



# HARDSHIP IN MANY LANGUAGES

## Immigrant Families and Children in NYC

JANUARY 2004

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upwardly mobile immigrant. Even as immigration has reshaped the city's population and redefined its character, the modern U.S. economy has left a high percentage of foreign-born New Yorkers to work in the most poorly paid jobs. Poverty is a long-term reality for very many working immigrants and their children.

Recent academic and policy research has begun to define disparities between immigrants and native-born New Yorkers:

- Immigrants in New York City are nearly three times as likely to worry about food or be hungry than the overall population<sup>1</sup>, and one-third of children with immigrant parents live in families that have difficulty affording food.<sup>2</sup>
- Recent immigrants tend to be very poor; their children usually live in two-parent families, and, in most cases, at least one parent is employed. Forty percent of legal permanent residents entering New York after 1996 had incomes in 1999-2000 below the federal

poverty line—a rate double that of the city as a whole.<sup>3</sup>

- Limited ability to speak English is closely linked to poverty. More than one-third of adult immigrants with limited English in New York City had incomes below the poverty line in 1999-2000.<sup>4</sup>
- By the late 1990s, two-thirds of foreign-born Latinos in the New York metropolitan area were employed in the bottom one-third of jobs (as defined by job quality and pay) and their median weekly earnings were less than half those of native born whites. On the whole, foreign-born workers make up well over half the bottom-tier labor force.<sup>5</sup>
- More than half of all immigrants in a recent survey of New York City residents said their net worth was \$0 or negative, compared to one-third of native-born residents.<sup>6</sup>
- Linguistically isolated households in New York City—in which all members 14 years old or older have difficulty speaking English—increased from 346,400 in 1990 to 440,200 in 2000. These families comprise about 15 percent of all city households.<sup>7</sup>

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This paper seeks to cast light on the intersection of poverty and English language ability among immigrants in New York City, and to energize discussion about social policies designed to assist low-income working people at a time

policy and welfare in the 1990s emphasized wages, earned income tax credits, child care subsidies and other government benefits as the primary route for families to get out of poverty. Yet as the articles that follow make clear, low-

### Poverty Rate Among Immigrant Families in New York City, 1999-2000

(Families with annual incomes below the federal poverty line)

All NYC families **20%**

All NYC immigrant families **30%**

Source: Community Service Society tabulations from the U.S. Bureau of the Census Current Population Survey (all families), and the Urban Institute (immigrant families)

### Poverty Among Adult Immigrants in New York City, by English Ability, 1999-2000

English proficient **14%**

Speak English “not well” **39%**

Speak English “not at all” **40%**

Source: Urban Institute

when nearly two-fifths of the city’s population was born outside the United States. We highlight the academic research findings of the last two years regarding immigrant families and poverty, and examine aspects of the social support sector—food stamps, child care, neighborhood family services and other programs—and their difficult, often slow adaptation to serving newcomer families.

Each year of the 1990s, more than 110,000 immigrants settled in New York City. These newcomers have transformed entire neighborhoods and generated economic energy, not unlike their predecessors a century earlier. New York is more diverse now than ever before. The city’s population is also much younger than it has been in many decades, primarily because immigrants tend to be either of child-bearing age or children themselves. Today, just over half of the city’s children under age 18 live in households headed by an immigrant.<sup>8</sup>

Immigrant families, although frequently poor, are mostly working families. The philosophy underlying the transformation of U.S. social

income immigrants are not gaining full access to the safety net that New York City, the state and the nation established during the last decade to promote and support work.

### Poverty Among Adult Immigrants in New York City, by Country of Birth

(Percent of adult population with annual incomes below the federal poverty line)

Mexico **60 percent**

Ukraine **53 percent**

Dominican Republic **37 percent**

China **32 percent**

Russia **29 percent**

Jamaica **23 percent**

Ecuador **21 percent**

Columbia **17 percent**

Source: Urban Institute

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Nationwide, nearly 40 percent of immigrant children living in poverty have parents who work full-time, as compared to just 23 percent of poor children of native-born parents.<sup>9</sup> This simple, clear distinction reveals the need for a more flexible approach to antipoverty programs that accommodates the work schedules as well as the language and cultural differences of immigrant families and children.

