

TESTIMONY
presented by
Dr. Sarah Sayeed, Chair & Executive Director
New York City Civic Engagement Commission
before the
New York City Council
Committee on Governmental Operations
on the subject of
Oversight – Civic Engagement Commission
on
Tuesday, April 29th, 2022 at 12:00 PM

Thank you, Chair Ung and members of the Committee on Governmental Operations, for holding this hearing and for the opportunity to submit testimony about the key accomplishments of the Civic Engagement Commission (CEC). I'm delighted to be here particularly during April, as our initial round of Commissioner appointments was first announced three years ago in April 2019!

One of the things that excites me about the Civic Engagement Commission is that the story of its creation is itself a civic participation win for New Yorkers. The proposal to create the Commission surfaced during a public process to revise the New York City Charter in 2018. Through public hearings and public deliberation, we heard about how New Yorkers wanted to “embed the value of civic participation into the City Charter” and “expand civic participation beyond the focus on voting.” New Yorkers wanted to see a “centralized mechanism to strengthen local democracy, help improve public trust, confidence, participation in civic institutions & activities; an information clearinghouse to support & amplify work already being done within non-profit, private, public sectors; and to be a launch pad for civic engagement innovations such as participatory budgeting and the expansion of poll site language assistance.”¹ The proposal to create a Civic Engagement Commission eventually made its way onto the ballot in 2018. This ballot measure passed with over 65 percent of the vote in the November election.

The Charter grants CEC broad authorization to support civic engagement throughout the city in partnership with community organizations and civic leaders in the public and private sectors. The Charter also defines specific programs and activities that CEC is to create and support, including participatory budgeting, language assistance at poll sites and assistance to community boards. In 2021, pursuant to Mayoral Executive Order 88, DemocracyNYC became a program of the CEC, thereby incorporating voter education and voter registration into our work. Two additional programs of the Commission include (1) the Taskforce for Racial Inclusion & Equity (TRIE) Neighborhood Initiative (TNI), a pandemic response coalition building project in the 33 neighborhoods designated as hardest hit by COVID-19 and (2) the People's Festival, which celebrates New Yorkers' resilience and explores the intersection of civics, arts, and joy. Our programs work to enhance civic participation, promote civic trust, and strengthen democracy in New York City. By being grounded in the practice of listening and lifting the voices and power of all communities, our vision is to foster dynamic and inclusive civic engagement processes that will make New York City a national model for democratic participation.

Over the past three years, some key areas of impact include:

Language Assistance for Voters: Poll Site Interpretation Program

The Civic Engagement Commission is charged with implementing a poll site language assistance program for limited English proficient (LEP) individuals in languages and geographies not served by the New York City Board of Elections (NYCBOE). As required by the Charter, CEC conducted a public

¹ (Final Report of the 2018 New York City Charter Revision Commission, 2018, pp. 47-57)

comment and public hearing in 2020 to promulgate [a methodology to select languages and poll sites](#) served through our program. The Charter requires the CEC to review and update its methodology by September 2022, and at least every five years thereafter. While the total number of poll sites depends on the amount of money allocated to this program, availability of qualified interpreters for the Program languages, and the time needed to recruit interpreters, CEC's methodology delineates how the languages and specific poll sites may be selected. The methodology can be found on the CEC's website.

Between 2020-2021, CEC served 2,784 voters in 11 languages in one primary and two general elections. In the 2021 primary, when ranked choice voting (RCV) was first implemented in NYC, CEC leveraged 25 community and ethnic media venues to promote the program in 13 languages.

Based on the resources currently available, CEC services 100 poll sites over the course of each year's primary and general election cycle during the last weekend of early voting and on election day. CEC works closely with NYCBOE to coordinate smooth on-the-ground operations for voters. We also work in partnership with the Campaign Finance Board (CFB) on voter outreach and education events.

