

TASK FORCE ON NEW AMERICANS

2021/2022 Report



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Message from the Chair

I want to thank Speaker Carl E. Heastie for the opportunity to lead the Task Force on New Americans over the last two years. Under his leadership, the New York State Assembly has unequivocally been the most progressive, pro-immigrant legislature in our State's history.

From unprecedented increases in funding for programs to help immigrant children and families, to important policy changes like driver's licenses for all, to state laws that make New York more welcoming and supportive for new arrivals that now call our great state their home, the New York State Assembly has prioritized a range of funding and public policy initiatives to socially, economically and civically integrate the millions of immigrants who reside all across the Empire State.

The data from the 2020 Census reflects that over 4.4 million immigrants come to our state from every region of our planet. They settle in our communities, creating a rich and beautiful diversity wherever they go. I have the honor of representing one of the most diverse districts in the state, one that is even said to be one of the most diverse in the country.

In the Spring of 2021, after taking leadership of the Task Force, I launched a statewide virtual listening tour. Our goal was to ascertain how to best support our immigrant communities, despite the fact that we were in the midst of a deadly pandemic. Additionally, through the Task Force, I fought for pro-immigrant initiatives sponsored by members of our majority; initiated changes to other proposed laws to make them more inclusive of the needs facing immigrants; and pushed for substantial budget allocations to improve immigrant access to unemployment benefits, health care, and educational opportunities for adult and immigrant youth. The pages that follow outline specific accomplishments by the Task Force over the past two years, reflecting community and expert input, and concerns and suggestions gathered from the advocacy and service delivery sectors—all focused on improving the lives of our immigrant communities as well as the lives of all New Yorkers.

I want to thank my team for organizing a series of virtual forums and for working on budget and policy initiatives to address the concerns discussed in this report and beyond. Special thanks go out to my Chief of Staff, Robyn Enes, Director of Policy Development & Legislation, Guillermo A. Martinez, my District Director, Kevin Jusino, and Special Assistant, Vianny Encalada, as well as Richard Murphy and Kathleen Fazio from the Assembly Program and Counsel Unit. Copies of this report will be made available by request by contacting my office.

I look forward to seeing the incoming Chairperson work with the Speaker and the Assembly to continue to support immigrant communities.

Thank you.



Catalina Cruz, Esq.
Member of Assembly
39th Assembly District, Queens

About the Chair of the Taskforce

Assemblywoman Catalina Cruz

Catalina Cruz represents New York State Assembly District 39, the most diverse district in the nation, encompassing the neighborhoods of Corona, Elmhurst and Jackson Heights in Queens, New York. She holds a Bachelor's Degree from the John Jay College of Criminal Justice and a Juris Doctorate from the City University of New York School of Law. She is admitted to practice law in the State of New York.

Catalina was born in Colombia and came to Queens at the age of 9. Catalina grew up as a DREAMer; she lived in the United States for more than 10 years as an undocumented American. Catalina is an experienced attorney and a leader for tenant protections, immigration reform and workers' rights.



Catalina began her career as a practicing attorney, representing low-income, rent-stabilized tenants in New York City Housing Court. She also served as the Counsel to the Division of Immigrant Policies and Affairs at the NYS Department of Labor, where she worked with immigrant workers and business owners, and led the agency to become a national leader in combating labor trafficking. Since elected, she has passed more than 20 laws including Nourish NY, which combats food insecurity, a permanent fund to support the Transgender and Gender Non Binary population, and making immigration and citizenship a protected class under the State Civil Rights Law.

During the 2021-2022 legislative sessions, she served on the following committees: Aging, Agriculture, Codes, Ethics, Judiciary, Labor, Small Business, the Black, Puerto Rican, Hispanic and Asian Legislative Caucus, the Legislative Women's Caucus and Puerto Rican/Hispanic Task Force. She also served as the Chair to the Task Force on New Americans in the New York State Assembly 2021-2022, where she advocated on behalf of immigrants state-wide.