Government and civic institutions in New York are only just beginning to adapt to these new realities. The puzzle these data describe requires greater attention than most city leaders and policymakers have yet offered. The recent passage into law of The Equal Access to Human Services Act (City Council Intro. 38A) is a significant, much awaited step forward, but the real change will have to happen in the programs on the ground—in neighborhoods, community organizations and government offices citywide.❖

<sup>1</sup> Michael Fix and Randolph Capps, “Immigrant Well-Being in New York and Los Angeles.” Urban Institute. August 31, 2002.  
<sup>2</sup> Randolph Capps, “Hardship Among Children of Immigrants: Findings from the 1999 National Survey of America’s Families.” Urban Institute. February 2001.  
<sup>3</sup> Michael Fix and Randolph Capps, “Immigrant Well-Being in New York and Los Angeles.” Urban Institute. August 31, 2002.  
<sup>4</sup> Ibid.  
<sup>5</sup> David Howell and Kimberly Gester, “Increasing Opportunities, Declining Pay: Immigrants in the New York Metropolitan Labor Market, 1979-98.” New York: Community Development Research Center, Milano Graduate School, New School University, Working Paper #2002-001. Available at <http://www.newschool.edu/milano/cdrc/pubs/wp/wp.2002.01.pdf>  
<sup>6</sup> Lenna Nepomnyaschy and Irwin Garfinkel, “Wealth in New York City and the Nation: Evidence from the New York Social Indicators Survey and The Survey of Income and Program Participation.” New York: Columbia University School of Social Work. September 2002, p. 14.  
<sup>7</sup> Denise Wallin, Michael Schill and Glynis Daniels, “State of New York City’s Housing and Neighborhoods 2002.” Furman Center for Real Estate and Urban Policy, New York University. December 2002, p. 260.  
<sup>8</sup> U.S. Census 2000  
<sup>9</sup> Yuval Elmelech, Katie McCaskie, Mary Clare Lennon and Hsien-Hen Lu, “Children of Immigrants: A Statistical Profile.” New York: National Center for Children in Poverty, Columbia University. September 2002.

**New York City Community Districts, 2000**

Neighborhoods with a high rate of recent immigrants and large populations with limited English ability

Community District	Total population	Foreign born	Recently immigrated, 1990-2000	Speaking English not well or not at all	Persons below 200% of poverty level
		percent of total population			
<b>Brooklyn 7</b> Sunset Park/Windsor Terrace	120,063	42.8%	21.5%	41.0%	49.9%
<b>Brooklyn 11</b> Bensonhurst/Bath Beach	172,129	50.7	27.5	40.7	39.9
<b>Brooklyn 13</b> Brighton/Coney Island	106,120	47.2	25.3	37.0	52.6
<b>Brooklyn 14</b> Flatbush/Midwood	168,806	49.8	24.1	26.5	45.8
<b>Manhattan 3</b> Chinatown/Lower East Side	164,407	40.1	17.9	37.8	52.5
<b>Manhattan 12</b> Washington Heights/Inwood	208,414	53.3	21.4	45.7	55.4
<b>Queens 1</b> Astoria	211,220	46.2	20.6	32.1	40.2
<b>Queens 2</b> Sunnyside/Woodside	109,920	60.2	28.6	43.0	38.5
<b>Queens 3</b> Jackson Heights/East Elmhurst	169,083	61.5	29.2	46.4	41.7
<b>Queens 4</b> Elmhurst/South Corona	167,005	67.8	35.2	52.4	44.9
<b>Queens 7</b> Flushing	242,952	50.3	20.4	35.7	30.9
<b>New York City</b>	<b>8,005,208</b>	<b>35.9</b>	<b>15.3</b>	<b>23.7</b>	<b>39.0</b>

Source: Population Division, NYC Dept. of City Planning analysis of U.S. Census 2000.

## FOOD STAMP FUTILITY: IMMIGRANT FAMILIES CONFRONT OBSTACLES

**M**aribel G. ran into roadblocks when she applied for food stamps last year. Unsure how to get to the government office to file an application, she became lost, arrived an hour late for her first appointment and was unable to speak with anyone. On her second attempt she arrived with time to spare, but the city worker she met didn't speak Spanish. Maribel waited for an interpreter, but he spoke with her only briefly.

