

NEW YORK CITY COUNCIL

**COMMITTEE ON CULTURAL AFFAIRS, LIBRARIES AND INTERNATIONAL INTERGROUP
RELATIONS, JOINTLY WITH THE COMMITTEE ON IMMIGRATION**

OVERSIGHT – The Role of Public Libraries in Support of Immigrant New Yorkers

Tuesday, November 19, 2019

Good morning. I am Tony Marx, President of The New York Public Library (NYPL). I would like to thank Speaker Corey Johnson, Chairs Jimmy Van Bramer and Carlos Menchaca, and the entire City Council for holding this hearing today and for your commitment to libraries. I thank you for the opportunity to testify on NYPL's role supporting New York City's immigrants.

This city is home to approximately 3.2 million immigrants, one-third of whom reside within the three boroughs that the NYPL serves. As the nation's largest public library system, featuring 88 branches and four scholarly research centers, NYPL is committed to serving this important population, with language, reading, learning and cultural programs across all ages, backgrounds, educational levels and ethnicities. We provide safe and welcoming spaces for everyone who walks through our doors, regardless of language ability, income or legal status. We treat all with dignity, kindness, and respect.

The NYPL has a long history of serving NYC's immigrants. The Library has always upheld the belief that the services we provide should be accessible to all. Activities across many different NYPL departments support the immigrant community, especially our Immigrant Services Division. This team is tasked with developing new initiatives and working with local community partners to provide programs and services that meet the particular challenges many immigrants face across the City. While we are constantly looking at ways we can best serve New York City immigrants and refugees, today I would like to focus on four priority areas: information technology and collection development, government partnerships and citizenship information, outreach and programming, and Census.

Information Technology and Collection Development

In 2012, NYPL launched its TechConnect initiative to provide a wide range of high-quality technology training programs to New Yorkers. Since its launch, TechConnect—in partnership with Bank of America and Wiley Educational Services—has grown to offer over 80 different free classes in multiple languages (including Spanish, Chinese, and Bengali), and has helped hundreds of thousands of patrons gain much-needed skills in an increasingly digital world. Classes are available for all skill levels, providing curricula for beginners as well as advanced users.

In addition to classes that help patrons build their technology skills, we also offer a host of electronic resources that utilize our vast collections. From Learning Express Library that offers test preparation materials and practice exams for immigrants interested in pursuing U.S. citizenship, to FreedomFlix, an eBook online platform that offers immigrants a glimpse into American history while building their literacy and comprehension skills, our services provide immigrants with the vital resources that they need to open doors of opportunity. NYPL is also exploring initiatives to help New Yorkers more easily access our digital and print collections. Currently, NYPL is working to more effectively promote the World Language Collections and better engage with patrons who want to read in other languages, including Spanish, Chinese, French and Russian. NYPL has curated the Latino and Puerto Rican Cultural Collection and Gallery, where patrons can reference rare books on Puerto Rican folk music and literature in both Spanish and English and view Puerto Rican/Latino artwork. We have also created the Best Books in Spanish for Kids, a curated book list of literary works that appeal to children ages 2-12, their caregivers, and teachers, sparking what we hope will be a lifelong love of reading. With the creation of bookmarks, book lists, and signage, we continue to promote a more inclusive literary environment for all New Yorkers.

Government Partnerships and Citizenship Information

To guarantee New Yorkers have a full complement of resources, NYPL partners with a number of government entities and not-for-profits to provide immigration-related information and programming. Just this year alone, NYPL has provided services—including application assistance, test prep / study groups, citizenship classes and legal services—with 6,000 attendees to programs offering a path to citizenship. New Americans Corners are in every NYPL

branch, and provide a dedicated space to easily access information and resources on applying for citizenship, green card applications, community resources and other immigration-related materials. New Americans Corners were created in 2015 in partnership with United States Citizenship and Immigration Services (USCIS) and the Mayor's Office of Immigrant Affairs (MOIA). For patrons planning to apply for citizenship, NYPL also offers citizenship classes and informal study groups. The classes are delivered by two specially-trained staff teaching curriculum developed in alignment with USCIS materials. Our citizenship classes and study groups, together with the New Americans Corners have assisted thousands of individuals to successfully prepare for their citizenship tests.

