Photo from nyc.gov by Spencer T Tucker Bloomberg upgraded the Mayor's Office of Immigrant Affairs to become a charter agency, which provides direct access to the mayor. He appointed Fatima A. Shama as Commissioner in August.

This is one in a series, to run between now and Election Day, examining Mayor Michael Bloomberg's record in key areas. For more on the mayor's eight years see:

Confronting the Challenges of Boom and Bust : James Parrott looks at the last eight years and finds that, despite the mayor's huge success as an innovative businessman, his management of New York City's economic fortunes has been pretty conventional.

Redefining Poverty -- Then What? : Michael Bloomberg won widespread praise for his push to change the way governments measure poverty. Reactions to what he has done after are less effusive.

Bloomberg's Green Empire : Recognizing the importance of parks, the mayor has expanded and improved New York's open space -- but critics wish he had consulted more with communities along the way.

Bloomberg as Budget Master : Reflecting a changing economy, the mayor's fiscal policies have changed while the city has gone from bust to boom and back again.

Businessman, Billionaire, Reformer? : Michael Bloomberg's handling of issues involving elections and governance raises the question: Is he above politics or a politician whose wealth lets him play the game in a different way?

The Health Mayor? While the administration has garnered attention for restricting smoking and trying to get New Yorkers to eat well, its actions on health policy go far beyond that.

Bloomberg and the Police : Crime has hit new lows under Mayor Michael Bloomberg, but experts wonder if he deserves the credit and some critics charge that new police practices infringe on the rights of New Yorkers.

A Calmer, Yet Still Segregated City : In eight years in office, Bloomberg has quieted the racially charged atmosphere of the Giuliani years but done little to address housing disparities and other divisions that remain.

Affordable Housing Not Included : A key part of the mayor's plan to provide moderately priced housing has collided with the collapse in real estate.

The 63rd Senator : The mayor won the school control battle and some funding fights too. Has he finally figured out how to get his way in the state capitol?

Reshaping the City: Who's Being Heard -- and Why? To meet the post-industrial age, the Bloomberg administration has rezoned one sixth of New York's land.

Elick Bloomberg, a native of Balvan, Russia, moved to the United States before the turn of the 20th century. According to his World War I draft registration card , he settled in Chelsea, Mass., and was employed by Metropolitan Life as an insurance agent.

His experience was shared by tens of thousands of Jewish immigrants from Eastern Europe at the time. However, it was one of his grandsons, Michael, who gave the family name a household recognition. Mayor Bloomberg is proud of his immigrant heritage in a city where 40 percent of its residents are foreign-born.

"Immigrants are why New York City became America's economic engine," said Bloomberg in a

recent press conference where he announced his campaign platform for immigrant communities. "The next time you walk or drive over the Brooklyn Bridge, remember that it was designed by an immigrant engineer. The next time you ride the subway, or pass the Empire State Building or the Rockefeller Center, remember they were all built by immigrant hands," he said.

"Economically, culturally and socially, we need more immigrants, not less," added Bloomberg.

As the election approaches, Bloomberg hopes to win votes in New York's immigrant communities. While his recently announced initiatives on immigration could be seen as campaign promises, over the last eight years he has been widely seen as a strong and outspoken supporter for immigrants.

'Don't Ask, Don't Tell'

Immigrants have long been drawn to New York City because it provides many opportunities for all people, regardless of their immigration status. This remains true today, even in the face of the poor economy. As more cities and states have begun allowing their police to check people's immigration status, New York City remains a safe haven for those without documentation.

In September 2003, Bloomberg signed Executive Order 41 to reinforce that protection. The order prohibited city workers from inquiring about a person's immigration status when the person seeks services from a city agency or witnesses a crime.

Immigrants "have always been and will always be welcome here," said Bloomberg at the signing ceremony. "And the reason is simple: what's good for the city's immigrants is good for the city."

Found in Translation?

Because New York has welcomed immigrants, the city now is home to people speaking more than 170 different languages. In July 2008, Bloomberg signed Executive Order 120 to mandate all city agencies that provide public services translate and interpret in the city's six most spoken languages other than English: Spanish, Chinese, Haitian Creole, Russian, Korean and Italian.

"When he instituted the citywide language access executive order, [requiring] all city agencies ... to translate and interpret to all city residents, no matter what their language capability, I think that was received as a pretty precedent-setting policy around the country," said Chung-Wha Hong, executive director of the New York Immigrant Coalition . "That was an important accomplishment the city has done."

But some said the move, while important, was long overdue.

"We are very happy that the language access executive order was passed about a year ago but I think it is important to note that it took a lot of advocacy over the course of seven years to get the mayor to agree to do an executive order," said Wayne Ho, executive director of the Coalition for Asian American Children and Families . "What I often wonder is that if the mayor has been so committed to immigrant populations, why does it take so much advocacy in order to get policies or funding passed?"

Learning English

At the same time he has increased translation services, Bloomberg has also looked at ways to help immigrants who do not speak English learn the language. To help immigrants with limited English ability improve their proficiency, Bloomberg proposed a 10-year plan to provide English as a Second Language classes with job-training opportunities to an estimated number of 50,000 immigrant adults. He said the city will initially commit $3 million to serve additional 5,000 people.