Missions and Goals of the Taskforce

The mission of the New York State Assembly Task Force on New Americans is to advocate for public policies and state budget allocations that will help improve the lives of the more than 4.2 million immigrants who call New York State their home, while working to build support for systematic and structural changes that will allow for the full integration of immigrants into the social, economic and political systems of our society.

To achieve these goals, the Assembly Task Force on New Americans worked to:

- Establish a legislative program addressing social and economic issues of concern to immigrant communities which includes their input via community forums and legislative hearings;
- Foster cooperation between legislators, state and municipal officials in efforts to address issues of concern and in seeking ways to improve services to immigrant communities;
- Research and evaluate current programs and proposals that affect immigrant communities;
- Serve as a conduit of information for immigrant communities on issues before the federal, state, and local governments.

Executive Summary

The impact of immigrants in New York is substantial, from the more than \$61 billion in taxes pumped back into the state each year by immigrant families, to the enrichment of our daily lives by immigrant business owners, teachers, first responders and so many more. Essential workers, many of them immigrants, put their lives on the line daily during the height of the COVID-19 pandemic and kept our communities running by stocking food shelves, cleaning hospitals, taking care of our elderly and infirm, and providing other services. Many did this knowing they had no health insurance, had little protection against the virus and faced chronic disease and even death.

In January of 2021, Assembly Speaker Carl E. Heastie assigned Assemblywoman Catalina Cruz to lead the Assembly's Task Force on New Americans. The Chairwoman began working to understand the current realities of immigrant communities across the state, including how the government and private sector were working to support immigrants, how to better invest in immigrants, and laws needed to protect immigrants. With that focus in mind, the Chairwoman launched four statewide virtual listening forums. The series served as a platform for immigrant-serving, community-based organizations to voice their concerns, and to allow them to make recommendations on how the state government can help improve the conditions of their constituents. Dr. Dina Refki, the Executive Director of the Center for Women in Government and a Civil Society and the creator of the Immigrant Integration Index, started each forum with a powerful data presentation. Elected officials from across the state also joined in the regional forums; including Assembly Members Patricia Fahy, Kenneth P. Zebrowski, Philip Ramos, Jonathan Rivera and Harry B. Bronson. The Task Force is greatly appreciative for their work and collaboration.

The recommendations made by the participating panelists served as a foundation to guide future social and fiscal public policies. Over the following 16 months, the Assembly Task Force on New Americans worked diligently on a long list of budget priorities and new laws to improve the lives of immigrants. Some of the discussion touched on current policy efforts and others yielded ideas for new legislation. The Task Force also fought to secure more than \$5 billion for initiatives including immigrant legal services, the creation of the SUNY Institute on Immigrant Integration, and establishing the Excluded Workers Fund and the life-saving Emergency Rental Assistance Program (ERAP), as well as many other programs that support and enhance New York's immigrant communities.

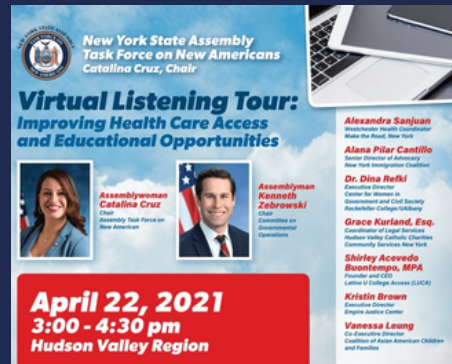
To build a more inclusive society, the barriers to the social and economic integration of our growing immigrant communities must be dismantled. The work of the past two legislative sessions has established a foundation to guide future social and fiscal public policies to this end. With the continued support of the Speaker and other legislators, there is hope for an even greater good to come.

Virtual Listening Forums

This series served as a platform for immigrant-serving, community-based organizations to voice concerns about the needs of their constituents. The feedback from these discussions sought to create and drive future policies representative of the needs of immigrants in New York State.



