community-based organization who are
24 doing so much with so little to meet the growing
25 needs of our immigrant community and redirect the

1
2 narrative to be inclusive of all backgrounds, races,
3 identities, genders, and religion. Thank you so
4 much.

5 COMMITTEE COUNSEL: Thank you for your
6 testimony. I'd like to now turn it over to Chair
7 Menchaca for questions.

8 CHAIRPERSON MENCHACA: Thank you, and I
9 just want to say thank you to this panel. I am
10 thankful for a couple things that were really
11 highlighted, and I'm thinking about the domestic
12 violence that is also growing in this time of COVID
13 and the separation that social distancing is
14 requiring us and the barriers that are connected to
15 that, and I want to offer some opportunity to maybe
16 come back and talk to the committee about what we can
17 think through together to support you, but also to
18 think about things that the City can do right now,
19 and engage in a different way, and I think that you
20 heard from the Commissioner that the Mayor's Office
21 of Immigrant Affairs is also potentially open, and in
22 this larger conversation about shifting funds into
23 COVID-impacted communities has to be met with ideas
24 that come from all of you who are on the ground. And
25 so let's start that sooner rather than later. I

1
2 think Ms. Fischer also mentioned the idea of a
3 guaranteed income, a Universal Basic Income, and so I
4 have sent in to the City Council a legislative
5 request to start building that. This will require
6 everyone that's on this call to help push the Council
7 to being a public process to build a piece of
8 legislation that works and to create a framework and
9 a pilot that could potentially focus on immigrants
10 who are not able to access federal stimulus, and so
11 the Council can respond, but when there is public
12 pressure, and so let's build that public pressure
13 together so that we can address these issues that you
14 are kind of speaking to, that we have power to-- and
15 the real duty to respond, and the more information
16 that we have on the ground, the more organizing we
17 can do, I think the better chance that we have to
18 actually get some of these things done. So, thank
19 you in advance, and I look forward to working with
20 you all on those issues.

21 COMMITTEE COUNSEL: I'd like to thank
22 this panel for their testimony. We'll now be moving
23 on to our next panel. In order I will be calling on
24 Fernon Darnell [sp?] followed by Olivia Pearl,

25

1
2 followed by Ronna Stifel [sp?]. Fernon Darnell, you
3 may begin when you are ready.

4 SERGEANT AT ARMS: Time starts now.

5 FERNON DARNELL: Hi, yes, and thank you
6 for having me. My name is Doctor Fernon Darnell
7 [sp?]. I'm actually an Iranian adoptee who was
8 naturalized in 1978 by parents who at the time of the
9 process and whatnot. I've also-- I'm a sociologist
10 who has done research on adoption identity, and so
11 this issue that has come before us on the-- pardon
12 me, I'm trying to-- on this resolution for the
13 Adoptee Citizenship Act was brought forth to me by my
14 friend and colleague who's also adoptee, Ronna Stifel
15 [sp?]. So I just want to bring attention to this
16 because not only through Ronna, but through her work
17 with the Adoptee Red Coalition I've become a lot more
18 aware of this issue that I actually no idea existed
19 until just in the last few months or so. The
20 importance that I want to bring to this is the fact
21 of the-- is the fact of-- the sense of belonging, I
22 guess, the issue of identity in terms of trying have
23 this-- in this legislation, the key to the adoptees
24 feel like they have a land, that they have a place of
25 belonging, and that-- this adoption policy has

1 failed, though, and so to pass this legislation means
2 that they will have a sense of belonging in their
3 country that they called home for so long, and to
4 make this amenable to them. In this legislation, it
5 needs to remedy that, to be able to also make sure
6 that there is a mental and health component that goes
7 along with going through this process of not being a
8 citizen and trying to fight through this whole
9 judicial process and legislation [inaudible]. So,
10 anyway, I don't have anything a lot more formal, but
11 I just want to show my support for the adoptee as a
12 researcher. I apologize for the background, but
13 that's-- as an adoptee and as a researcher, but also
14 someone who-- I was young going through the process,
15 but now as an adult and knowing what it takes, their
16 frustrations, share their frustrations. I want to
17 make sure that their voice is heard through me as
18 well. Anyway, thank you for your time.

20 COMMITTEE COUNSEL: Thank you for your
21 testimony. I'd like to now welcome Olivia Pearl to
22 testify. You may begin when you are ready.

