



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 Youth Services Committee of the New York City Council
Lew Fidler, Chair**

Oversight Hearing – “Adult Literacy Programs in New York City.”

May 29, 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.

The Demand for Adult Literacy Programs

The demand for adult literacy (also referred to as adult education) programs in NYC continues to be significant. While about a quarter of New York City’s adults – about 1.23 million – have inadequate English skills,¹ only 62,467 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.² Based on these figures, only about 5 percent of the need is being met. Within adult literacy programs, the demand for ESOL classes is particularly high. For example, 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 that ESOL programs are forced to:

- Hold lotteries to accept students.
- Discontinue waiting lists because the number of students that want to enroll is too great.
- Refrain from publicizing 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.

¹ Center for an Urban Future and Schuyler Center for Analysis and Advocacy. “Lost In Translation,” p.4. Inadequate English skills is defined as adults ages 18-64 that speak English less than very well.

² 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 CSBG are not included.

Literacy Classes Offer Positive Benefits

New Yorkers with improved literacy skills can obtain a job with better pay, better benefits, and a career ladder; advance their education by obtaining a GED and moving to post-secondary education; contribute to civic and community life; and live a more independent and confident life. Literacy programs also assist the City's workforce development and economic development efforts³. New Yorkers with strong 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 New York City, adult literacy programs are provided by four main sectors: community-based organizations (CBOs), libraries, CUNY, and the Department of Education (DOE), and include various types of instruction:

- *English for Speakers of other Languages (ESOL)* – Instruction in the English language for individuals whose primary language(s) is not English, and who have limited proficiency in listening, reading, writing, or speaking English. Immigrants are the majority of ESOL students.
- *Adult Basic Education (ABE)* – Instruction in reading, writing, and mathematics. Most students are native-born, but also include higher-level ESOL students. ABE students are at various levels of literacy.
- *General Educational Development (GED)* – Instruction and preparation to take and pass the GED exam. The GED is offered in Spanish in addition to English.
- *Basic Education in the Native Language (BENL)* – Instruction designed to improve the literacy levels of individuals in their native language. When an immigrant is more literate in their native language, improvements in English literacy occur more quickly. BENL students can also choose to take a separate ESOL class at the same time, yet BENL instruction is strictly in the native language.
- *Family Literacy* – Family literacy programs are designed to address the educational and individual needs of parents and their school-aged children through integrated activities such as ABE, ESOL, children's education, parent and child interactions, and parent knowledge of child development and parenting strategies. Examples of activities include parents and children reading and writing together, and solving learning games.

Adult Literacy Programs Operated by CBOs

UNH members are proud to be part of the City's adult literacy system. About two-thirds (2/3) of UNH's members operate adult literacy programs, largely offering ESOL instruction, but also including the other types of instruction discussed above. Literacy students that attend classes at multi-service CBOs like UNH settlement houses and community centers may also utilize childcare, citizenship programs, immigration legal services, afterschool programs, and senior

³ 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.

programs. It's also possible that students may come for other services first and then learn that they can also take a literacy class. Either way, literacy classes are often leveraged with other human services to meet the needs of the student and their family, thereby increasing student retention and the likelihood of student achievement. Comprehensive literacy programs, such as those run by our member agencies, are valuable because they allow students' instructional and human service needs to be met simultaneously and include elements such as:

- Morning, afternoon, or evening classes to accommodate the working schedules and lives of the students.
- Caseworkers, counselors, and supportive services to address issues that can pose as a barrier to attending class and learning. These issues can be ongoing ones or be a recent crisis. Examples could include: the need to have emergency repairs made to one's apartment; filing an application for U.S. citizenship; suddenly becoming unemployed; the desire to look for a better paying job; enrolling for public benefits such as food stamps.

Comprehensive literacy programs need to be appropriately funded. We urge DYCD to increase instructional hour rates to adequately support the instruction and human services that students need. In addition, CBO adult literacy programs are best equipped to reach the lowest level learners, because they are community based and can meet students where they are located. It is important that adult literacy programs exist in a diversity of settings and reach the various New Yorkers that need them. Therefore multi-service community based organizations require sustained investment to continue their significant role alongside CUNY, DOE, and the three public library systems in providing adult literacy programs and services.

Multi-service CBO adult literacy programs are also crucial for reaching the disconnected youth population. While we urge that specific young adult literacy programs are developed and expanded to assist disconnected youth, we recognize that in the meantime, it is the adult literacy system that can offer the GED and adult basic education classes they need. Well-funded and comprehensive adult literacy programs can reach these disconnected youth until we make the needed investments to develop and expand the programs that these young adults actually require.

Financing Adult Literacy Programs

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

Immigrant Opportunities Initiative (IOI)

We thank the City Council for your strong support for the Immigrant Opportunities Initiative (IOI) these past few years. IOI has provided 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 had 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. We urge that this time consuming process is expedited this year through earlier decisions on who gets funded.

We also understand that Councilmember Stewart, Chair of the Immigration Committee has sponsored a budget initiative to enhance IOI by \$8.75 million, and bring the total amount up to \$18 million. We support the increase in IOI funding, and urge that minimum contract amounts are increased to \$50,000. A higher contract amount helps 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, 2006. 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. We expect this to be added to current funding for an upcoming RFP for adult literacy programs, which should 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 **strong support** for Councilmember Gonzalez's budget initiative to add \$4 million dollars to DYCD's RFP, and urge that the members of the Youth Services Committee support this initiative throughout the budget negotiations during these upcoming few weeks. Additional funding for DYCD's adult literacy RFP will allow approximately 4,000 additional New Yorkers to attend adult literacy classes.

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

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.

Mayor's Office of Adult Education

We are pleased that the Mayor's Office of Adult Education continues to support New York City's adult literacy system. As this Office builds its capacity and develops its vision, we urge the City Council to provide oversight on the Mayor's plans. The students, teachers, advocates, and providers of adult literacy programs need the City Council's input to monitor the work of this Office. Towards that end, we would like to suggest options that the City Council can use to monitor the Mayor's Office of Adult Education, and the City agencies involved with literacy programs:

- a) Establish an Adult Education Subcommittee within the larger Education Committee to focus on adult literacy programs.
- b) Coordinate the Youth Services Committee, the Libraries Subcommittee, the Higher Education Committee, and the Education Committee to work closely on oversight activities and hold joint hearings on the state of adult literacy programs in New York City.
- c) Establish a City Council Taskforce on Adult Education – We understand that the Mayor's Office of Adult Education plans to convene the adult literacy field this summer and have working groups to devise a new plan for NYC's adult education system. A City Council Taskforce on Adult Education should participate in these working groups, and or create its own recommendations.

Indeed, the Youth Services Committee played a very important oversight role last November when it questioned why the DYCD's Beacon Community Centers concept paper included literacy programs in Beacons.

Once again, we thank the City Council for your great interest and support of literacy programs and encourage your continued oversight on adult literacy programs. We look forward to working with you to increase the resources for these vital programs that will sustain New York's future.

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