"He just asked me two questions," recalls Maribel, a single mother of two. "He wanted to know if I was married and where the father of my children was. Then the meeting was over." The non-Spanish-speaking worker abruptly moved on to another client, Maribel says.

After this brief encounter, Maribel, who lives in Sunnyside, Queens, received one month's worth of food stamps. She says she knew neither how quickly the benefits would run out nor that she could apply to have them extended. In the meantime, her financial situation—already dire—worsened. With a two-year-old daughter and a six-month-old son to support, Maribel has been relying on help from her brother, who shares his apartment and meals with her. But, in September, he lost his job in a Manhattan deli, prompting a crisis that drove Maribel to seek help at Sunnyside Community Services Center, a non-profit agency. "I don't know what I'll do next," she confessed at a recent meeting at the center's offices.

Maribel's frustrating experience dealing with the Human Resources Administration (HRA) as a non-English-speaker is not unique, according to social workers. "Whenever we send Spanish-speaking clients to the food stamp centers, we see they're sitting there all day waiting to be seen by a worker because there's no Spanish speaking translator," says Joanne Hernandez, a social worker at the Spanish Speaking Elderly Council-RAICES, a Brooklyn-based nonprofit that provides classes in English as a Second Language as well as recreational activities, mental health services, and referral and benefits counseling. Some of Hernandez's clients choose to meet with HRA

workers without waiting for a translator—a move she says can be fruitless. "If the HRA [worker] is asking them for any documents, they don't understand what they have to provide," says Hernandez. "Sometimes they get frustrated and they call us from the HRA office and say I'm hungry, and they walk away."

Immigrants in New York City are nearly three times as likely to worry about food or be hungry than the overall population,<sup>10</sup> and one-third of children of immigrants live in families that have difficulty affording food,<sup>11</sup> according to recent reports published by the Urban Institute. Language difficulties compound the problem. Those who don't speak English are one-and-a-half times more likely to be food insecure than those who do, according to a federally funded survey of several thousand immigrant families in New York City. The survey also found that 57 percent of immigrants in New York City who spoke no English could not afford to buy sufficient food, and fewer than one-quarter of all non-elderly immigrant families who had difficulty buying food were receiving food stamps.<sup>12</sup>

*One-third of children of immigrants  
in New York City live in families  
that have difficulty affording food.*

As of September 2003, a half million fewer people in New York City were participating in the food stamp program than eight years ago—a drop of 36 percent, according to HRA. Some of this immense reduction in the food stamp rolls is a result of the 1996 welfare reform law, which made most recent immigrants ineligible for the program. Legislators have since restored benefits to all legal immigrant children who meet income requirements, and to legal immigrant adults who have lived in this country for at least five years.

In fact, the total number of food stamp recipients began to rise steeply during the last year, though it remains low compared to most of the 1990s. According to the New York City Coalition Against Hunger, more than 900,000 New Yorkers who would qualify for food stamps are not enrolled in the program, and many of these are immigrants.

Nationally, the average monthly food stamps benefit in federal fiscal year 2002 was about \$186 per household. The typical

family receiving food stamps has an annual household income of \$7,008, according to the federal Department of Agriculture.

In a lawsuit filed in 1999, *Ramirez vs. Giuliani*, immigrants and their advocates charged the city and state with violating federal law by failing to provide interpreters or translate important documents for people applying for food stamps. The government settled the lawsuit but many promised changes have yet to be made, according to the plaintiffs. “It’s a question of the glass being half-full or half-empty,” says Randal Jeffrey, assistant director of the New York Legal Assistance Group, one of the organizations that brought the suit. “The situation is a lot better than when we filed our lawsuit. The city has bothered to match people with workers who speak their languages. It has translated some documents. But there’s much more to be done.”

Food stamp applications are now available in five languages and the city is preparing translations in several others. But, according to Jeffrey, the city still needs to hire more than 100 bilingual staff to ensure adequate interpretation services. As part of the *Ramirez* settlement, the state Office of Temporary and Disability Assistance, which regulates the city’s welfare system, surveyed New Yorkers with limited English ability applying for food stamps. It found that more than half of respondents didn’t know translation services were available. Jeffrey and other advocates continue to meet with city officials in an effort to resolve outstanding issues related to the suit, but he says he hasn’t ruled out further legal action.

