



New York City Council Speaker Adrienne E. Adams
Committee of the Whole
Oversight - Examining the City's Response and Delivery of Services to
Migrants
Remarks as Prepared for Delivery
December 19, 2022

Good morning. I am Adrienne Adams, Speaker of the New York City Council. Today's special hearing by the Council's Committee of the Whole to examine the City's response and delivery of service to migrants is critical to maintaining the health of our city and our communities. The success of our efforts relies on close coordination across governmental agencies, as well as collaboration with non-governmental organizations and input from the public. That is why we have chosen to dedicate two days to hear testimony from both the Administration, who we will be hearing from shortly, and from members of the public at tomorrow's hearing. Committee of the Whole hearings are uncommon, but the enormity of this issue affects life in all five boroughs and across all 51 council districts, and its reach across all aspects of government requires comprehensive participation by the Council's various committees and the City's many agencies. We will be joined by various Committee Chairs and Council Members at different points throughout both days' hearings. I want to acknowledge the leadership of my co-chair of this hearing, Deputy Speaker Diana Ayala, who is also Chair of the General Welfare Committee and has been focused on this issue before and since her committee held the body's first hearing on this over the summer. Our various committee chairs and members have likewise been highly engaged and responsive to help the City meet the challenge of this moment, and I want to acknowledge their leadership as well.

Since early spring, over thirty thousand people have arrived in New York City, seeking asylum from their home countries to escape dire economic conditions, political violence, and other crises. We also know that some asylum seekers were sent here by Governors from southern states in a despicable act of political theatre. Real, human lives are at stake here. As I have said before, this is not a game, and New York City takes its responsibility to help those in our city seriously. As a sanctuary city, we welcome our recent arrivals with open arms, and we will utilize every tool at our disposal to ensure that they can build safe, dignified, and abundant lives. This is the same commitment we make to every New Yorker, which remains the focus of our day-to-day work.

New York City is a city of immigrants, and we owe much of our greatness to the significant contributions that immigrants and the children of immigrants have made throughout history. Our diversity allows us to lead interconnected and rich lives, benefiting, learning, and growing from each other's cultures, skills, and perspectives. Though all of those seeking asylum have come to our city in pursuit of new life, so many have left behind dedicated careers – whether with skilled craftsmanship or trades, as nurses, engineers, and other professions. It is to our collective benefit to recognize these talents and skills early on and set policies that allow for immigrants to make meaningful and unique contributions to society without delay. We must also acknowledge the struggles and trauma they have been through in their journeys here, and the support required to help them succeed in our city and communities.

Over the past several months, the City has worked to pool its resources and accommodate the thousands of new migrants. We have seen the opening of dozens of emergency shelters and several Humanitarian Emergency Relief and Recovery Centers. While the Council expressed opposition to constructed outdoor HERRCs, first at Orchard Beach and then on Randall's Island, we understood the need for such a response and facility. We simply believed there were alternative indoor locations that would be more effective in achieving the desired humanitarian outcomes. We are glad the Administration shifted its approach and is instead making use of large vacant or underutilized hotels for HERRCs, consistent with the Council's recommendation. As a result of the learning process an unexpected crisis such as this provides and requires, we are now better equipped to meet some needs of migrants. Yet, there are an array of improvements to policies and support services that can help us better serve asylum seekers and all New Yorkers.

In addition to shelter, migrants need culturally appropriate food, translators, clothing, transport access, and of course, schooling for children. Alongside the Administration's efforts, our non-profit partners, community organizations, and everyday New Yorkers have gone above and beyond to fill the gaps. The organizations that have been committed to this work need our support now and in the future.

We understand that addressing this crisis is challenging and complex. It requires significant coordination across city government, and major support from our state and federal government partners. The Council has used its voice to advocate for additional support from the federal government in various areas. We know increased support from other levels of government is necessary, both to meet the needs of those already in our city and especially as we expect more people seeking asylum to arrive in the coming days. With the imminent end to Title 42, additional funding and logistical support from our government partners will be essential as we prepare to meet the increase in arrivals of people seeking asylum.

Whether it is for expedited work permits or resolving bureaucratic challenges with the administration of our local ICE office at Federal Plaza that has left too many awaiting appointments in the cold overnight, the Council will continue to be a champion for this important partnership and support from the state and federal governments.

It is necessary for the City to effectively respond to this humanitarian crisis with all stakeholders, especially in order to address long-term needs, such as legal services and employment opportunities. The immigration process is lengthy and challenging, even with legal representation. Numerous reports have documented long lines of people waiting overnight in the winter cold, outside the Javits Federal Building, to attend their mandated check-in with immigration agencies. Even if they have scheduled appointments, they are turned away if they are not among the first in line. The severely backlogged intake process, due to scheduling and staffing challenges in our federal agencies, undermines the health and safety of people seeking asylum in our city. We must not inflict further harm onto people who are already experiencing some of the most vulnerable moments of their lives, and we continue to call on our federal and state agencies to resolve these challenges. Additionally, we need the federal government to grant work permission so people can legally work and contribute to our city as their asylum claims are processed.

At the same time, our city agencies must increase their close coordination with one another and with all stakeholders in order to effectively fulfill the comprehensive needs of asylum seekers. It is also imperative that we prioritize planning for long-term needs, such as legal services and employment opportunities.

As a city government, we must think creatively for policy solutions that will allow people to succeed. That includes providing the legal ability to work to people as they wait for their asylum seeker claims to be processed. We simply cannot have people waiting *years* for the chance to legally earn a living to support themselves, their families, and our city. Without urgent action, we also leave people vulnerable to exploitation by those who may offer illegal wages and dangerous or unethical opportunities to people yearning for self-sufficiency.

Until the humanitarian crises in other countries ease, we will continue to have people who seek asylum in this country arrive in our city. I hope that in their testimony today, the Administration will offer prospective policy solutions that prioritize a vision for meeting the long-term needs of these new residents and everyone within our communities across the City.

Before I conclude, I would like to give my deep appreciation and thanks to the Council staff from numerous divisions, who have put this special hearing together, coordinated with organizations to support migrants, and are currently administering a holiday drive to collect essential supplies for individuals and families. These efforts have been a massive undertaking that I know took a lot of coordination and team effort. They demonstrate the commitment of our public servants to this work. Also, thank you to everyone joining us in the Chambers today and on the livestream. Public participation is essential to the health of our democracy, and I look forward to hearing the public's testimony tomorrow.

I will now turn it over to Deputy Speaker and Chair of the General Welfare Committee, Diana Ayala.

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