Establishment of a Language Assistance Advisory Committee (LAAC)

Relaunched in February with the 2022-2023 cohort, the LAAC is a Charter-mandated advisory group that plays a vital role in developing and implementing the CEC's poll site language assistance program and advancing language justice. There are currently 21 members representing 15 language communities. For the upcoming June Primary, the CEC is working with the LAAC, community-based partners and the CFB to provide targeted in-language workshops on civics and voting and translated information about voter registration and poll site services. The CEC is currently translating CFB voter education palm cards into languages beyond the federal Voting Rights Act-mandated languages. LAAC members also advise CEC on placement of multilingual ads in community and ethnic media to promote the poll site interpretation services.

Voter Registration and Education

Last month, 13,760 students registered to vote during the March 2022 Civics Week. This voter registration drive was coordinated by staff in the Department of Education's Civics for All team, the Mayor's Public Engagement Unit, DemocracyNYC and the CEC. In total, since 2018, nearly 75,000 young voters have registered to vote during Civics Week.

Ranked Choice Voting Education

DemocracyNYC reached 90 percent of New Yorkers with ads in 25 different languages during the 2021 June Primary, as estimated by OpAD, DemocracyNYC's media placement vendor. CEC also supported outreach events to language communities and organized outreach in TRIE neighborhoods (metrics below). The full multi-sector concert of activities, including those by the CFB, Rank the Vote, and many non-profits across the City helped drive New York City voter participation in the last primary to **the highest rate in 30 plus years**, with over 26 percent turnout.

Participatory Budgeting (PB)

The Civic Engagement Commission is also charged with implementing a citywide participatory budgeting program.. Citywide PB gives residents direct say in how their tax dollars are spent by engaging residents in idea generation and voting on local projects to be funded in the executive budget. Although an emergency executive order suspended citywide participatory budgeting for health and safety reasons during 2020-2021, CEC was able to run two smaller pilot PB processes with the goals of raising awareness of PB, increasing the voices of underrepresented residents in decisions about how public funding is spent, strengthening partners and relationships in the community, and building up our civic infrastructure.

- Year 1: CEC put up \$100K of our OTPS funds for a youth-led process called “It’s Our Money.”
 - Working with the CEC and the Coro Youth PB Fellowship program, a cohort of youth co-designed the process, hosted 30 virtual conversations with young people across the city, produced a [facilitator guide for CBOs](#), and a [needs assessment report](#) based on these community conversations and polling data.
 - [59 youth-serving CBOs submitted a project](#) for a vote focused on priorities defined by youth, including mental health services, career college readiness, and more youth programming and advocacy.
 - 2,000 youth chose [five projects of \\$20,000](#) each, including a girls mental health mentorship circle in the Bronx, a community garden project with a co-located school in Brownsville, a recycling and climate change program for youth in the Bronx, a school mentorship program in Queens and a leadership development program for young musicians in Flatbush (all five projects were successfully implemented).
 - Based on survey respondent data, over 90 percent of youth participants voting were of young people of color.
- Year 2: In 2021, the Mayor allocated \$1.3M to support a recovery focused participatory budgeting process in the 33 TRIE neighborhoods hardest hit by COVID-19.
 - In the needs and priority-setting phase, over 7,000 residents of TRIE Neighborhoods completed a survey identifying top priorities in their community: mental health, reducing gun violence, increasing access to youth programming, and addressing hunger. Community based organizations then generated project ideas based on these priorities, and each neighborhood had its own ballot form.
 - Surveys and voting were conducted through both online and in-person/paper formats; paper ballots were translated into 15 languages.
 - 29,500 residents in TRIE neighborhoods voted in “The People’s Money,” and [chose 33 winning PB projects](#) worth a total of \$1.3M (\$40,000 per neighborhood).
 - Now in their implementation phase, the 33 projects include a youth soccer league (African Life Center in the Bronx), a community fridge project at a local school (Lower East Side), and a mental health project involving barber shops and salons (Coney Island).
- Year 3: CEC plans to launch citywide participatory budgeting in late summer, 2022.
 - OMB granted \$5M in funding for expense projects citywide through FY24. The program will include a full year of idea generation and voting through June 2023, and projects will be implemented beginning July 2023 and continue through June 2024.
 - The Charter requires the CEC to develop the implementation plan for citywide PB in coordination with borough presidents, community boards, city agencies and elected officials, and in consultation with the Participatory Budgeting Advisory Committee (PBAC); Commissioners vote on the implementation plan. Over the course of the past two years, the CEC worked with the PBAC to establish program recommendations, which we are incorporating into our final proposal to the extent possible, conditional on staffing capacity and the available funding for the program.
 - CEC is required by the Charter to promote participation by a wide range of residents including non-citizens, immigrant communities, youth 16 years and older, students, seniors, veterans, people with disabilities and LEP individuals. CEC also plans to facilitate the participation of public housing residents, justice-involved communities, labor, LGBTQ communities, parents, social service organizations, and faith-based communities citywide.
 - CEC will develop multi-sector partnerships with a wide variety of institutions including libraries, community-based organizations, M/WBEs, college campuses and community boards during idea generation and voting in the PB process.
 - In addition to the PBAC, we are actively engaging multiple stakeholders through June 2022 to gather feedback on various aspects of the program, including the Mayor’s Office, and an intergovernmental working group we convened for the first time this year, particularly around