Regardless of the city’s efforts, there are several other factors that deter participation. Perhaps the most daunting is immigrants’ fear that requesting food stamps could bring about the deportation of undocumented members of their families. Though undocumented immigrants are not eligible, many families include a mix of documented and undocumented immigrants. Many immigrants also are not aware that a social security number is not required to qualify for the program.

“A lot of people get the application form but don’t send it back because it asks for your social security number,” says Joel Berg, executive director of the New York City Coalition Against Hunger.

Indeed, misunderstandings and misinformation about documentation have increased in the wake of September 11, 2001. Such was the case with Jenny, a 25-year-old mother of two who says she and her husband frequently skip dinner because they

don’t have enough food. Jenny, who also sought help at Sunnyside Community Services Center in Queens, says HRA asked for proof of employment, but her employer, worried about potential consequences, refused to provide documents. The worker in the food stamp office then asked for a letter from her bank, but when she provided it she was told it was inadequate and was denied food stamps. She was not told how to reapply, she says.



Some immigrants fear that applying for food stamps might affect their sponsors. Most documented immigrants live in New York City through family sponsorship, a process that can yield a green card and involves a determination about whether immigrants are likely to become dependent on the government. Unlike cash benefits through Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF)—which may weigh against an immigrant’s case and can in some cases require the sponsor to pay back the government—receipt of food stamps poses very little risk.

Nevertheless, many of the more than 100,000 immigrants now waiting for permanent residence status are unaware of the distinction.

<sup>10</sup> Michael Fix and Randolph Capps, “Immigrant Well-Being in New York and Los Angeles,” Urban Institute, August 31, 2002.

<sup>11</sup> Randolph Capps, “Hardship Among Children of Immigrants: Findings from the 1999 National Survey of America’s Families,” Urban Institute, February 2001.

<sup>12</sup> Randolph Capps, Leighton Ku and Michael Fix, “How Are Immigrants Faring After Welfare Reform? Preliminary Evidence from Los Angeles and New York City,” Urban Institute, March 2002.

“Understandably, there’s a lot of confusion,” says Adam Gurvitch of the New York Immigration Coalition. “The general rule of thumb is that when people talk to an immigration attorney, they’re warned off any government benefits out of fear that it will preclude them from getting their green cards.”

Regardless of immigration status, low-income New Yorkers encounter numerous hurdles in their quest for food stamps. A recent investigation by the New York City Council found that only 18 of 40 food stamp application sites listed on the HRA website actually provided applications upon request. Seven of the remaining listings contained incorrect addresses. These basic problems are compounded for people who don’t speak English.

“Understanding English is very important,” says Carlos Rodriguez, senior organizer at the Children’s Defense Fund–New York. Some immigrants don’t understand even the translated documents, says Rodriguez. “After the application is filled out, you have to convey that you need this or that document. What if that [document] doesn’t exist where you come from? How can you ask that in another language? How do you explain the need to document your income in another language?” asks Rodriguez. “It’s a huge challenge.”

The United Way Food Card Access Project has stationed outreach workers at soup kitchens, food pantries, WIC centers, supermarkets, bodegas and senior centers. Armed with laptops, they help potential food stamp recipients prepare paperwork in several languages and arrange appointments with HRA. Meanwhile, community-based organizations like the Sunnyside Community Services Center provide non-English-speaking clients with translation services and explanations of the food stamp process in their own languages, as well as encouragement.

“Maribel really needs to learn how to speak up for what she needs,” says Betsy Pabone, the social worker at Sunnyside Community Services who has been helping the young mother in her quest for food stamps. Maribel has brought her social worker every letter the food stamp office has sent. All are in English.

“I feel like we’re getting somewhere,” says Pabone, “but Maribel doesn’t speak the language and she’s really shy. And when I tried to have her tell [the HRA workers] that she really needed the stamps, she got asked questions in English and she didn’t know how to answer. So she just went back home.”❖

## LANGUAGE ACCESS IS NOW THE LAW

On December 22, 2003, Mayor Michael Bloomberg signed into law legislation that requires the city’s welfare agency and its contractors to provide extensive language assistance to New Yorkers who have limited English ability. Although the law doesn’t take full effect for five years, its supporters say its passage is a landmark on the road toward fair access to government services for immigrants.