Session 1
April 15, 2021 | Capital Region/Mohawk
Valley Regions



Session 2
April 22, 2021 | Hudson Valley Region



Session 3
April 29, 2021 | New York City & Long Island
Regions



Session 4
May 6, 2021 | Western New York Region

The following is a summary of the virtual listening sessions. You can access the entire program on our Facebook Page: The Taskforce on New Americans.

(<https://www.facebook.com/TaskForceonNewAmericansNYSA/>)

Session 1

Access to Legal Services & Justice for Immigrants

April 15, 2021 | Capital Region/Mohawk Valley Regions

The session was centered on issues in the Capital Region and Mohawk Valley, including the lack of access to legal services and the experience of immigrants with courts and criminal justice agencies. Participants discussed the need for an increase in funds for legal services. It was also noted that prior to COVID-19, the overall number of legal services providers shrank from 158 in 2018 to 141 in 2019.

The Chairwoman noted that there are only four such providers serving the Capital Region and Mohawk Valley, and all are perpetually at capacity and unable to take on new clients. Not only are lack of attorneys an issue, but the travel time to and from facilities exacerbates the shortage of supported attorneys and interpreters. The use of remote appearances in state courts during the pandemic eased some of these problems, but immigration courts run by the Federal government have not been as accommodating.

The participants discussed positive steps they have seen in agency interactions with immigrant communities, as well as future steps to be taken. According to panelists, the Albany County Sheriff's office is currently providing training to new officers on topics such as implicit bias and vicarious trauma, and also introducing the cadets to diverse communities they will be serving. They have also trained police recruits in Erie County about other languages and cultures and are seeking to expand this instruction to other public-facing professionals such as firefighters and inspectors. Participants also shared that the Syracuse Police Department hired former refugees and assigned them to the communities where refugees live. Participants also emphasized the need for all of our governmental partners to provide substantially more support in order to ensure that New York's immigrants have access to justice.

Session 2

Improving Health Care Access & Educational Opportunities

April 22, 2021 | Hudson Valley Region

During this session, health care and education advocates from the Hudson Valley Region evaluated immigrants' access to health services and educational programs. Participants identified programs providing immigrants with pandemic-related information, including eligibility for emergency Medicaid for COVID-19 tests and treatment, as well as with help in obtaining vaccinations. Participants noted that inadequate benefits leave many immigrants with substantial medical debt, and while hospitals are required by law to offer financial assistance to consumers who are unable to pay, the forms are complex and not readily accessible. They also noted the need for legislation that will address these concerns specifically, and to expand access to COVID-19 coverage on a temporary basis. Legislative ideas were presented to extend state and local safety net programs to cover critical health and mental health needs, regardless of immigration status. There was also agreement on the importance of programs that help individuals navigate New York's complicated health care system. Participants stressed the need of addressing health inequities and advocated for additional investment in training immigrants to serve in this capacity. The significant measures in the FY22-23 budget that expanded coverage for many undocumented New Yorkers should form a framework for continued efforts toward this goal.

The session also addressed the need to provide access to quality educational programs for immigrants, who are projected to be even more essential in meeting the State's workforce needs in the coming years. A concern was noted in that, on the high school level, there are not enough guidance counselors to effectively assist students. Difficulties navigating the financial aid process was also identified as a key issue for families. There was a collective push to change the State's student aid programs to reduce complexity and increase awareness. Lastly, SUNY's Educational Opportunity Centers, which provide a range of free educational services throughout the state, were praised and the continuous support for programs/centers such as these are advised.

Session 3

Workforce Training & Entrepreneurship

April 29, 2021 | New York City & Long Island Regions

The Virtual Forum sessions moved downstate to Long Island to explore the status of efforts to improve immigrants' economic opportunities. Data showed that due to the region's high housing costs, those without college degrees found home ownership virtually unattainable. It was also noted that even advanced education does not guarantee success for immigrants, who face roadblocks to continuing a professional practice due to restrictive state licensing requirements. Advocates expressed a need for a coordinated system where immigrant community-based organizations (CBOs), workforce development programs and educators collaborate to serve the significant needs for more skills training and ESOL for immigrant job seekers.

