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

Oversight Hearing on the State of Immigrant Services in NYC

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Good afternoon Honorable Chair Stewart, and members of the Committee. My name is Anthony Ng, and I am the 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.

UNH's settlement houses have a rich history of serving immigrants, dating back to the turn of the last century. Many of our member agencies in the Lower East Side served the first waves of Eastern European immigrants, and helped them to flourish socially, economically and culturally in this City.

About a century later, many of the residents that continue to access the services of our member agencies are immigrants and their families. Several of our agencies are located in, or have sites in some of the City's major immigrant communities such as Jackson Heights, Sunset Park, Flatbush, East Harlem, Tremont, Flushing, and Chinatown, which collectively, have high Asian, Latino, West African, and Black Caribbean populations. UNH's member agencies continue their historic role of helping immigrants enter the City's economic and social mainstream

It is important to consider, that when we talk about NYC being a welcoming place for immigrants, settlement houses and other community-based organizations are the front door for these families. CBOs in immigrant communities often have culturally and linguistically proficient staff to deliver these services. Immigrants that attend ESOL classes at settlement houses, also utilize childcare, citizenship programs, immigration legal services, afterschool programs, and senior programs. 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.

The release of last week's Newest New Yorkers report from the Department of City Planning underscores with hard demographic data, what many of us working with immigrants and their families know – that immigrants are an integral part of many NYC neighborhoods, have contributed to the growth of NYC's population, maintained its housing stock, and are nearly half of the City's labor force.

As immigrant New Yorkers continue to carve out a life for themselves, the availability of ESOL classes and immigration legal services are essential for them to realize social and economic opportunities.

ESOL classes

According to a 2001 New York Immigration Coalition report entitled, "Eager for English: How and Why New York's Shortage of English Classes for Immigrants Should Be Addressed," over 1 million New Yorkers who don't speak, read, or write English well, **want to learn English**. However, there were only 50,000 ESOL classroom seats available – or only enough to meet 5% of the need. To illustrate the immense need for ESOL programs, one of our settlement houses in Queens serves about 3,000 people annually, at five different English proficiency levels and they are forced to turn away thousands of other people because they don't have enough classes. This settlement house also doesn't do any outreach for its programs.

Immigration Legal Services

Immigrants need legal services to navigate this country's complex immigration system. In doing so, they need to be wary of lawyers who may charge them exorbitant fees, or provide inaccurate information. Additionally, the backlog of citizenship applications means that good counsel is needed to monitor the status of one's application. Free or low-cost legal services are important for these newcomers.

In order to provide services that immigrant New Yorkers need to thrive, we recommend the following:

- Restore and increase funding to the Immigrant Opportunities Initiative to \$10 million. This initiative provided \$2.8 million in FY2005 to fund the delivery of ESOL classes, immigration legal services, and immigrant worker legal services at the community level. Mayor Bloomberg's recently released Preliminary Executive budget for FY2006 did not include funding for this initiative.
- Create an interagency taskforce that reviews how key immigrant services are delivered by City agencies, and which can be involved in coordinating the delivery of these services.

We look forward to working with the City Council to implement these recommendations.

Thank you.