The mayor had expressed strong opposition to the measure just weeks before, initiating a period of intense negotiations between his administration, Council members and immigrant advocates, who had pushed for such a law for more than three years.

“Initially the administration was slow in responding, but in the end, we were all on the same side,” says Jose Davila, public benefits and language policy coordinator at the New York Immigration Coalition. “If implemented, it’ll improve the services in Medicaid and food stamp offices. Folks will have a significant uptick in services.”

Under the new law, The Equal Access to Human Services Act (Intro. 38A), city welfare offices, job centers and government offices accepting applications for Medicaid, food stamps and child care subsidies will be required to provide translation services to clients and applicants speaking little or no English. The law also applies to the private and nonprofit organizations that contract with the Human Resources Administration (HRA), the city’s welfare agency, to provide welfare-to-work programs and other services.

By 2008, HRA and its contractors will be required to provide translation and ensure that speakers of the city’s six most common foreign languages—Spanish, Chinese, Haitian Creole, Arabic, Korean and Russian—are served as quickly as English speakers in the everyday affairs of the agencies’ offices. Administration officials say the city intends to have computer software that will provide instant translation in scores of languages, as well as benefits applications that can be processed electronically.

The law also requires several city agencies—including HRA, the Department of Health and Mental Hygiene, the Administration for Children’s Services and the Department of Homeless Services—to track how many of the New Yorkers they serve need language assistance.

Elaine H. Witty, executive director of HRA’s Office of Refugee and Immigrant Affairs, says the administration’s early resistance to the legislation was “opposition to the bill as written, but not opposition to the idea.” Both parties made significant compromises before settling on language that met advocates’ calls for improved services for people who don’t speak English while recognizing the administration’s concerns about the potentially daunting expense.

Intro. 38A, co-sponsored by Council members John Liu and Gail Brewer, initially included even broader mandates. Draft versions of the legislation covered more than 20 languages and would have required the Department of Health, along with the Human Resources Administration, to provide timely interpretation services to anyone using its programs. The new law requires the Department of Health to only keep records of the need, but not to provide additional services.



“We didn’t feel that the initial bill represented the best means of improving services to the clients and we felt there was an expense element to it,” says HRA’s Witty. The administration had argued that employing full-time interpreters for more than

20 languages would have cost taxpayers \$30 million per year. Council members contend the law in its final form will cost about \$5 million per year by the time it is fully in place. “The bill as it was initially written did not permit people to bring spouses or any family to a center with them and that was very important to us to permit that as one of the ways as serving the public,” adds Witty. Now, the law specifically allows for people to provide their own translators if they wish.

Witty also points out that the five year phase-in of the law allows time for the development of translation software. “Rather than investing a lot of tax dollars to translate, we believe the technology is in the process of being tested that will better serve the public as a communication device,” she says.

Advocates and Council members say the administration also compromised. “It’s a different bill,” acknowledges Andrew Friedman, executive director of Make the Road by Walking, an immigrants’ rights group that helped organize support for the bill. “The first version was broader. But the administration made considerable concessions, too. For the first time, they’ve said they have to provide interpretation services promptly, that they need to keep records and do reporting. That’s all stuff they did not want to do.”

Indeed, the mayor seemed extremely reluctant to sign Intro. 38 when he spoke about the bill during his weekly radio show in late October. In response to a caller’s question, Bloomberg said the city would have to cut “a whole bunch of services” in order to find the money to hire the additional interpreting staff.

Two months later, however, Mayor Bloomberg cheerfully presided over the signing of Intro. 38A in City’s Hall’s blue room. “People pay taxes, they fight and die for us, and they should have services accessible to them,” Bloomberg told reporters. “If they don’t speak English, I happen to think they should learn to speak English, because you will forever not be able to share in the American dream. But in the meantime it’s incumbent on government to make services available.”

Advocates are already beginning to talk about enforcement of the new law. “We’ll be ready within eight months to look at their plan. We’ve got our members ready to go out and look at what’s hung on the walls and guarantee the city’s compliance with the law,” says Friedman. “Language access takes resources and attention. With time, it tends to get back-burnered if there’s not someone out there saying you’re breaking the rules.”❖

## LONG HOURS, FEW OPTIONS: CHILD CARE FOR WORKING IMMIGRANTS

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**P**ing and Tong Chen\* emigrated separately from China's Fujian province to the New York area in the early 1990s. They met while working low-wage restaurant jobs in New Jersey, married and moved to the Lower East Side in 1996. Their first daughter, Ivy, was born later that year.

