



70 West 36th Street, Fifth Floor, New York, NY 10018
tel: 212-967-0322 fax: 212-967-0792

Testimony before the Committee on General Welfare of the New York City Council

Bill de Blasio, Chair

September 18, 2003

Good afternoon Chairman de Blasio, and members of the Committee, my name is Anthony Ng and I am the Legislative Advocate at United Neighborhood Houses (UNH). As you may know, UNH is the federation of 36 settlement houses benefiting 500,000 participants—from infants to adults to senior citizens to immigrants—through educational programs, employment assistance, human services, ESL, and cultural activities at 350 sites throughout New York City. Several of our settlements are located in communities with large immigrant populations such as the Lower East Side, Washington Heights, Highbridge, Sunnyside, and Astoria. Settlement houses have a historic commitment to immigrants through understanding and serving their needs. Thank you for giving me the opportunity to speak about how Intro. 38 would make a huge difference in the lives of the limited English proficient (LEP) immigrants that live and work in our communities.

Indeed, our settlements that assist families in accessing public benefits understand how language barriers prevent LEP speakers from successfully accessing their benefits. One such settlement is University Settlement in the Lower East Side. Through their Project Home program, they provide case management assistance to families that interact with City agencies to access services and benefits. Last year, University Settlement assisted nearly 600 families through Project Home, of which at least 60% were LEP speakers. Of these LEP families, 75% (approximately 270 families) were accessing some form of public benefits administered by HRA. University Settlement caseworkers mentioned that the following issues arise because of the lack of language assistance at HRA and other City agencies:

- Clients have waited several days for a translator
- LEP clients are expected to find their own translators
- Even when translators are provided, their availability is inconsistent; may arrive late; and are rarely, if ever trained in the necessary phrases to explain the client's rights and procedures for applying for benefits. As a result, key information is miscommunicated or simply lost in translation.
- Caseworkers need to accompany clients to agency offices to provide translation.

The experience of one LEP client served by University Settlement also illustrates the discrimination that LEP speakers face due to lack of adequate translation services at a City agency. An appointment for the LEP client was arranged at an HRA Job Center to receive a fair hearing to access Medicaid and food stamps. Prior to the hearing, the client was cautioned by her caseworker not to sign any documents she did not understand, as clients have been asked to sign documents that would cancel their hearing. At the hearing, the client was told that she

had missed her medical assessment appointment, which she had actually kept. When she asked for proof of her attendance at the hearing, she was refused, and instead instructed to sign a document in English. Since she did not understand the document, she requested a translator. The translator refused to translate the document, and told the client that if she did not sign the document, her hearing would be cancelled, and benefits denied. The translator also told the client that she had lived in the country long enough to have learned English. The document in question turned out to be one saying that she had attended the mandated hearing but had missed her medical assessment appointment. So while it did not cancel her hearing, it stated that she missed her medical appointment, which was untrue. While her University Settlement caseworker worked to clear up the miscommunication regarding the medical appointment, proper language assistance would have eliminated the misunderstanding that occurred, and ensured that this LEP client accessed her benefits with dignity and respect.

Lastly, the lack of translation of materials in one's native language also results in confusion and the potential loss of benefits. One of our Bronx settlement houses, the Citizen's Advice Bureau (CAB), serves approximately 2,000 immigrant families and individuals in accessing public benefits. CAB was assisting a Dominican woman who only speaks Spanish, in applying for Section 8 benefits from NYCHA. Additionally, she was 6 months pregnant, a domestic violence survivor, and had extenuating health circumstances. After CAB helped her fill out the Section 8 application (it was only offered to her in English), she returned the application to the Bronx NYCHA Section 8 office, but was told to go to the Brooklyn NYCHA Section 8 office with it. This was already inappropriate as she is a Bronx resident. When she arrived in Brooklyn, she was told that no bilingual caseworker could assist her, and that her six-year-old son would have to translate. Ultimately, she returned to CAB for assistance, and was able to obtain her Section 8 benefits. However, if she had been provided with proper language assistance, she would have been in a better position to understand the application procedures, and encountered less difficulty in obtaining her Section 8 benefits.

From the work of our settlements in assisting LEP immigrants obtain services and benefits, it is clear that translation and interpretation services is important if city agencies are to adequately provide services to those legally entitled to receive them. Passing Intro 38 would remove the language barriers that LEP speakers who are eligible for these benefits face, when accessing them. It would also be a strong first step in considering how to extend language assistance to LEP speakers who access services offered by City agencies in addition to HRA. We appreciate the support that has already been garnered for Intro 38, and now urge you to pass this act into law, as it would greatly improve the lives of immigrant LEP speakers throughout the City, and afford them the dignity and respect they deserve in accessing benefits and services.

Thank you.