Through our partnerships with MOIA and the Immigrant Justice Corps, NYPL is able to provide free legal assistance to immigrants. Our partnership with MOIA supports the NYCitizenship program. This essential service provides free legal advice and assistance to help patrons complete the citizenship application, plus financial support for low-income applicants. In addition, the program supports two part-time NYPL outreach positions. Similarly, our partnership with the Immigrant Justice Corps provides free legal assistance to immigrants on a range of legal issues and is located at the Mott Haven branch in the Bronx. The partnership, established in 2017, partners Justice Fellows, and a supervising attorney, with applicants to assist with removal defense, complex affirmative asylum applications, and other forms of relief, including those for juveniles and victims of crimes.

Since 2005, the Mid-Manhattan Library has hosted a program to assist those applying for the Diversity Visa Lottery, and this year it was also introduced at Richmondtown Library. The program assists applicants with digital photographs and online applications, helping to alleviate the digital divide for immigrant New Yorkers. Applicants hail from Albania to Burkina Faso, Ecuador to Mongolia, and 27 other countries around the world. At NYPL, it is important that all who enter our libraries feel welcomed. Printed outreach materials are available in seven spoken languages, and we make information about our collections available in 23 languages, via nypl.org. This year we also installed Google Translate on tablets that branches use for outreach and provided branch staff with training on how to use Google Translate to enhance communication and better support patrons in languages other than English. Through a range of programs, we cultivate language accessibility programming for our patrons and all New Yorkers.

Outreach and Programming

NYPL provides services such as language instruction and programming to help immigrants improve their language skills to advance their careers, connect with their communities and help the next generation succeed.

Since 2012, NYPL's English as a Second Language (ESOL), Adult Basic Education (ABE), and English for Work classes have significantly expanded. Cumulatively, NYPL served over 7,000 individuals through these programs in FY19. NYPL teaches ESOL classes in 39 locations in the Bronx, Manhattan and Staten Island, and filled approximately 15,000 seats last fiscal year, a 7-fold increase since 2012. Many students build on their proficiencies acquired through ESOL and continue on to ABE and English for Work classes. This pipeline builds upon their existing language skills and puts those skills to use through real-world opportunities including job fairs, Google's G Suite instruction, and career counseling. Building on our robust selection of language services, we offer drop-in English Conversation Classes for ESOL learners in twenty two sites across our network, who are at an intermediate level, which attracted over 20,000 attendees in FY19. Students use a variety of platforms to build on their skills, including We Speak NYC, which builds on students' language competencies through a variety of media. Building on the We Speak NYC curriculum and with a FY20 City Council allocation of \$102,000, we also provide ESOL classes at two correctional facilities on Rikers Island. With additional funding from the City Council we will be able to continue to expand both formalized literacy and language instruction as well as more fluid drop-in programs.

Our partnership with the non-profit organization, New Women New Yorkers, provides an opportunity for immigrant women to develop entrepreneurial and career skills. They prepare participants for entry into the New York City workforce or to pursue higher education. This free workforce development program for immigrant women teaches critical skills such as resume writing, networking, writing workshops and public speaking at our Mid-Manhattan and Chatham Square branches. New Women New Yorkers is just one of the many community organizations that the Library partners with to bring a wide range of programs to our branches.

To improve the language skills of our next generation, branches offer bilingual storytimes, early literacy kits in a variety of languages, and storytimes and art programs in Spanish. This year we are working to bring additional language programming in Urdu, Hindi and Italian. From

non-native speakers to the intermediate and advanced speakers, early education to formalized adult language instruction, NYPL fills critical gaps in immigration language services for all New Yorkers across the City.

Refugees are welcomed at the library. In the past few years, we have partnered with the Cayuga Center to connect unaccompanied immigrant children and their foster families with library services. We have donated Spanish-language children's books and work through our branch libraries that are located near the centers to conduct outreach and educator workshops. In July this year, NYPL staff supported a Cayuga event for foster families that attracted around 100 adults and 700 children. Our staff also stay connected with the refugee community by regularly participating in Refugee and Asylee Service Providers (RASP) meetings.

Additionally, we know from previous outreach efforts that some communities (particularly households with undocumented immigrants or recent immigrants) are hesitant to sign up for library cards and take advantage of all that we offer because they are concerned about sharing personal information. In an effort to engage those patrons, we are currently piloting a new library card type that would greatly limit borrowing, but would require much less personal information than a full-service card. We'll continue to update you on whether that program will be expanded.