23 SERGEANT AT ARMS: Time starts now.

24 OLIVIA PEARL: New York City Council
25 Members, thank you for having me today, and thank

1
2 you, Council Member Koo for introducing Resolution
3 1229, very important legislation that highlights the
4 need for the Adoptee Citizenship Act, an inclusive
5 bill that will grant citizenship to all adoptees
6 including those with criminal convictions. Since
7 1948, over 500,000 children have been adopted from
8 abroad by US citizen parents with the promise of a
9 better life, yet the adoptive systems have failed to
10 protect the children that they intended to protect.
11 Adoptive parents, agencies, attorneys, and the US
12 government are all responsible for ensuring that
13 transnational adoptees have a safe place to call home
14 in the United States. However, an estimated
15 thousands of legally adopted individuals who are born
16 before February 27th, 1982 and raised in the United
17 States, or those who did not enter the country on an
18 orphan visa do not have US citizenship, and
19 therefore, are potentially subject to deportation.
20 It is now our responsibility to ensure the safety and
21 protection of citizenship grants to these adoptees
22 and right a wrong that should never have occurred in
23 the first place. It starts here with you today. My
24 name is Olivia Pearl and I'm here on behalf of
25 Adoptees for Justice, an organization that empowers

1
2 adoptee communities and fights for restorative
3 justice for all adoptees, particularly those who are
4 most vulnerable. I am a transnational and
5 transracial adoptee, meaning that I was born in
6 another country and that I'm not of the same race as
7 my adoptive family. I was adopted from Russia as an
8 18-month-old into a loving white family. Prior to
9 adoption was cherished at the orphanage. The women
10 caring for me cried as they handed me off. My mom
11 was able to hire a translator, Max, who spoke with me
12 in Russian and was the only person who made me smile
13 or laugh for the first few days of my new life. Many
14 people incorrectly assume that babies do not notice
15 or remember traumatic events. While I have
16 compartmentalized so much of the trauma of being
17 taken away, much of the resulting damage remains. In
18 addition to coping with this stress, adoptees without
19 citizenship are led to endure many other traumatic
20 experiences navigating the United States systems. My
21 mom had to apply for my citizenship, and I am here to
22 tell you why all adoptees deserve this right. I do
23 not have to live in fear of deportation. I have
24 never been referred to as illegal, and when I go to
25 vote, I do not fear that this will be the patriotic

1 act that puts my existence in the US in jeopardy.
2 These are some of the more simple, less tangible
3 protections that the United States citizens have the
4 privilege of experiencing. Until I joined Adoptees
5 for Justice, I took my citizenship for granted. I
6 know that milestones like voting were easily
7 accessible to me as a citizen and I never questioned
8 it. Additionally, I have not had to jump through
9 unnecessary hoops to do so. The Adoptee Citizenship
10 Act will not just grant citizenship in a haven for
11 all adoptees, but will provide well overdue dignity
12 and hope for many. Citizenship for adoptees means
13 safety, security, and the realization of our dreams
14 here in the United States. Please, City Council
15 Members, I urge you to pass Resolution 1229. Do your
16 part today to end this cycle of systemic violence and
17 trauma for adoptees without citizenship--

18
19 SERGEANT AT ARMS: [interposing] Time
20 expired.

21 OLIVIA PEARL: around the world. Thank
22 you.

23 COMMITTEE COUNSEL: thank you for your
24 testimony. I'd like to now welcome Ronna Stifel to
25 testify. You may begin when you are ready.

1
2 SERGEANT AT ARMS: Time starts now.

3 RONNA STIFEL: Good morning. Thank you
4 for giving me the opportunity to speak on behalf of
5 impacted adoptees. I'm an adoptee from Iran. I was
6 adopted at two years of age before the revolution in
7 Iran. I was adopted into a family where there was
8 abuse, neglect, and abandonment at 16, and I am one
9 of thousands of adoptees who entered the foster care
10 system. Today, I am stateless because of poor
11 adoption policy and zero oversight by the State
12 Department on my adoption. I was one of thousands who
13 was left behind by the Child Citizenship Act of 2001.
14 We were deliberately left behind because we were over
15 the age of 18 when legislation was passed to give
16 automatic citizenship to adoptees. And here we are
17 20 years later still being left behind by politicians
18 who chose to politicize this issue and turn it into
19 an immigration issue when it clearly is an adoption
20 issue. Why do we need legislation you might ask?
21 Because US Citizenship and Immigration talked to me
22 in 2017 about my case and threatened me with
23 deportation to a country I left as an orphan. The
24 officer never once showed any empathy or acknowledged
25 that I was adopted. The conversation was nothing but

1
2 scare tactics. She told me I could be deported. I
3 find that hard to believe because I am legally
4 adopted in a court in a state, and when do we deport
5 Americans to Iran? She told me my former Senator,
6 Kamala Harris, and Congresswoman Katie Porter of
7 California could do nothing to prevent my
8 deportation. She said one of my options was to turn
9 myself in for deportation and go in front of a judge
10 to plead for a green card. I'm an American and the
11 daughter of an Airforce Officer and prisoner of war.
12 Again, I ask you, how can we deport Americans to
13 Iran? Immigration spoke to me as if I had illegally
14 come to this country. How did I at the age of three
15 get on a plane and fly into the United States? My
16 entire life has been documented here as a legally, I
17 stress legally, adopted person. I am a taxpayer, and
18 I am denied the right to vote. This is how the
19 conversations happen with Immigration. This is
20 completely unacceptable. We are adoptees. Why are
21 we being pushed through a crowded and cruel system
22 and paying thousands of dollars for the mistakes made
23 by our parents, adoption agencies, lawyers, the State
24 Department, and Congress. Our lives are being erased
25 and endangered because of the lack of urgency. We

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2 can't get driver's licenses, Real Act ID, loans,
3 healthcare, retirement, and we are at risk of
4 deportation. New York has three known cases of
5 adoptees who can't get driver's licenses today
6 because of Real Act ID.