- the use of civic tech, evaluation, and outreach and engagement strategies to ensure an inclusive process. We have also been working with NYC Speaks, an initiative of the Administration, to include feedback on participatory budgeting in the community conversations they have organized with residents throughout the city. We are aiming for Commissioners to vote on the design and implementation plan by the end of July.
- We look forward to partnering with City Council members on the roll-out of the citywide program and continuing to build and strengthen a community-based civic infrastructure that is inclusive and that elevates the voices of those who are often under-represented in local government decision making.

Launch of Decidim

CEC was the first city agency in the U.S. to launch the use of Decidim, an open source, direct democracy platform used by local governments throughout the world. The platform is governed by an international community of practitioners and is grounded in the principle of transparency. The platform enables residents to propose ideas, endorse and comment on other ideas, create groups, and vote.

The CEC used the platform to run the last two PB processes for youth and in the TRIE neighborhoods. The platform also hosted [13 City Council Member participatory budgeting processes](#), and to date, over 15,000 New Yorkers have created an account on the platform. The platform is currently hosting the NYC Speaks [City employee idea challenge](#) to ask City staff for suggestions on program and policy changes.

Community Boards: Assistance in Capacity Building, Language Assistance, and Land Use

The Charter requires the Commission to provide assistance and training to community boards, specifically by identifying and providing access to urban planning and land use professionals who do not have an interest in the proposals being considered by community boards; providing services and tools to address the needs of LEP individuals; and training in the use of technological tools and uniform meeting procedures.

- Since July 2020, CEC has held 21 workshops and trainings that reached 998 community board members. Topics included Parliamentary Procedures (Motions & Amendments, Nominations & Elections, Committees, Efficient Meetings, Secretary Duties & Responsibilities); Conflict Resolution; Affordable Housing; Public Engagement; and Language Access Tools & Best Practices
- In the area of language access, CEC provided all 59 community boards with access to telephonic interpretation through Language Line. We also worked with the Mayor's Office of Data Analytics to produce the first citywide language map that helps users understand the top five languages spoken in their community district.
- In the area of land use, to improve access to neutral resources, CEC initiated a Request for Expressions of Interest and compiled a directory of 13 land use consultants, including M/WBE providers, which was distributed to the boards. CEC also purchased and distributed to 59 community boards plain language guides from Center for Urban Pedagogy on zoning, affordable housing, and ULURP.
- Working with DoITT, CEC created a community board internal webpage in CityShare to facilitate board staff and board member access to training recordings, presentation decks, and other community engagement and land use resources.
- CEC collaborates closely with borough presidents, the Department of City Planning, the Mayor's Community Affairs Unit, DoITT, MOIA, and OMB in community board outreach and assistance.

The People's Bus and People's Festival

The People's Festival is a five-borough tour centering the transformative power of arts and culture to activate public spaces, bring critical resources and information to communities, and use music and art to celebrate New Yorkers' resilience. The festival began as a Public Artist in Residence partnership with the

Department of Cultural Affairs and centered the People's Bus, an artistically transformed bus from the Department of Corrections.