Participants shared that many immigrant-run businesses had difficulty accessing capital from traditional sources. Immigrant small businesses were also left behind in initial efforts to help them recover from the pandemic, and pointed out that support is also needed for the CBOs that assist them in accessing government programs. The Chairwoman noted that many entrepreneurs in immigrant communities such as street vendors do not neatly fit into the Americanized concept of small businesses, but state programs should still recognize and respect the value they bring to their communities and the state. Advocates stressed the need for CBOs to offer wrap-around services and funding to help sustain people receiving training which can last months, during which time they cannot work and have no income to pay for child care, health insurance, rent, food, and basic needs. The hazards these workers, who generally are undocumented, face were acknowledged and were said to include wage theft, unsafe working conditions and the lack of any safety net. Participants felt that overt or systemic discrimination is one factor that impedes the success of immigrants' businesses or careers. Participants recommended combining job training with language classes that include the specialized vocabularies of an occupation and other immigrant-focused workforce development programs; entrepreneurship assistance programs aimed at immigrant populations can also positively impact the State's economy; and easier relicensing of professionals who immigrate would ease the shortages of qualified professionals in many fields.

Session 4

Improving Adult English Language Program Availability

May 6, 2021 | Western New York Region

The final virtual forum session included stakeholders and Assemblymembers from Western New York convening to address the need for improvements in meeting the language needs of immigrants. New York requires state agencies interacting with the public to provide translation services, and provides funding for an array of agencies and community-based organizations to teach English. Despite the state requirement that state agencies working with the public provide language access, many panelists said enforcement of this rule is nonexistent and that local agencies providing state services are not required to, and largely do not, provide access to translation services.

Language access is critical for New York's immigrants, and efforts to expand the availability of translations and of translators must be continued and built upon. The Office of General Services' language access program created in the FY22-23 budget could be a major step forward if fully and effectively implemented, but language access must also be made available when state programs are administered by local agencies. Suggestions for potential programming included adding options beyond classroom instruction to state-funded adult ELL programs, such as cell phone-based and other remote instruction, and incentivizing immigrants who arrive in the US with English degrees (or are otherwise proficient in English) to obtain ELL teaching credentials.



The Taskforce would like to thank the following people and organizations for participating in the forums:

- Speaker Carl E. Heastie, NYS Assembly
- Assemblyman Harry B. Bronson, Chair, Committee on Economic Development, Job Creation, Commerce and Industry
- Assemblywoman Patricia Fahy, Chair Committee on Banks
- Assemblyman Phil Ramos, Deputy Majority Leader
- Assemblyman Jonathan Rivera
- Assemblyman Kenneth P. Zebrowski, Chair, Committee on Government Operations
- Mayor Eric Adams, New York City
- Secretary of State Robert J. Rodriguez, New York State
- Sudha Acharya, Executive Director, South Asian Council for Social Services
- Kristin Brown, Executive Director, Empire Justice Center
- Shirley Acevedo Buontempo, MPA Founder and CEO, Latino U College Access (LUCA)
- Alana Pilar Cantillo, Senior Director of Advocacy New York Immigration Coalition
- Marlene Cortes, Senior Manager, Language Access Advocacy & Resource Center, Empire Justice Center
- Juan Pablo Morales Estrada, Coordinator, Bronx Day Laborer Program, Catholic Charities & Community Services, NY
- Julina Guo, Staff Attorney, Albany Law School Immigration Law Clinic

