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**Testimony presented by Anthony Ng
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**Before the Immigration Committee of the New York City Council
Kendall Stewart, Chair**

“Immigrants’ Contributions to the Economy.”

April 10, 2008

Good morning. My name is Anthony Ng, Deputy Director of Policy and Advocacy at United Neighborhood Houses. Thank you for holding this important hearing to examine the contributions that immigrants make to the economy here in New York City. Today, I will discuss some of the human services that our member agencies offer, which help immigrant New Yorkers improve their lives and integrate into society, and further facilitate their contributions to this city economically, but also socially and culturally. As many of us know, New York City has always been a city of immigrants, and the demographic data of this City continues to illustrate this fact. Today, New York City’s population is close to 8.2 million people. About 40 percent of New Yorkers are foreign-born, with almost 2/3 of the City being immigrants and the children of immigrants. The contributions of immigrant New Yorkers have shaped the City in countless ways, and have made New York the exciting, vibrant, and interesting place it is today. New York’s immigrants are also remarkably diverse, with close to 170 languages spoken by families with children in New York’s public school system.

Through the work of United Neighborhood Houses (UNH), and our member agencies, we continue our long tradition of serving immigrants and helping them to flourish in New York and the U.S. Founded in 1919, UNH is the membership organization of New York City settlement houses and community centers. Rooted in the history and values of the settlement house movement, UNH promotes and strengthens the neighborhood-based, multi-service approach to improving the lives of New Yorkers in need and the communities in which they live. Our membership comprises one of the largest human service systems in New York City, with 34 agencies working at more than 400 sites to provide high quality services and activities to a half million New Yorkers each year. Services provided by our members include: early childhood education, after-school programs and youth development programs, adult literacy classes, English classes for recent immigrants, job training, meals and supportive services for the elderly, mental health counseling, drug prevention, and art, music and drama programs. These services are free, or low cost, and subsidized by public and private funds.

In addition to offering human services, UNH members also offer opportunities to help community members speak out for their rights and improve conditions in their lives and neighborhood. Some of our members have created youth, and family councils and leadership projects to organize their community, offer advocacy skills training, and participate in activities to express support for their issues. Through these councils and projects, community residents

have spoken at public forums, attended rallies and marches, and met with elected officials to improve public education, obtain more affordable housing, urge for comprehensive immigration reform, and expand youth services.

Both immigrants and non-immigrants alike utilize the human services delivered by UNH members. To reach immigrants with these services, our members design the programs to ensure that they are delivered in a linguistically and culturally appropriate manner. This includes hiring bilingual staff that can speak the dominant language in a community and incorporating cultural practices and considerations in programming. UNH member agencies have their central office in, or have program sites located in some of the City's major immigrant communities such as Jackson Heights, Sunset Park, Flatbush, East Harlem, Tremont, Flushing, Coney Island, and Chinatown. These communities are home to a sizeable number of the City's Latino (Puerto Rican, Dominican, Mexican, South and Central American), Caribbean, West African, East Asian, South Asian, and Russian populations.

UNH members are also among the City's primary immigrant service providers. There are 3 general types of immigrant services: English for Speakers of other languages (ESOL) classes, immigration legal assistance, and citizenship assistance.

- About 3/4 of UNH members offer adult literacy programs, primarily in ESOL. Adult literacy also includes ABE, BENL, and GED.
- Nine UNH members offer immigration legal services with lawyers they have on staff, or through a partnership with a legal services organization such as the Legal Aid Society.
- Almost half of our members also offer citizenship assistance. These services help immigrants apply for citizenship, take civics classes to prepare for the citizenship exam, and prepare for the citizenship interview.

The current work of UNH members in immigrant communities is similar to what they offered at the turn of the last century. Back then, UNH members also provided English classes, registered new voters, and were active in advocating for social reforms such as better housing conditions and ending the practice of child labor. While today's immigrants are more diverse and from more parts of the world than over a century ago, UNH and its members continue to help immigrants integrate through the same strategies of offering human services and opportunities to participate in American democracy. And as the population of their communities have changed, so too have the programs offered, and the staff of our agencies.

Staff and participant changes

The staff that work at our agencies, and the community members that benefit from their programs, reflect the diversity that is New York City. Our 2007 member survey compiled a lot of useful information about our members and their programs. Some interesting data that I'd like to share include:

- Over forty languages are spoken by the staff of UNH member agencies.
- Over seventy languages are spoken by program participants at UNH agencies.
- Over 14,500 New Yorkers take adult literacy classes (doesn't include ESOL) through UNH's members.
- Over 13,600 New Yorkers obtain immigrant services such as ESOL, immigration legal services, and citizenship services through UNH's members.

Adjusting program delivery

A hallmark of our agencies is their ability to adapt to new populations that move into a neighborhood. It is an ongoing process. For example, one of our members in the Lower East Side, developed a program for the increased numbers of Asian seniors that now live in the neighborhood. Their senior program historically, mostly served Puerto Rican and other Latino seniors. Now, the Asian and Latino seniors get along and share friendships, food, and culture with each other. Another member in East Harlem has become one of the main providers of basic education in the native language (BENL) instruction. BENL helps one become literate in their native language, thereby speeding their ability to actually learn English. Finally, one Queens UNH member is exploring the idea of starting a community credit union, to offer better financial services to immigrants who are seeking affordable financial products and still learning how to navigate the world of credit, savings, and investment in the U.S.