The People's Bus programming began with a two-week Ranked Choice Voter Education Tour in June 2021. More than 800 residents completed an RCV ballot about People's Festival programming. Later in the summer, the People's Festival stopped in the TRIE neighborhoods hardest hit by COVID-19. In the fall, additional events featuring the People's Bus included a voter registration drive in Flatbush Brooklyn and Get Out the Vote event in the Bronx in collaboration with DemocracyNYC and local community-based organizations. In total, the festival offered 15 creative engagements to the general public and partnered with a total of 16 government agencies to provide resources, information, and to increase public engagement in communities hardest hit by COVID-19.

A total of \$175,000 of NYC Arts project funding and \$170,000 in philanthropic funding was awarded to the CEC last year to support arts and civic engagement activities and events, including the People's Festival. CEC in turn distributed 41 grants through the NYC Artist Corp to support 148 local artists in the TRIE neighborhoods.

The People's Bus recently found a permanent, new home at [The Clemente](#), a city-owned building operated by The Clemente Soto Vélaz Cultural & Educational Center Inc., a Puerto Rican/Latinx multi-arts cultural institution that provides affordable working space and venues to artists, small arts organizations, and emergent and independent community producers that reflect the cultural diversity of the Lower East Side and our City. CEC plans to conduct community programming on site in partnership with the Clemente in future months.

TRIE Neighborhood Initiative (TNI)

As I mentioned above, CEC supports collaborative, community-based coalitions across all 33 priority TRIE neighborhoods through the TRIE Neighborhood Initiative. TNI has connected residents to information and resources to support ongoing COVID-19 recovery; increased the local civic infrastructure; and conducted a needs-based participatory budgeting process (as highlighted earlier). Coalitions bring together nonprofit organizations, businesses, houses of worship, community boards, educational institutions, mutual aid networks and civic bodies and provide a localized approach. CEC manages these coalitions in partnership with Young Men's Initiative (YMI) and an M/WBE project management vendor. To provide you more specifics about TNI's accomplishments:

- 33 coalitions promote vaccine education, reaching an average of 23,000 New Yorkers each month through texting, tabling, email and social media campaigns, newspaper ad placements, communication through apps.
- TNI reached nearly 144,000 New Yorkers about RCV through texting, canvassing, media and social media outreach.
- Each neighborhood is currently implementing their winning project from the TRIE participatory budgeting process.
- Neighborhood coalition coordinators meet monthly with the CEC & YMI and have received training in vaccine outreach, RCV, the City Human Rights Law, and preventing hate crimes.

CEC Structure, Staff & Budget

Before I close, I'd like to give you an overview of the CEC's structure, staff, and budget. CEC consists of 15 Commissioners, eight of whom are appointed by the Mayor, two by the City Council, and five by the borough presidents. The Chair of the Commission serves at the pleasure of the Mayor and serves as the Executive Director. The Charter requires at least one Mayoral appointee to be enrolled in a political party with the highest number of registered voters, and at least one other Mayoral appointment to be enrolled in a political party with the next highest number of registered voters. Although initial Commissioner

appointees' terms ranged from two to four years to stagger appointments, all Commissioners, except for the Chair, serve four-year terms.

CEC's current employees total nine full time employees, a part-time artist in residence, and two college interns. We are in the process of hiring and onboarding for three vacancies due to attrition and three seasonal temps who will support our poll site language assistance services for the primary. CEC received 10 additional lines to support the roll out of citywide participatory budgeting in the November plan and is actively recruiting for all these positions. These additions include an expanded outreach team of two new lines and an Outreach Director. This outreach team will develop and implement targeted field strategies to support language assistance, voter registration and voter participation, and other initiatives while integrating in person, virtual, and arts-based approaches. CEC also works closely with other agencies to leverage their capabilities and ensure the efficient performance of CEC's functions and duties using its core staff.

CEC's current budget totals \$4.87M, with \$1.29M dedicated to personnel and the remainder to programs. The poll site language assistance program leverages \$1.8M to provide interpretation services, and \$1.3M is dedicated for participatory budgeting in the current year.