Census

NYPL is committed to doing its part in ensuring a complete Census count across the city. To achieve this, our community outreach and programming support for immigrant communities, particularly in hard-to-count neighborhoods, is one of our priorities.

With funding support from the City, we are able to focus on this important work, and last month, we recruited a Civic Engagement and Community Partnerships Manager to coordinate the Library's Census efforts. Working together with local branch staff and community partners, we will ensure that libraries have reliable Census information and adequate support available in a range of languages that are spoken in our local communities.

With a 4-point strategy, NYPL will (i) leverage community partnerships to ensure communities know that the library is a welcoming space to complete the Census and seek support; (ii)

provide language support through frontline staff, volunteers and partner organizations to ensure Census related programs are connecting with local language groups, (iii) provide “Census kiosks” and digital support, and (iv) provide a range of programming opportunities for patrons to engage with the Census through in branch support, community Town Halls, network-wide Census “Open Houses”, and scheduled drop-in Census support programs. These community-focused initiatives enhance our day-to-day work and help to engage immigrant communities to ensure that they are fully counted in the 2020 Census.

Conclusion

Libraries serve as community hubs for people of all ages, backgrounds, ethnicities, and religious affiliations. Regardless of immigration status or educational attainment, all patrons are welcomed through our doors. As New York City’s most used institution, NYPL has created trusted community partnerships to support our immigrant communities with reliable and easily accessible services. From our early literacy bilingual programming, to ESOL programs, and government partnerships with agencies like MOIA, NYPL continues to provide both longstanding partnerships and new initiatives aimed to alleviate barriers for all immigrants. Through our diverse program offerings and targeted services, NYPL continues to assist immigrants to succeed in all facets of life in New York City.

The essential services that NYPL provides immigrants and refugees not only support their current needs, but builds on learned skills so they may achieve their version of the American dream. As we reflect on the NYPL’s upcoming 125th anniversary in 2020, we are proud to share our robust contributions that created the multifaceted world we live in today.

Thank you for the opportunity to testify today.



Statement by Dennis M. Walcott, President and CEO, Queens Public Library

**New York City Council Committee on Cultural Affairs, Libraries and
International Intergroup Relations jointly with the Committee on Immigration**

Oversight - The Role of Public Libraries in Support of Immigrant New Yorkers

November 19, 2019

Good morning. It is a pleasure to be here. I am Dennis Walcott, President and CEO of Queens Public Library (QPL). Thank you, Chairs Van Bramer and Menchaca, and the members of this joint committee for the opportunity to testify today. I would also like to thank Commissioner Bitta Mostofi for her leadership and partnership with NYC's public libraries.

Libraries are the "great equalizers" in our democratic society. As such, public libraries play a crucial role in supporting new immigrants. Serving the most ethnically diverse county in America, Queens Public Library has long been a primary destination for immigrant New Yorkers. QPL's New Americans Program (NAP) provides an array of programs and special services to help the borough's immigrants integrate into American society and share their diverse cultures with the community-at-large. Beginning in 1977, QPL was the first public library in the nation with a department dedicated to providing comprehensive programs and services for immigrants. Almost half of the residents of Queens County are foreign born, making this program a vital resource.

NAP works closely with QPL's Adult Learner Program (ALP), Job & Business Academy (JBA), and community libraries to assess local needs and link residents with existing system-wide library and social services to enhance civic engagement. NAP organizes workshops in the languages spoken by Queens' immigrant communities to assist new immigrants in adapting to life in the United States. Workshops cover various topics that include but are not limited to job search help, entry-level job skills training, technology training, small business development, immigration law, citizenship application, tenants' rights, career planning, parenting and health, and coping skills. Music, dance and drama performances, bilingual poetry readings, storytelling and crafts are among the cultural programs offered to celebrate the diversity of our communities.

Our Adult Learner Program offers Adult Basic Education for immigrants, covering topics such as math, reading and writing skills. It offers High School Equivalency instruction for new immigrants who did not complete high school in their home country, or whose high school diploma is not recognized in the United States. Case Management services are also available at several of our Adult Learning Centers, which provide social service assistance and referrals to immigrants for important matters like housing and accessing Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) benefits.