While Tong continued to work 12-hour restaurant shifts, Ping began caring for the baby full-time. But the financial strain was overwhelming: one wage was not enough to cover the family's rent and other expenses. The couple had no relatives in New York, and did not know any of their mostly Spanish-speaking neighbors. Their only friends and acquaintances were other immigrants who also worked long hours, and finding someone to help take care of Ivy seemed impossible.

After just three months, the Chens sent their daughter to live with Tong's parents in the city of Fuzhou, China, and Ping returned to work.

Almost three years later, when Tong and Ping finally brought Ivy back to live with them in New York, the young girl did not recognize her parents. She cried day and night, calling out for her grandmother, whom she missed desperately. Though Ivy gradually began to adjust to her new surroundings, and was enrolled in pre-Kindergarten by the time she was four, the Chens continued to struggle. By the time she became pregnant again in 2001, Ping was still unable to find work that would allow her to pick up her daughter in the afternoon. So when their second daughter, Erin, was born, she too was sent to China to live with Tong's parents.

Four months ago, the Chens had a third daughter, Annie. This time, Ping's parents came to New York to visit and brought Erin with them. Having relatives at home has allowed Ping to return to work, but the comfortable arrangement won't last: her parents must return to China sometime in the next four months, and Tong and Ping have still not decided if they will send Erin—and possibly little Annie—halfway around the world

with them. They know that, in China, their daughters will be well-raised by their grandparents. But they are also too familiar with the hardship of separation. They want to keep their daughters with them, but Ping says the financial burden of doing so without outside child care may in the end force them to once again part with them.

The fact is, few good child care options exist for the Chens and other low-income immigrant families in New York. And most newcomers are unaware of those that do.

Faced with a dearth of affordable child care, many immigrant parents resort to the Chens' solution: sending children far away to live with relatives. Discussions with staff at community-based organizations around the city reveal that sending young children back to their home countries due to lack of infant and toddler care has become commonplace, especially in the Chinese immigrant community. While no studies have yet been done to assess either the full extent of the practice or the psychological impact of such separation during a child's formative years, there is little doubt that, as the Chens experienced, young children have great difficulty separating and reuniting with parents.

According to the Agency for Child Development (ACD), New York City's waiting list for subsidized child care is currently close to 37,000 children. A 2000 report by Citizen's Committee for Children estimates that more than 100,000 children aged 0 to 5 qualify for subsidized care but do not receive it.<sup>13</sup> This leaves many of the city's already-underserved communities with a perpetually unmet need for child care. Low-income parents, who often work twelve or more hours a day, sometimes at multiple jobs, find themselves scrambling from day to day trying to piece together safe, affordable care for their children. When they are unable to find it, many are forced to miss work, further jeopardizing their family's already precarious financial security.

Because the wait for subsidized child care in New York has been known to stretch to several years, it is common practice in some parts of the city to place a child on the waiting list as a newborn, in the hope that a spot will open within a few years. Such action, however, requires an understanding of how the child care system in New York works. For our city's newest families, persistent language and cultural barriers often stand in the way of information required to access available child care.

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\* The family's last name has been changed at their request to protect their privacy.



It took several years—and strokes of luck—for Ping Chen to discover some of the child care options available to her. While visiting Grand Street Settlement in her neighborhood to inquire about computer classes, Ping learned that the agency also offers subsidized child care. She has since placed her two younger daughters on the waiting list for Head Start and advised her pregnant sister to do the same.

While Ping is not comfortable with the idea of having a stranger take care of her very young children, she has noticed that some immigrant families with successful businesses are able to hire someone to care for their children. Ping says that if she had the money and could find someone she could trust—preferably a Chinese person—she would likely do that as well. But, like so many of New York’s newcomers, she is in a double bind, having neither the money to pay for day care nor the family, friends or neighbors who might help care for her children.

The relatively few immigrants who do manage to find day care are often not well served by existing programs. New York City’s new immigrants frequently work as taxi or livery drivers, restaurant kitchen help, domestics or other jobs that require very long and late hours. And many work at more than one low-wage job. Yet traditional day care programs run only between 8 a.m. and 6 p.m.