Thank you again for the opportunity to speak about the work of the CEC, and I look forward to answering your questions.

Advocating for Caribbean LGBTQ Voices in NYC

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Testimony to the New York City Council Committee on Government Operations

April 26, 2022

Written Testimony

I want to thank Committee Chair Ung and the Council Members here today for the opportunity to testify. My name is Mohamed Q. Amin, and I am the Founder and Executive Director of the [Caribbean Equality Project](#). Founded in 2015 in response to anti-LGBTQ hate crime violence in Richmond Hill, Queens, Caribbean Equality Project is an NYC-based community organization that empowers, advocates for, and represents Black and Brown, lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, gender non-conforming, and queer Caribbean immigrants in New York City. The organization's intersectional work fosters solidarity, community partnerships, and greater family acceptance in the greater New York metropolitan area. Through public education, community organizing, civic engagement, storytelling, and cultural and social programming, the organization focuses on advocacy for LGBTQ+ and immigrant rights, gender equity, racial justice, immigration, mental health services, and ending hate violence in the Caribbean diaspora. We are a proud member of the Asian American Federation's AAPI Power Coalition.

Since 2015, the Caribbean Equality Project has built political power through civic engagement, voter registration, public education, and legislative advocacy. The organization cultivates civic participation and promotes education to build collective political power for Afro and Indo-Caribbean LGBTQ+ immigrants and Caribbean-Americans at the neighborhood, city, state, and national levels. Annually, the organization registers hundreds of eligible voters, coordinates political candidate forums, organizes voter education community events, and works with allied community partners to amplify Black and Brown Queer and Trans Caribbean voices in New York City.

The Caribbean Equality Project's civic engagement work is hyper-local in Caribbean-centric neighborhoods in NYC, such as Little Guyana in Richmond Hill, Queens, Little Caribbean in Flatbush, Brooklyn, and Castel Hill and Soundview in The Bronx. The organization leads and collaborates with community-based partners, faith-based institutions, and civic groups to organize direct actions to mobilize documented and undocumented LGBTQ+ community members and their families to engage with elected officials through town halls, community board meetings, and city and state hearings, regardless of their immigration status or voter eligibility.

Richmond Hill and South Ozone Park are home to the largest South Asian and Indo-Caribbean communities in Queens, the fastest-growing immigrant population in NYC. In 2020, during a global pandemic, the Caribbean Equality Project scripted, directed, and created our own culturally proficient 2020 Census infomercial, highlighting Caribbean voices throughout New York City. Our "Caribbean Counts" campaign was a historic Census digital ad, which encompassed a racially and ethnically diverse view of New York City's Caribbean immigrant neighborhoods and local businesses through the lens of LGBTQ people and allies, reaching over 25,000 people on social media. In addition to leveraging our community reach at food pantries and PPE distribution initiatives, we organized multiple 2020 Census virtual educational forums and on-the-ground street canvassing outreach events,

counting thousands of Queens households, which contributed to 7.8 percent growth in the World's Borough.

In 2021, to encourage civic participation in the primary and general elections and promote voter education, we launched "Mash-up De Vote," a culturally-responsive Black and Brown Caribbean immigrant-focused civic engagement campaign. To continue building political power at the neighborhood level, we founded the now annual [Little Guyana Votes Rally](#), a civically engaged Get Out the Vote (GOTV) rally to educate voters on Ranked Choice Voting, conduct voter registration, and increase voter participation in the primary election. To commemorate National Voter Registration Day in 2021, the Caribbean Equality Project founded the [Little Guyana Votes Festival](#), a culturally-responsive hyper-local civic engagement drive and resource fair in Richmond Hill, Queens. The community event included a press conference with local political activists, elected officials, local faith leaders, and live music and cultural performances to increase voter participation and engagement among residents in NYC's Little Guyana. The unique open street space allows local small businesses to promote their products, community-based organizations to share their resources, and community members to access housing and COVID-19 testing and vaccine information.