Continued demand for immigrant services

As our City's immigrant community continues to grow, the demand for the services that help immigrants integrate into society continues to increase. In particular, immigrant New Yorkers want to learn English, become U.S. citizens, and need the legal services to support their efforts at applying for citizenship.

The High Demand for ESOL Classes

Indeed, improving one's English skills is a key strategy for immigrants to better integrate into life in New York City and the U.S., making the importance of ESOL programs very clear. When immigrant New Yorkers speak better English they can obtain jobs with better pay, better benefits, and a career ladder; increase participation in our democracy by being equipped to contribute to civic and community life. ESOL classes also help recent immigrants live more independent and confident lives. For example, with better English skills one may feel more comfortable on public transportation; interacting more closely with their children's teachers; running errands within one's neighborhood.

ESOL programs are also vital to workforce development and economic development efforts¹. Immigrant New Yorkers with good literacy skills can better communicate with employers, co-workers, and customers. They are more employable, and provide a labor pool to fill jobs in the growing sectors of our economy – retail, customer service, healthcare, construction, and small business. Immigrants that attend ESOL classes at multi-service community based organizations (CBOs) like UNH members, may also utilize childcare, citizenship programs, immigration legal services, afterschool programs, and senior programs. It's also possible that immigrants may come for these human services first, and then learn that they can also take an ESOL class. Either way, ESOL classes are often leveraged with other human services to meet the needs of the student, and help further their socioeconomic opportunities.

A review of 2000 and 2005 U.S. Census data explains why the demand for ESOL classes is so high -- about a quarter of New York City's adults – about 1.23 million – have inadequate English skills². However the resources to fund ESOL classes have not kept pace with demand and meet less than 5 percent of the need. Only 62,467 students are enrolled in government funded

¹ In November 2006, The Center for an Urban Future and Schuyler Center for Analysis and Advocacy released a report entitled "Lost in Translation," that details the important relationship between improved English skills amongst immigrants and a more prepared workforce for New York State in the decades to come.

² Center for an Urban Future and Schuyler Center for Analysis and Advocacy. "Lost in Translation," p.4. Inadequate English skills are defined as adults ages 18-64 that speak English less than very well.

literacy programs, with about two-thirds in ESOL programs and the remaining 1/3 in adult basic education, and GED programs.³

Citizenship and Legal Services

Immigrants continue to face challenges to attaining U.S. citizenship, such as the introduction of a redesigned citizenship exam in 2008 and increased application fees that have already been enacted. Fueled by these changes and rumors of changing federal immigration law, immigrants have been applying for citizenship with a renewed urgency. Naturalization applications in New York State have gone up 77% from 86,173 in FY2006 to 112,482 in FY2007. In New York City, naturalization applications filed through programs that depend on funding from the Department of Youth and Community Development have gone up 65%, from almost four thousand in FY2006 to over six thousand in FY2007. The redesigned naturalization exam will also make English instruction with a civics component and test preparation even more crucial in helping one pass the exam.

Applying for citizenship also requires legal assistance and guidance in completing the application forms, preparing for the naturalization interview, and the chance that legal representatives may accompany applicants to the naturalization interviews. Moreover, as citizenship application fees have doubled, more naturalization applicants are seeking fee waivers, which require additional legal assistance to complete.

Funding for Immigrant Services

When we talk about New York City being a welcoming place for immigrants, settlement houses and other community-based organizations are the front doors that they walk through to make themselves feel at home. Through the programs of our members, immigrants can improve their lives. Since CBOs are key institutions in delivering these services in many immigrant neighborhoods throughout the City, adequate public funding for community-based immigrant services must be a priority.

For the FY 2009 budget, we urge the City Council and the Mayor to work together to restore vital funding for English classes for recent immigrants, legal services for immigrants, and adult literacy classes, as follows:

- \$11.25 million for the Immigrant Opportunities Initiative (IOI), which supports CBOs to deliver ESOL classes, immigration legal services, and immigrant worker legal services.
- \$1.5 million for the City Council Adult Literacy Services Initiative.

We look forward to working with you to restore this funding, and ensure that immigrant New Yorkers continue to have immigrant services that help them lead productive lives. Thank you.

UNH Members: CAMBA-Center for Family Life in Sunset Park - Chinese American Planning Council - Citizens Advice Bureau - Claremont Neighborhood Centers - Cypress Hills Local Development Corporation - East Side House Settlement - Educational Alliance - Goddard Riverside Community Center - Grand Street Settlement - Greenwich House - Hamilton-Madison House - Hartley House - Henry Street Settlement - Hudson Guild - Jacob A. Riis Neighborhood Settlement House - Kingsbridge Heights Community Center - Lenox Hill Neighborhood House - Lincoln Square Neighborhood Center - Mosholu Montefiore Community Center - Queens Community House - Riverdale Neighborhood House - SCAN New York - School Settlement Association - Shorefront YM-WHA of Brighton-Manhattan Beach, Inc - Southeast Bronx Neighborhood Centers - St. Matthew's and St. Timothy's Neighborhood Center - St. Nicholas Neighborhood Preservation Corporation - Stanley M. Isaacs Neighborhood Center - Sunnyside Community Services - Third Street Music School Settlement - Union Settlement Association - United Community Centers - University Settlement Society

³ Literacy Assistance Center. This includes funding administered by the NYS Dept. of Education (SED) -- WIA Title II, EPE, WEP, and ALE. **In 2006, SED administered over \$54 million of this funding to NYC.** Enrollment figures for ESOL and adult basic education programs supported by City tax levy dollars and the Community Services Block Grant are not included.