What’s more, immigrant families are often unable to communicate with their day care providers. According to Karen Liu, director of the Child Care Division at the Chinese American Planning Council, the majority of preschool-aged children in the organization’s Chinatown day care centers end up translating for their parents.

Although the city’s child care budget has grown by 20 percent over the past five years, most of that increase has been for child care vouchers administered by the Human Resources Administration, which are targeted to mothers transitioning off welfare and returning to work.<sup>14</sup> While this is indeed a population with an increasing need for child care, comparatively little new funding has been put in place to fill the growing child care needs of the city’s other working families.<sup>15</sup>

Uneven geographic distribution of child care resources compounds the problem. “The neighborhoods where immigrants are settling are not those that have historically been targeted for subsidized child care,” says Jessica Lee, executive director of the Coalition for Asian American Children and Families.

New York State is working to address the language and cultural barriers to child care services by funding the Child Care Resource and Referral Consortium, comprised of five nonprofit agencies that staff a toll-free hotline in Mandarin, Cantonese, Russian, French, Haitian Creole and Spanish.



But much more is needed, advocates say. “We need to do everything we can to support these families. Immigrants are here to work hard and give their families a better life,” says Lois Lee, Director of the Chinese American Planning Council’s Queens school-age day care center. “They need to work to survive in America, and in order to work they need to have their minds at ease that their kids are being taken care of,” she adds. “Immigrants in New York are working hard to provide services to us. We need to serve them as well.”❖

<sup>13</sup> Citizens’ Committee for Children, “Child Care: The Family Life Issue in New York City.” 2000.

<sup>14</sup> New York City Independent Budget Office Background Paper, “City’s Reliance On State and Federal Funds For Child Care Grows.” December 2002.

<sup>15</sup> According to the IBO report, HRA’s child care budget has more than doubled since 1999, while ACD’s has grown by a mere 8 percent.

## IN THE NEIGHBORHOODS: SOCIAL SERVICE AGENCIES STRAIN TO BREAK THE ENGLISH LANGUAGE BARRIER

Cabrini Immigrant Services on the Lower East Side has a Kung-Fu academy for a neighbor—as well as a Buddhist temple, a Yemeni-run deli, a junior high school and a storefront Pentecostal Church that conducts daily services in Spanish. “It’s a great neighborhood,” says Cabrini’s director, Sister Pietrina Raccuglia. “We have Cantonese, Mandarin, Bengali, Fujianese and Spanish. You don’t have to know English to live here.”

But, she hastens to add, to navigate the city’s human services systems you need to know English or else find a tenacious English speaker to lend a hand.

Sister Pietrina and her staff have helped hundreds of immigrant New Yorkers navigate city and state agencies during the past four years, while the inadequate supply of translated written materials at those agencies has prompted lawsuits against the city. “If you’re looking for a multilingual case management agency that’s doing a wonderful job, and doing it on a shoestring, look at Cabrini,” says Ilze Earner, senior policy analyst at the National Resource Center for Foster Care and Permanency Planning at Hunter College.

Cabrini’s basement office is immaculate and inviting. On a recent morning, a volunteer translator helped a Spanish-speaking client fill out an intake form. Sister Pietrina, who has claimed one end of a wooden table as her desk, answered the phone, paid for food deliveries and scheduled appointments without missing a beat in her conversation. With Cabrini’s annual budget of about \$130,000, multi-tasking is a necessity.

The agency uses funds from the Cabrini Center for Nursing and Rehabilitation, and from city and state contracts, to help resolve naturalization and immigration problems, run computer and citizenship classes and refer local residents to health care

services. A recent grant from New York Attorney General Eliot Spitzer’s office allows Cabrini to provide nutrition counseling to 400 mostly Chinese immigrants struggling with diabetes and high blood pressure.

“The goal is for people to become self-sufficient, but that can’t happen without language help,” says Sister Pietrina. The agency provides English as a Second Language (ESL) classes and computer training to as many as 300 non-English speakers a week. Written materials are all printed in Chinese, Spanish and English. Cabrini’s skeleton staff of two and a half paid employees and a group of volunteers and interns routinely travel to hospitals, courts and city agencies to translate for clients who speak no English. Cabrini also carefully tracks the languages spoken by those who use its food pantry and language training services.