New York City is home to the largest Caribbean diasporic population. In 2021, our voting rights advocacy included passing Intro 1867- the Our City, Our Vote bill. The legislation expands democracy in New York City, so over 900,000 green card holders can vote in municipal elections for city-level offices, including the electoral process for mayor, comptroller, public advocate, borough president, and city council as ballot referendums. For the first time in over 100 years, this legislation corrected a historical racial justice inequality and will give a voice to politically disenfranchised immigrant communities.

The following recommendations will help city agencies ensure that immigrant New Yorkers are not excluded from the voter registration process due to a lack of sufficient resources or training but are also provided culturally proficient and language-accessible civic engagement resources:

Recommendations

- Invest in community-based organizations doing culturally competent voter outreach in geographically immigrant communities.
- Expand hyper-local voter education on Ranked Choice Voting that is linguistically accessible and accurate.
- To prepare immigrant New Yorkers eligible to vote in the 2023 municipal elections, the Board of Elections must expand the language accessible on official voter registration forms to include citywide languages.
- Increase public education on Intro 1867, so immigrants who are permanent residents, Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals (DACA) recipients, hold Temporary Protected Status or other work authorization forms know their voting rights and eligibility to vote in municipal elections for city-level offices.
- Significantly increase the number of early voting sites in neighborhoods of South Queens, including Richmond Hill, South Ozone Park, Ozone Park, and Jamaica. Each voting poll site should be ADA compliant, readily accessible by public transportation, and have interpreters providing voter services in citywide languages (Spanish, Chinese (including Mandarin, Cantonese and Taiwanese), Russian, Bengali, Haitian Creole, Korean, Arabic, Urdu, French, & Polish)

I want to thank you for allowing me to testify before you today. We look forward to working with you to create a more civically engaged New York City. Our recommendations will help city agencies make a more significant investment to uplift and protect voting rights for immigrant New Yorkers.



Asian American Federation

Testimony to the New York City Council Committee on Governmental Operations

April 29, 2022

Written Testimony

I want to thank Committee Chair Ung and the Council Members here today for the opportunity to testify. I'm Ahmed Butt, Civic Engagement Coordinator at the Asian American Federation, where we proudly represent the collective voice of more than 70 member nonprofits serving 1.5 million Asian New Yorkers.

To give you an idea of the scale of our community before we get into the critical civic engagement work, here are some numbers:

Since 2010, the Asian population in New York City has increased 34%, growing from over 1.1 million in 2010 to over 1.5 million in 2020, making up 17.3% of our city's total population. Overwhelmingly, Asian New Yorkers are immigrants, with two out of three in the city being foreign-born. Of those Asian immigrants, 47% arrived in 2010 or after. Additionally, language barriers remain high among Asian New Yorkers. Overall, 48% of Asians have limited English proficiency in New York City, compared to a citywide rate of 23%.

Our Asian American community is getting more and more dispersed across our City and moving beyond ethnic enclaves. We work and live across our City, and that presents a challenge when it comes to civic engagement. Language access continues to be the primary bottleneck between our community and effectively exercising their collective power at the ballot box and within the civic engagement space between elections. Because our LEP population is spread out and not always within clusters, our most politically-isolated community members are often looked over by critical programs like the Poll Site Language Assistance Program (PSLAP). Furthermore, a lack of education in our communities about this program undermines its impact.

Nonetheless, the Asian American Federation and the civic engagement coalition we lead, the AAPI Power Coalition, have and continue to do large-scale on-the-ground work in our most marginalized communities. For many potential voters, registration is not the push that gets them to the polls – they have to see how voting centers them and the needs of their neighbors. The CBOs of our coalition, who collectively made almost 2 million contacts with Asian voters last year, and who serve eight different ethnic communities in four boroughs, have credibility in our most isolated communities and must occupy leadership roles in city civic engagement initiatives. Our coalition members must be a part of the process, engaged as partners and centered as experts.