The problem of not speaking English seems particularly dire in the schools. According to a report released by the Department of Education, the dropout rate among English language learners is significantly higher than for other students. Only 30.8 percent of the English language learners graduated from high school in four years.

Image from MikeBloomberg.com

"Under mayoral control, while all student groups had their test scores and graduation rates

increased, the dropout rates for English language learner students actually increased, and test scores and graduation rates for them decreased," said Ho. "While [Bloomberg] keeps talking about mayoral control being successful for the school system, that's not necessarily true for English language learners."

Bloomberg has said he will convene a task force in the hopes of improving academic performance for these students.

Supporting the Dream Act

The Dream Act , which stands for the Development, Relief and Education for Alien Minors Act, proposed legislation that would help certain undocumented immigrant youth gain legal status. The bill has been under discussion since 2001 and has been introduced to Congress at various occasions. Bloomberg has been an outspoken supporter.

"Why shouldn't our economy benefit from the skills these young people have obtained here in our public schools?" he said at a 2009 press conference officially endorsing the act . "It is senseless for us to chase out the home-grown talent that has the potential to contribute so significantly to our society. They're the ones who are going to start companies, invest in new technologies, pioneer medical advances. We need to welcome more immigrants, not deport those already here."

In the latest version , introduced in March 2009, undocumented immigrant youth would be eligible to apply for permanent residency if they have proof of having arrived in the U.S. before the age of 16 and have lived in the U.S. for at least five consecutive years. They must also have attended at least two years of American high school and have graduated from it. They will be given a six-year conditional status, during which period they must attend college or serve in the military for at least two years.

Bloomberg also cited the in-state tuition policy at the City University of New York as a model for other public institutions in the country. Currently any undocumented student who has attended high school for at least two years and graduate or earned a GED in New York State is eligible for the lower, in-state tuition at the City University if the person applies for a CUNY institution with five years of receiving their high school diploma.

Upgrading the Office of Immigrant Affairs

The Mayor's Office of Immigrant Affairs , formerly known as the Office of Immigrant Affairs and Language Assistance, has existed under various names and forms since the mid-1980s. In November 2001, the office became a charter agency, adopted by voter referendum into the city's charter. This provides it with direct access to the mayor and makes it a permanent part of the city government. In 2002, Bloomberg appointed
Sayu Bhojwani
as the first commissioner. Currently,
Fatima Shama
, a former education policy advisor to Bloomberg, heads the agency.

In 2004, Bloomberg initiated the first Immigrant Heritage Week . It is an annual citywide celebration of immigrant cultures that includes more than 100 free or low-cost events in art, music, dance and cinema. Taking place in every April, the celebration was made permanent when Bloomberg signed
Executive Order 128
in April 2009.

Protection Against Immigration Fraud

Like employment agencies, immigration service companies are found in many ethnic neighborhoods. Although not attorneys, their staffs help immigrants prepare the documents and forms required by the Department of Homeland Security. Many of these service providers take advantage of immigrants who are not familiar with immigration laws and not proficient in English. This often leads to fraud such as the companies demanding for money for services they didn't perform or providing legal advice when they are not supposed to.

In 2004, Bloomberg signed Local Law 31 to ensure that immigrants are protected from fraud. Immigration service agencies are required to provide written contract in English as well as the client's native language, give the client three days to cancel the contract without penalty, itemize all charges, give back original documents upon request and have a legible sign stating the provider is not an attorney.

New Initiatives

The mayor's latest program sets out a number of initiatives aimed at immigrants. For example, he said he will add 1,000 spots for English language learner students to the city's summer youth employment program, which serves more than 50,000 young people. The city will identify

bilingual work environments to accommodate students in entry-level jobs.

To help immigrants better integrate into civic life, Bloomberg proposed language assistance to immigrant homeowners on issues including code enforcement, property tax exemption, recycling, foreclosure prevention and so on. He said the Department of Housing Preservation and Development will conduct at least three forums per year in predominately immigrant communities.

To help immigrant entrepreneurs, the Department of Small Business Services will continue to conduct information sessions on financing, business assistance and government resources in Spanish. Bloomberg said similar programs in Russian and Asian languages are in the works.

At the federal level, Bloomberg said he will continue to advocate for comprehensive immigration reform. "I've said this a thousand times: I think this country is committing national suicide by not bringing the best and the brightest, the hardest working, the most fun â€¦ from around the world," Bloomberg said.

The People Will Be Watching

Advocates for immigrants will be checking to see whether Bloomberg delivers on his promises.

"Mayor Bloomberg does understand that the immigrant community is a vital part of New York City and he is committed to improving the quality of life for immigrant New Yorkers," said Wayne Ho. "But ... I would have hoped the mayor realizes that he is culpable in some of the challenges that immigrant New Yorkers currently face because he has cut back on budgets and hadn't passed certain policies earlier in his terms."

Discussing the mayor's new initiative, Hong said, "These are campaign promises but they are commitments on issues that immigrant communities have been talking about for a long time. ... It will be up to the people to hold him accountable to campaign pledges."

"In politics, they can offer everything. The thing is how do they do that," said Oscar Parades-Morales, executive director of the Latin American Workers Project . "We have to

continue to push and work together."

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