- Eva Hassett, Executive Director, International Institute of Buffalo
- Karla Henriquez, Economic Recovery and Resilience Fellow, New York Immigration Coalition
- Mary Hetteix, Adult Education Director, Arab American Association of New York
- Kate Holmes, Director, Catholic Diocese of Syracuse Refugee Resettlement Program
- Ahyoung Kim, Associate Director of Small Business Programs, Asian American Federation
- Grace Kurland, Esq., Coordinator of Legal Services, Hudson Valley Catholic Charities Community Services New York
- Vanessa Leung, Co-Executive Director, Coalition of Asian American Children and Families
- Sonia Martinez, Executive Director, Mohawk Valley Latino Association
- Lisa McKay, Associate Provost and Director, University Center for Academic and Workforce Development, (UCAWD) SUNY
- Anna Ireland Mongo, Ph.D., Chief Program Officer, Jericho Road
- Julio Olaizola, ATTAIN Project Manager, University Center for Academic and Workforce Development, SUNY
- Dr. Dina Refki, Executive Director, Center for Women in Government & Civil Society Rockefeller College/University at Albany, SUNY
- Fabrizia Rodriguez, Attorney, Centro Civico of Albany
- Alexandra Sanjuan, Westchester Health Coordinator, Make the Road NY
- Karen M. Andolina Scott, Executive Director, Journey's End Refugee Services
- Howard Shih, Researcher/Policy Director, Asian American Federation
- Maiber Solarte, Community Health Worker & Training Coordinator, Make the Road NY
- Jennifer Sun, Co-Executive Director, Asian Americans for Equality
- Isabel E. Villar, Founding Director, El Centro Hispano

Advocacy During Migrant Crisis & Beyond

Over the course of the two years, the Chairwoman met with the New York City's Mayoral Administration, including the Mayor's Office for Immigrant Affairs, the Department for Homeless Services, the Office of Emergency Management, and the Human Resources Administration, as well as the New York State Department of State (Office for New Americans), and the Executive Chamber to advocate for legislative and budget priorities. The Chairwoman used these meetings as a space to build connections to better serve migrant communities city and state-wide. She also visited Asylum Welcome Centers and migrant shelters in New York City and Buffalo and met with providers at both locations to better understand the support needed.

In 2022, building off of the feedback obtained during her listening sessions, the Chairwoman used her role as Chair of the Task Force to advocate before governmental stakeholders on behalf of immigrants during this time of crisis. Additionally, in partnership with the New York Immigration Coalition, the Chairwoman organized city-wide donation drives to support newly arrived asylum seekers. The donations gathered included clothing, diapers, toiletries and Personal Protective Equipment (PPE), and benefitted more than 2,000 people. The Chairwoman, in conjunction with Senator Brad Hoylman-Sigal, the Vera Institute, the New York Immigration Coalition and other advocates, also held a roundtable to discuss legal service needs statewide, such as funding for the Office for New Americans and the Access to Representation Act, for newly-arrived asylum seekers and immigrant New Yorkers with detention/deportation issues. They also wrote a letter to the federal authorities asking for work permits to be expedited for asylum seekers.

Additionally, during her tenure, the Chairwoman participated in an Agriculture Committee hearing that took an in-depth look at the food insecurity needs and solutions in marginalized communities throughout the state. During the hearing, the Chairwoman helped highlight the plight of undocumented communities in accessing food resources and advocated for making Nourish NY a permanent program in New York State.

Significant 2021 & 2022 Budget & Legislative Wins

The focus of the Task Force was to highlight and address the persistent and systematic problems facing immigrant communities, and the Task Force helped achieve many successes to this end. Many of these efforts are a direct result of recommendations from the statewide listening forums. The dedication and combined work of the nonprofit and government sectors to remedy a host of problems have resulted in tangible state budget allocations as well as legislative accomplishments in both the 2021 and 2022 Legislative Sessions which need mention:

- The creation of the new SUNY Institute on Immigrant Integration Research & Policy, funded at \$430K. It will serve as a research and technical assistance provider to state and local governments to help better integrate immigrants socially, economically and politically. The Institute will begin operations in late 2022 and had its genesis with the Assembly Task Force on New Americans.
- \$21.4 million for the Office for New Americans and legal services for immigrants;
- \$10 million for community-based programs to combat bias-based crimes;
- \$2.1 billion for the Excluded Workers Fund, which will provide critical support for workers who do not have access to unemployment, federal stimulus funds or other assistance funds during the COVID-19 pandemic;
- \$19.6 million to expand Essential Plan coverage to provide health care insurance for individuals with a confirmed or suspected case of COVID-19, who are ineligible due to immigration status but would otherwise qualify;
- \$100 million for expansion of the Essential Plan to cover health care access for immigrant elderly and expecting mothers;
- \$7.79 million for adult literacy education grants to teach ESL and help residents achieve their high school equivalency;
- \$65.3 million in grants for school districts to help provide bilingual education;
- \$1 million in educational services for out-of-school immigrant youth (DACA) and young adults;
- \$3 billion in combined federal and state dollars for rent and homeowner relief, including: \$100 million for a hardship fund for those who cannot access funds from the Emergency Rental Assistance Program (ERAP); \$100 million to reduce homelessness; \$575 million in federal homeowner relief, including a three-year; and, \$60 million commitment to fund the Homeowner Protection Program (HOPP) to provide legal assistance to homeowners facing foreclosure;

- Offices of Language Access are now required in each state agency to ensure New Yorkers with limited English proficiency have access to their government. New York now mandates that translation of documents be made for up to 14 most common foreign languages spoken in the State;
- Chapter 56, Part BB (A3006C: Budget/S2506C: Budget) – establishes an Emergency Rental Assistance Program providing for eligibility without regard to immigration status and for confidentiality of all documentation and personally identifying information;
- Chapter 447 (A3412A: Solages/S343A: Kaplan) – amends Penal Law to include threats to report immigration status to initiate deportation proceedings within definitions of “extortion and “coercion”;
- Chapter 659 (A6665A: Cruz/S2585A: Brisport) – requires the Office of Children & Family Services to post on its website information on available post-adoption services in English, French, Polish and the 10 most common non-English languages spoken by New Yorkers with limited English proficiency;
- A8798 Cruz/S7776 May (The Reimagining Long Term Care Task Force) – Mandates that culturally and linguistically competent services are considered when providing healthcare to patients in nursing homes and other long term care facilities,
- A6328A Cruz/S6586 Liu – New law now bans discrimination in hiring based on country of origin and later this year all discrimination based on country of origin and immigration status will be banned in New York; and
- A10026 Cruz/S9180 Brisport – In partnership with the State University of New York, legislation which will ensure that public colleges will no longer require undocumented students to file status of immigration affidavit as a requirement for in-state tuition benefit. This requirement has been state law since 2002 and is seen as hindering college enrollment by immigrant students.
- With the guidance and consideration from the virtual forums and meetings with advocacy groups, below is an additional list of bills awaiting passage during the 2023 legislative session (note that bill numbers are reflective of the 2022 legislative session):
 - On Access to Legal Services & Preventing Discrimination:
 - A8414: Relates to alternative forms of identification for renters insurance
 - A9877A: Requires notice of risk of deportation of non-citizens, prior to accepting a plea
 - Expanding Workforce Development & Entrepreneurship Opportunities:
 - A7415A: Relates to a study on the economic impact of the establishment of kitchen incubators
 - A7787: Establishes the home kitchen enterprise and economic opportunity act

- A9811: Relates to prohibiting retail establishments from refusing to accept payment in cash
- On Expanding English Language Services:
 - A9286: Establishes the bilingual teachers of tomorrow teacher recruitment and retention program
 - A9355: Relates to language access services; establishes within the office of general services, the division of language access services in order to translate vital documents
- On Expanding Access to Educational Opportunities:
 - A10026: Relates to affidavits of the lawful immigration status of certain students
 - A10385: Provides that the state shall make reasonable efforts to obtain federal funding for child care expenses and prohibits limiting authorized child care services based on proof of immigration status
 - A1961A Access to Representation Act: Establishes the right to legal counsel in immigration court proceedings and provides for the administration thereof



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