Given the recently proposed changes to this year's primary election timeline, it is of utmost importance that voter engagement efforts center the ability of our CBOs to guide and educate underserved communities. While the state redistricting process has largely been viewed as a political fight, the proposed changes will without a doubt increase confusion and indifference among voters. We are running the risk of further disenfranchising our most isolated communities while we should be focused on

increasing their participation. The CBOs belonging to our AAPI Power Coalition are deeply trusted in their communities and are the experts we should be turning to on how to engage vulnerable communities. I urge you to consider the impact these changes will have on turnout and not leave our communities behind in your voter education efforts.

Two of our coalition members, Arab American Association of New York and Council of Peoples Organization serve two of the top five language communities for PSLAP, Arabic and Urdu, respectively. They also work in target geographies including South Brooklyn. Another member organization, Parent Child Relationship Association, services the South Brooklyn Chinese community; it should be noted that Chinese is a language covered by the Civic Engagement Commission at some poll sites.

The following recommendations will help city agencies ensure that our community members are not only not excluded from their voter registration efforts due to a lack of adequate resources or training, but are also provided culturally-competent and language-accessible civic engagement resources.

- Build rapport and prioritize community based organizations in target areas, while being mindful of top languages and geographies, in order to conduct culturally competent voter outreach.
- Make information on poll site interpretation services more easily accessible
 - Connect regularly with local organizations' communications departments to share linguistically accurate social media assets, including information on interpretation services and of a voter's right to bring their own interpreter
 - List interpretation services provided at a voter's poll site on the Board of Elections poll site lookup web page (including mention of their right to bring their own interpreter)
- Eliminate language barriers present *before* voters reach the polls
 - Prioritize inputs from CBOs regarding community linguistic and resources needs, and apply them across voter resources and websites.
 - Expand the language coverage of official voter registration forms to include citywide languages
 - Translate the online voter registration portal to make this service available to LEP community members
- Ensure adequate staffing of bilingual employees at city agencies who are properly trained to register voters.

I want to thank you for giving us the opportunity to testify before you today. We look forward to working with all of you to create a more civically engaged New York City and our recommendations will help city agencies make further improvements to their voter registration efforts.



CITIZENS UNION OF THE CITY OF NEW YORK
Testimony before the City Council Committee on Governmental Operations
New York City Civic Engagement Commission

Oversight Hearing
April 26, 2022

Good morning members of the New York City Council Committee on Governmental Operations. My name is Ben Weinberg, and I am the Director of Public Policy at Citizens Union. Citizens Union is a nonpartisan good government group dedicated to making democracy work for all New Yorkers. For 125 years, we have served as a civic watchdog, combating corruption and fighting for political reform in city and state government.

We thank the committee for the opportunity to provide comments today, and commend Chair Sandra Ung and committee members for conducting an oversight hearing on the Civic Engagement Commission (CEC), a new city agency that has yet to be reviewed by the City Council.

I will begin by noting that Citizens Union opposed the 2018 ballot measure that established the Civic CEC because we believed a commission with leverage over a myriad of crucial issues such as assisting voters at polling sites and providing technical assistance to community boards should be independent of the mayor. The mayor appoints the majority of commissioners in the 15-member body, including the Chair/Executive Director. Citizens Union is pleased to see the CEC has worked in an open, transparent, and independent manner since it was established. We appreciate the hard work of CEC members and staff, working through the difficulties of setting up a new agency under Covid-era limitations.

Citizens Union makes three comments on the Commission's mandates under the City Charter.

Fund and expedite citywide participatory budgeting

The CEC's first Charter mandate was to take over the participatory budgeting (PB) program, which until then was based on the goodwill of individual Council Members, and to expand it into a citywide program. According to that mandate, New Yorkers were meant to vote for City projects to be included in the executive budget, starting with the FY2021 budget. That has not happened yet, mostly due to Covid-related delays. A citywide PB is supposed to begin this summer¹ with the aim of integrating results into FY2024 budget.

¹ NYC Civic Engagement Commission, March 22, 2022 meeting

An unfortunate side effect of transferring PB out of the Council was a significant drop in funding. The first planned citywide PB, set to begin later this year, will have 5 million dollars allocated for projects. By comparison, the last cycle of Council-based PB, which covered two-thirds of the city, included almost 40 million dollars for projects around the city.² The Council-led program also enjoyed the support of a large staff, many interns, and Coro fellows across participating Council districts.

