



70 West 36th Street, 5th Floor, New York, NY 10018-8007
Phone: (212) 967-0322 Fax: (212) 967-0792 www.unhny.org

**Testimony presented by Anthony Ng
Senior Legislative Advocate, United Neighborhood Houses**

**Before the Immigration Committee of the New York City Council
Kendall Stewart, Chair**

Oversight Hearing – “The Demand for ESOL Programs Among Immigrant Adults in NYC.”

May 4, 2007

Good morning. My name is Anthony Ng, and I am the Senior Legislative Advocate at United Neighborhood Houses of New York, Inc. (UNH). UNH, founded in 1919, is the nonprofit membership organization for 35 settlement houses and community centers in New York City. Our member agencies comprise one of the largest human service systems in New York City and the largest group of settlements in the nation. 8,000 employees operate programs and activities in over 300 locations, reaching 500,000 New Yorkers each year. Services provided by our settlement houses include: early childhood education, after-school programs, teen centers, English for Speakers of Other Languages (ESOL) classes, immigration legal services, GED classes, job training, tutoring, recreation, meals and supportive services for the elderly, mental health counseling, drug prevention, and art, music and drama programs.

Both immigrants and non-immigrants alike utilize the human services delivered by UNH members. To reach immigrants with these services, they are delivered in a linguistically and culturally appropriate manner. 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, which collectively, have high Latino, Caribbean, West African, East Asian, South Asian, and Russian populations. UNH’s current work in immigrant communities builds on its rich history of serving immigrants since the turn of the last century. Many of our member agencies in the Lower East Side served the first waves of Eastern European newcomers, and helped them to flourish socially, economically and culturally in this City.

Indeed, a key strategy that limited English proficient immigrants utilize to better integrate into life in New York City and the U.S. is to improve their English skills, thereby 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, one may feel more comfortable traveling around the City on public transportation; interacting more closely with their children’s teachers; running errands within one’s neighborhood.

ESOL programs also assist the City's 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 the City's economy – retail, customer service, healthcare, construction, and small business. In addition, 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 other 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.

Currently, nearly 2/3 of UNH members offer ESOL and or other adult literacy classes that help immigrants become more literate in English. Several of our members also help immigrants become more literate in their native language first, which speeds their ability to improve their English as well. UNH members report that demand for ESOL classes remains high, and has been high for many years now. One UNH member in Queens serves about 2,700 people annually, at five different English proficiency levels, yet they are forced to turn away almost 1,000 people each year due to inadequate funding for additional ESOL classes. It is also common to hear about ESOL programs:

- Holding lotteries to accept students.
- Discontinue using waiting lists because the number of students that desire a class is so great.
- Refrain from doing outreach when a new cycle of classes begins. Programs don't want to be overwhelmed with students who can't get into classes that quickly fill up.

A review of 2000 and 2005 U.S. Census data explains why UNH members and other ESOL providers in NYC face such high demand for their programs -- 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 literacy programs, with about two-thirds in ESOL programs and the remaining 1/3 in adult basic education, and GED programs.³

In order to meet the high demand for ESOL classes in New York City, we need a greater investment in ESOL and adult literacy programs. The two current funding streams within the City budget that support ESOL programs at CBOs are the Immigrant Opportunities Initiative (IOI) and the NYC Adult Literacy Initiative (NYCALI).

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.

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.

Immigrant Opportunities Initiative (IOI)

We thank the City Council for your strong support on the Immigrant Opportunities Initiative (IOI) these past few years. IOI has been vital funding to allow community based organizations to offer ESOL classes and civics classes. The flexible nature of IOI funding also allows groups to serve those with the lowest English proficiency. We support the restoration of IOI at \$9.25 million in the FY2008 budget, and urge that groups are notified of their awards shortly after the City budget is adopted. For the past two years, groups were not notified of their awards until mid-November⁴. Once awards were made, groups would still have to wait months to actually draw down their funds, since they had to negotiate and sign contracts with DYCD, and then have them registered with the Comptroller's office. This time consuming process can be expedited with earlier decisions on who gets funded. We also understand that Chairman Stewart is interested in sponsoring a budget initiative to increase overall IOI funding. We would be supportive of this, but would urge that the minimum contract amounts are then increased to \$50,000. A higher per award amount helps to build the capacity of organizations to provide ESOL classes through IOI. In the long term, we urge the City Council to work with the Mayor to baseline IOI funding.

NYC Adult Literacy Initiative (NYCALI)

For nearly two decades, NYCALI has supported adult literacy programs in NYC. The Department of Youth & Community Development (DYCD) has historically administered the portion of NYCALI that supports programs at CBOs. Last June, DYCD lost crucial funding for NYCALI when its joint application with CBOs for adult literacy funds from the NYS Education Department (SED) was denied. Thirty-six (36) CBO programs funded through NYCALI were at risk of reducing services or closing entirely by June 30. However, some of these programs had also applied for funding directly with SED, and were successful. Upon analyzing the funding situation the NYCALI providers were actually in, the City identified \$3.6 million to continue supporting 18 of the 36 providers. This was one year funding for FY2007, and DYCD committed to releasing a new RFP to ensure that services would continue once these contracts expired. Therefore, we were pleased to see the Mayor's Executive budget include \$3.8 million for adult literacy programs in FY2008, which increases to \$5.3 million in FY2009. These funds will be added to current funding to support a \$7.4 million RFP for adult literacy programs. We understand that DYCD will shortly release this RFP to support programs offering instruction in ESOL, adult basic education, and basic education in the native language (BENL).

At this time, we also want to express our support for Councilmember Gonzalez's budget initiative to add \$4 million dollars to DYCD's RFP, and urge the members of the Immigration Committee to sign on to her initiative. We also urge you to speak with your colleagues to have them sign on to this initiative as well. Additional funding for DYCD's adult literacy RFP will allow CBOs to reach greater numbers of immigrants looking to improve their English.

⁴ In the FY2006 budget, repeat IOI funded groups were notified in November 2005. Groups receiving IOI money for the first time were not identified until January/February of 2006.

Additional ESOL programs

In addition to our support of IOI and NYCALI, we also work with the Coalition for Adult Literacy to urge for increased funding for all ESOL programs, including those operated by CUNY and the public libraries. It is important that ESOL and other literacy programs are offered in a variety of settings to reach immigrant New Yorkers seeking to improve their English skills.

Once again, we thank the City Council for your great interest and support of ESOL programs. We look forward to working with you to increase the resources needed for these vital programs for the future of New York.

Thank you.

United Neighborhood Houses (UNH) is the membership organization of New York City settlement houses and community centers. Founded in 1919, UNH's membership comprises one of the largest human service systems in New York City, with 35 agencies working at more than 300 sites to provide high quality services and activities to more than half million New Yorkers each year. For over 85 years, UNH has worked with its members to strengthen families and improve neighborhoods throughout the City. UNH supports the work of its members through advocacy and public policy research and analysis, technical assistance and funding and by promoting program replication and collaboration among its members.

UNH Members: Boys & Girls Harbor-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 - Queens Community House (formerly the Forest Hills Community House) - 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 - 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