



New York City Council – Immigration Committee – Municipal ID Hearing

Testimony from the New York Immigration Coalition
Delivered by Steven Choi, Executive Director

April 30th, 2014

Good Morning. My name is Steve Choi and I am the executive director of the New York Immigration Coalition, an umbrella policy and advocacy organization that works statewide with nearly 200 immigrant-serving member organizations. Thank you to the members of the City Council and its Immigration Committee, chaired by Carlos Menchaca, for convening this important hearing on the proposed Municipal ID legislation, and for working hard to make sure such an ID would be a truly universal ID for all New Yorkers.

Today I am here to represent and speak on behalf of New York City's vibrant and diverse immigrant communities – both the estimated 500,000 undocumented residents of New York City, as well as the thousands of additional immigrants, even those with legal immigration status, who continue to face barriers to accessing a government-issued form of identification. We say unequivocally that the Municipal ID envisioned by this legislation - an ID available to all New Yorkers, regardless of status - would go a long way toward breaking down the stigmatizing barriers that prohibit immigrants from fully participating in the civic, cultural, and economic life of this City.

My testimony is informed by the NYIC's experiences with two citywide, Council-funded initiatives to engage and educate immigrant New Yorkers: the NYIC "Key to the City" consular ID initiative, and the DYCD Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals (or DACA) initiative, which the NYIC coordinates. It is further informed by our work as a Coalition to convene various collaboratives of diverse immigrant groups that delve deep into critical areas of need in immigrant communities such as health access, civic engagement, and education. The crushing consequences of a lack of proper identification are a common theme in the work of these collaboratives. Time after time, we hear stories of individuals who do not have a document to prove identity at hospitals, of parents who cannot enter their child's school, of hardworking New Yorkers who cannot open bank accounts to protect their earnings and become the victims of crime.

But we've also seen how strong policy can make strides in breaking down these barriers. When the NYIC's Education Collaborative successfully advocated for the NYPD and the DOE to allow school safety agents to accept foreign passports and Consular ID cards, many undocumented parents received a new level of access to the everyday lives and participated deeply in the education of their children. From this policy change and the generous support of the City Council, the NYIC was able to begin the "Key to the City" consular ID initiative to work with the consulates of Mexico, Guatemala, Ecuador, El Salvador, the Dominican Republic, and Peru to provide same-day mobile services for immigrants to obtain passports and consular IDs at schools in immigrant neighborhoods across all five boroughs. The fact that over 19,000 New Yorkers have attended these events to receive services, and nearly 13,000 have stood in line for hours to receive these critical identity documents speaks to the tremendous need in our communities. This past Sunday it was my pleasure to offer a tour of our latest event in Staten Island to the Speaker of City Council, Melissa Mark-Viverito, and Councilmember Debi Rose, who saw in person what a transformative impact such documents can have for these New Yorkers. These consular ID events have not only shown the incredible need in immigrant

communities, but alongside the DYCD DACA Initiative also provide a model structure for engaging multiple partners - community organizations, foreign consulates, elected officials, and schools in successfully reaching hard-to-reach and diverse communities. I cannot stress enough the importance of developing a similar model for Muni ID outreach to encourage the most participation possible and lend the initiative the trust it will need in immigrant communities.

I also want to emphasize today that perhaps the most important part for immigrant communities, is the fact that the best ID for immigrants will be an ID widely adopted by non-immigrants. The Muni ID cannot and should not be a proxy for undocumented status – we must not allow it to become a scarlet letter that only furthers the vulnerability of undocumented immigrants. It should instead be a badge of civic pride that unites all residents of this great city, and it will only be so if it is linked to a robust package of partnerships and tie-ins to discounts, privileges, and other benefits that will appeal to everyone – citizens, students, legal residents and undocumented immigrants alike. All municipal agencies and authorities should accept the card – particularly the NYPD – and a wide range of public and private institutions should be engaged as partners, such as banks, cultural organizations, libraries, and museums. To that end, we believe it will be critical to establish a joint taskforce of the Administration, City Council and community organizations to bring this robust package of partnerships to life.

And once our fellow NYC neighbors – immigrants and native-born alike – decide to sign up, we must ensure that the application and document verification process is as smooth, secure, and trustworthy as possible. City agencies and front-line staff must be properly informed on the uses of the card, able to troubleshoot problems, understanding of language access procedures, and sensitive to the unique needs of immigrant New Yorkers. Above all, the confidentiality of personal documents and information must be guaranteed. Our immigrant communities have been left beaten and bruised by rampant immigration enforcement, as parents, children, spouses, and friends are all left reeling after the deportation of a loved one and the fear that entire lives and dreams will be shattered in an instant. While New York City is one of the most welcoming cities in the nation for immigrants, there is still a stigma around government. The immigrant community needs to be assured that when they hand over a document to a City agency, these documents will be kept securely and safely from the prying eyes of immigration enforcement. We must acknowledge the fears of immigrant communities and work together to break them down and build back trust. Privacy must thus be maintained and legitimacy must be afforded to the program.

In conclusion, I applaud this Council and the de Blasio Administration for moving to make a New York City municipal ID a reality. In the face of federal inaction around immigration reform, it is municipal action like this that is the strongest solution. It supports our hard-working immigrants that offer so much to our City, while helping all New Yorkers by making our City safer and our communities more integrated. We at the Coalition look forward to working closely with the Administration and the City Council to do everything we can to make municipal IDs a reality, and I know I cannot wait to get my own New York City Muni ID! Thank you.