The City Council should provide adequate funding to allow the CEC to fulfill its primary purpose – running a meaningful, comprehensive citywide participatory budgeting. Although the Commission has done admirable work running small-scale PB programs focused on youth and Covid-hit neighborhoods, its Charter mandate is to run a citywide program.

Continue to support language assistance at poll sites

The CEC has greatly expanded language access at poll sites in New York City compared to the limited assistance provided by the New York City Board of Elections (NYC BOE). The NYC BOE meets federal obligations, and these requirements are insufficient for a city like New York. We commend the CEC for developing a thoughtful, systematic methodology to assess language needs in different neighborhoods and setting up a program that provided New Yorkers with interpreters and translation services in 11 languages at dozens of poll sites.

The CEC’s methodology can serve as a model for future poll site language access expansions, such as the one currently considered by the Legislature under the proposed New York Voting Rights Act (S1046A).

Language assistance needs would likely increase in the 2023 election, with many new Municipal Voters registering to vote for the first time under Local Law 11 (Non-Citizen Voting). We believe the Council should continue to support the Commission’s work to expand language access at poll sites.

Focus on technical land use support for community boards

When considering the assistance the future Civic Engagement Commission would provide for community boards, the 2018 Charter Revision Commission focused on resources connected to land use. The Civic Engagement Commission was tasked with creating an available pool of urban planners, independent from borough presidents’ offices, that can be accessed by community boards. This decision reflected “the importance of the role of community boards in the development of community-based plans (197-a plans) and in the Uniform Land Use Review Procedure (ULURP)”.³ Although the Commission was also tasked with providing language and technological assistance, the heart of that proposed reform was in offering land use resources.

However, this Charter mandate is dependent on appropriations (City Charter §3203), and the Commission is currently lightly funded, with less than \$3 million total in the adopted June 2021 budget. Citizens Union urges the Council to provide the resources needed to develop a meaningful land use assistance program for community boards. Do not turn this Charter provision, approved by the voters, into another unfunded mandate.

² New York City Participatory Budgeting Cycle 9 Rulebook 2019-2020. <http://council.nyc.gov/pb/wp-content/uploads/sites/58/2019/10/PBNYC-Cycle-9-Rulebook-2019-2020.pdf>

³ Final Report of the 2018 New York City Charter Revision Commission. <https://www1.nyc.gov/assets/charter/downloads/pdf/final-report-20180904.pdf>

**Written Testimony on behalf of Common Cause New York before
The New York City Governmental Operations Committee
April 29th, 2022**

The New York City Civic Engagement Commission (CEC) was established through voter referendum in 2018 and began to build out as an agency in 2019. Its mission is clearly outlined in the city's Charter:

- Run a citywide participatory budgeting program with guidance from a participatory budgeting advisory committee;
- Partner with community-based organizations and civic leaders, increase awareness of City services, and assist New York City agencies in developing civic engagement initiatives;
- Develop a plan to consider the language access needs of limited English proficient New Yorkers with regards to the Commission's programs and services and provide language interpreters at poll sites by the 2020 general election, with advice from a language assistance advisory committee; and
- Provide assistance to community boards

Like every other government agency, the CEC was presented with operational challenges as a result of the pandemic. Understandably, as a nascent city agency, this seems to have slowed their initial ability to fully meet their charter mandated obligations.

Of particular longstanding interest to Common Cause New York is enhanced language access services for limited English proficient voters at poll sites. Given the inaugural implementation year was 2020, it's difficult to ascertain the success of the program given the COVID challenges and large number of voters who voted absentee. The 2022 election cycle will hopefully give the CEC more meaningful data with which to assess voter usage of additional translation services.

Regardless, Common Cause New York would like to see the agency positioned for success through an appropriate agency budget and greater inter-agency coordination. The CEC, the New York City Board of Elections and the New York City Campaign Finance Board share overlapping missions in the area of language access and civic engagement. While their operational functions are quite different, we recommend a more cohesive interagency language access plan that does not duplicate services and allows for maximum voter engagement.