7 SERGEANT AT ARMS: Time expired.

8 RONNA STIFEL: You chose to stand in
9 solidarity with impacted adoptees and magnified our
10 voices on this issue, and I thank you. We all thank
11 you from the impacted adoptee community. We must
12 continue to hold Congress accountable for this
13 population who are being denied their rightful claim
14 to citizenship. It is not the life adoption is
15 promised us. If you know an adoptee who is
16 struggling and living with US citizenship, please
17 refer them to Adoptee Rights Campaign. We are the
18 foremost organization advocating for legislation
19 called the Adoptee Citizenship Act. This legislation
20 died in the last two sessions of Congress despite
21 bipartisan support and 103 [sic] co-sponsors in the
22 House. Thank you.

23 COMMITTEE COUNSEL: Thank you for your
24 testimony. I'd like to now turn it back to Chair
25 Menchaca for questions.

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2 CHAIRPERSON MENCHACA: Thank you, Harbani
3 [sp?]. I just want to say thank you to everyone's
4 strong testimony rooted in experience that not just
5 the Council needs to hear, but the Federal
6 Government, and as the new Federal Government is
7 installed and we have reached out to our leaders so
8 that the new bill which will have a new number and
9 will move forward with the support of the City of New
10 York. When we move this Resolution forward it will
11 have your testimony behind it. It will have your
12 courage, and relationship to the cruelty of what
13 needs to change, and so I just want to say thank you
14 for your testimony today. What I know more than ever
15 is that we are at a crossroads of how a city can
16 support this national agenda, this return to dignity
17 for this larger conversation of a broken system, and
18 this city is behind you. So as the Chair of the
19 Immigration Committee for the last seven years, with
20 this incredible committee and this incredible
21 Council, we have been pushing with you and working
22 with the Mayor's Office of Immigrant Affairs, but our
23 journey is not over. I think we have only seen the
24 intensity and the impact of what Ms. Diaz has talked
25 about so many others that we heard from today. So, I

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2 just want to say thank you for that courage and that
3 strength to be here, and we are listening, and we
4 will be moving forward with you to ensure that our
5 federal leaders from the Senate to our local
6 representatives have this resolution, and as we speak
7 on behalf of New Yorkers, move to address this. So,
8 thank you.

9 COMMITTEE COUNSEL: Thank you, Chair. At
10 this point we have concluded public testimony. If we
11 have inadvertently missed anyone that has registered
12 to testify today and has yet to be called, please use
13 the Zoom raise hand function now, and you will be
14 called on in the order that your hands have been
15 raised. Seeing no hands, I'm going to turn it back to
16 Chair Menchaca for closing remarks.

17 CHAIRPERSON MENCHACA: Yeah, thank you.
18 I want to thank all the incredible staff who have put
19 this hearing together on the tech side, our Sergeant
20 of Arms, and our committee staff that include Harbani
21 Usha [sp?], Elizabeth Cronk [sp?], Caesar Vargas, and
22 Lorna Lucero [sp?]. I also just want to say thank
23 you to everyone who's come on and spoken to this
24 issue, not just the resolution, but this larger
25 intersectional moment that we have to make some

1
2 changes. We are-- we will be very shortly moving
3 into budget negotiations and I hope that we can unite
4 to bring justice. The council needs to hear from you
5 and it is because of your voice here today that we
6 need to continue to work to change the way that we
7 fund the most critical and essential needs of our
8 workers, our essential workers, our immigrant
9 workers, and the communities that have been impacted
10 by this broken immigration system. And so the City
11 of New York has so much power in its ability to bring
12 ideas, not just to the rest of the city-- not just to
13 the rest of the country, but specifically to other
14 municipal-- municipalities, and so we will have to
15 meet the Federal Government half way, and that's
16 through funding. That's through reorganization.
17 That's through creativity, and that's through the
18 stories that you have brought today that continue to
19 encourage me to fight as hard as I can to use a bully
20 pulpit, and so I am dedicated to that work, and so
21 let's talk about Universal Basic Income. Let's talk
22 about changing the way that we engage you with legal
23 services free preparation for DACA and more pipelines
24 for citizenship. These are all things that we need
25 to keep hearing, and when we think about domestic

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2 violence that is ripping through our communities, it
3 is heavily impacting our immigrant communities and
4 those barriers I heard very, very clearly. We need
5 to solve those, and so let's do that together. And
6 so that is my commitment to you to keep working.
7 Let's reach out and let's build those bases that we
8 can organize. Thank you so much again, and as the
9 Chair of the Immigration Committee, I now call this
10 hearing to a close.

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C E R T I F I C A T E

World Wide Dictation certifies that the foregoing transcript is a true and accurate record of the proceedings. We further certify that there is no relation to any of the parties to this action by blood or marriage, and that there is interest in the outcome of this matter.



Date February 28, 2021