QPL offers ESOL classes at many of our branches and Adult Learning Centers, including conversational English classes, as well as contextualized ESOL classes that focus on job searching, entrepreneurship and using new technology. ESOL Conversation groups are also offered in select libraries for customers to practice English.

The New Americans Corner initiative, in partnership with the United States Citizenship and Immigration Services and the NYC Mayor's Office of Immigrant Affairs, dedicates a space in every single one of our libraries where immigrants can find information and resources to become U.S. citizens. In partnership with the NYC Mayor's Office of Immigrant Affairs, we, along with the New York Public Library and Brooklyn Public Library (Tri-Li) participate in the NYCitizenship program, which assists immigrant New Yorkers with free citizenship applications and financial counseling. Weekly appointments can be made with an immigration attorney at our Central, Flushing and Jackson Heights libraries. As the City transitions from NYCitizenship to ActionNYC, we look forward to continuing this great partnership and hope to provide the same level of service to which our customers are accustomed.

QPL provides free citizenship classes that help customers prepare for the naturalization exam. Moreover, we collaborate with the Immigrant Justice Corps to provide free immigration legal assistance, status adjustments, green card renewal and other related services, in English and Spanish, at our Long Island City Adult Learning Center.

Through another proud partnership with the de Blasio Administration, Tri-Li implemented IDNYC, New York City's signature free identification card program for all New York City residents. Since the program's inception, QPL has helped over 220,000 New Yorkers enroll to receive their ID cards, with over 12,400 people integrating their QPL card with their IDNYC card. Undocumented immigrants often have difficulty obtaining government-issued identification. Knowing this and knowing that immigrants trust our institutions and spaces, New York City's libraries were, and remain, ready, willing and able to serve some of our most vulnerable communities.

In addition to providing vital programs and services, we must also ensure our frontline staff are communicating effectively with our newest New Yorkers. Every library and ALC in our system have both Travis devices and tablets with Google Translate for our staff to connect with our customers, regardless of the language they speak. These translation devices are crucial for our staff to properly assist customers in an efficient and timely fashion.

QPL's collection contains materials in 30 languages, and we actively purchase adult and children's books, magazines, newspapers, CDs, movies and more. Our international language collections are some of the largest available in the United States.

Our immigrant-focused programs and services are continuously in high demand. In Fiscal Year 2019, QPL welcomed over 18,200 participants to our more than 8,600 immigrant-focused program sessions. We hosted over 4,600 ESOL sessions, which had over 4,100 participants. Our ESOL participants are seeing results. This past fiscal year, they experienced an average educational gain of 59 percent. In addition to our ESOL program, QPL provided:

- Citizenship counseling to over 900 individuals and completed more than 1,600 sessions;
- Over 380 coping skills workshops (helping newly-arrived immigrants adjust to American society) to over 6,200 participants;
- JBA's Integrated English Literacy & Civics Education, which teaches contextualized English and training for technology or home health aide jobs, to over 230 individuals who produced a post-test rate of 79 percent;
- Nearly 2,500 hours of immigration legal assistance to 270 individuals; and
- Over 230 cultural celebration programs attracting over 6,400 attendees, reinforcing our commitment to inclusion and diversity within our borough.

The programs and services we offer to our customers allow them to make real, positive differences in their lives. For immigrant New Yorker Ana Dias, finding a free and high quality English language class where she could express herself in a safe and trusted environment was extremely difficult. She then discovered and registered for an intermediate ESOL course at the Briarwood library. With every class, she started becoming increasingly independent and self-reliant. She became so confident in her English language skills and was so grateful to the library for empowering her, she felt compelled to share her story – and show off her new skills – last year by providing public testimony at the Libraries Committee's FY2019 Preliminary Budget hearing.

Libraries are trusted entities that people turn to when in need. Ana's story is unique to her, but it highlights the role QPL, and all public libraries, play in the lives of our immigrant customers. As we strive towards building a vibrant, informed, cohesive, and empowered society, it starts with making sure that our most vulnerable populations receive the care and services they need.

Thank you again, Chairs Van Bramer and Menchaca, for the opportunity to testify. I look forward to continuing our work together, and to answering any questions you may have.

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Name: Tony Marx

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