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With shrinking budgets and overworked staff, small agencies like Cabrini still manage to represent the ideal in language-appropriate services for many immigrants, helping people in ways that larger organizations have failed to do. Yet small community-based outfits can only meet a tiny fraction of the need for case management services among immigrants and their children. For the 1.8 million New Yorkers who do not speak English well, lack of English proficiency can make navigation of the social service system nearly impossible.

“Many people come to us with children who are not in school or have no health care,” says Maria Quiroga, director of adult education at Union Settlement House in East Harlem.

“Before they come to us, they have no job, no place to stay, no home, no way to stay warm. And they don’t know how to find it.”

Trying to measure how well the city's immigrant populations are being served can be difficult. The few studies available on case management for non-English speakers in New York have been conducted by advocacy groups. One, a 1999 survey of New York City family support agencies under contract with the Administration for Children's Services to serve Asian and Latino communities, found that most of these organizations were limited in bilingual staff and in the materials they offered to clients with little or no English. Of the 54 agencies that completed and returned surveys for analysis, nearly half (48 percent) reported that one-third or less of their materials were multilingual. Only one agency reported that all of its materials were multilingual, and only five stated that all their caseworkers were bilingual or multilingual, according to the report, which was co-authored by the Committee for Hispanic Children and Families and the Coalition for Asian American Children and Families.

Existing studies are also limited by the responding agencies' divergent and inconsistent record-keeping practices. Many don't track clients' ethnicity and language needs—necessary data, advocates say, for understanding where and how to improve language services. Citywide data are also lacking. “We don't really know how bad the problem of language access is,” says City Council member John Liu, co-sponsor of the recently enacted Equal Access to Health and Human Services Act. “We have stories, but part of fixing the problem is understanding the problem.”

Inadequate funding for case management has meant that agencies struggle to attract bilingual social workers. Others hire community residents with no social work training to translate for clients.

Like most small case management agencies, the Arab-American Family Support Center must stretch its resources to meet the need. “Are there enough Arab translators and bilingual social workers? Absolutely not, an emphatic no,” says Emira Habiby Browne, the center's executive director. “In the Arab community, we don't have case workers because people don't want to go into this field,” she explains. “It's not one that has any kind of status.” New immigrants seeking higher education, she says, want to go into medicine, law or business, not social work.

As with any large immigrant community, many second generation Arab-Americans don't know much Arabic, while those born overseas often don't know enough English to serve as caseworkers. “It's hardly ever that we have somebody who is strong in

both languages,” says Browne. “And then we have to train them as social workers, which is a problem in itself, because people come in with this sort of glamorous idea of what social work is, without having any idea how frustrating it is.”

Volunteer interpreters who bridge the gap end up privy to very personal client information. But agencies want to protect confidentiality, particularly in cases involving domestic violence and mental health, so directors generally agree that their system of employing informal interpreters should be only an interim step.

Robert Schachter, executive director of the New York City chapter of the National Association of Social Workers, says the shortage of bilingual and multilingual social workers is “incredible.” The gaps are visible in his own organization. Comprised of 10,000 professional social workers, just 650 members identify themselves as Latino. Two hundred and fifty others identify themselves as Asian. “And that doesn't mean that all the Asian social workers speak the languages of the country they originally came from,” says Schachter.

Scholarships and incentives could be one way to solve the recruitment problem. “I always thought we should go to the high schools and pick up the seniors, or even before that, and get them interested in going into these fields,” says Browne.

Schachter is working with a social work task force to create a state loan forgiveness fund available to any bilingual and bicultural student interested in attending social work school. The incentive would be offered at both the undergraduate and graduate levels, and loans would be forgiven once the certified social workers entered the field. The task force hopes state officials will commit funding for 200 graduates over four years.

In the meantime, advocates say the city could do more to help improve services at city-contracted agencies who provide services to immigrant and non-English-speaking populations. “Whether or not you have bilingual and bicultural staff does not affect your chances of renewing your contract, regardless of the community you are in or the services you provide,” says Ilze Earner, of Hunter College. “It should.”

Earner believes that only the threat of lost income from the city would force contracted agencies to pay full attention to the needs of their communities. Indeed, the city's new Equal Access to Health and Human Services Act will require just such accountability from some organizations when it takes full effect in 2008.❖

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