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**New York City Council Committee on Governmental Operations  
Council Member Fernando Cabrera, Chair  
Introduction 1867 - Municipal Voting Rights**

**Testimony of Nora Moran, United Neighborhood Houses  
September 20, 2021**

**Introduction**

Thank you for convening today's hearing and for the opportunity to testify in support of Introduction 1867 to expand voting rights in New York City elections. My name is Nora Moran, Director of Policy and Advocacy at United Neighborhood Houses (UNH). UNH is a policy and social change organization representing 44 neighborhood settlement houses, including 40 in New York City, that reach over 765,000 New Yorkers from all walks of life. A progressive leader for more than 100 years, UNH is stewarding a new era for New York's settlement house movement. We mobilize our members and their communities to advocate for good public policies and promote strong organizations and practices that keep neighborhoods resilient and thriving for all New Yorkers.

For too long we've seen a fundamental disconnect between public policies and our communities. It's time for New York City to hear from more of its residents and modernize civic participation. **UNH urges the City Council to pass Intro 1867 immediately.**

This legislation would amend the City Charter to permit lawfully present residents and those with work authorizations to vote in municipal elections, including races for Mayor, Comptroller, Public Advocate, Borough President, and City Council, as well as referenda and other local contests. The legislation would also allow noncitizen residents to join political parties, and vote in primary elections for municipal offices. Under its terms, a noncitizen would be qualified to vote in municipal elections if she or he is (1) a lawfully permanent resident or authorized to work in the United States (including Green Card holders and work authorizations such as DACA and TPS status); (2) a resident of New York City for at least 30 days; and (3) otherwise qualified to register to vote under New York State election law once exempted from the requirement that she or he possess United States citizenship.

**Background**

For over a century settlement houses have driven higher levels of civic engagement, particularly among disenfranchised community members. UNH works closely with settlement houses to promote civic engagement across New York City through leading nonpartisan voter mobilization,

promoting the inclusion of all residents in the 2020 Census and the redistricting process, and advocating for modernized election laws to ensure residents who live and work in the city are fairly represented in local government.

New York City is home to more than 3 million immigrants who contribute billions of dollars to our economy and expand the cultural and social vitality of our city. Even in normal times, New York City could not function without these immigrants. During the COVID-19 crisis, we saw the vital contributions immigrants made on behalf of our city. Over half of New York City's frontline workers during the pandemic were immigrants, and 1 in 5 were noncitizens.<sup>1</sup> These New Yorkers have been risking their lives to treat those stricken with COVID-19, stock our grocery shelves, take care of our elderly, and keep this city running in a time of crisis.

Despite their contributions and sacrifices, these New Yorkers cannot vote in local elections and have no say on the issues that affect them most, including public education, street safety, housing affordability, and more. And despite contributing billions of dollars in taxes annually, just like everyone else, these New Yorkers have no say in how their taxes are spent. These are our coworkers, neighbors, and friends.

Our nation's founders rallied behind the idea of "no taxation without representation." Those same founders chose not to make citizenship a requirement for voting. Race, gender, and property ownership were among the restrictions the founders imposed, but not citizenship. That is why noncitizen voting was common for the first 150 years of US history. Slowly, as our nation's immigration policies changed, the right to vote was stripped from noncitizens. In New York City, noncitizens were still permitted to vote in local school board elections until 2002, when school boards were eliminated in favor of Mayoral control of schools.

The right to vote has historically been linked to ideas about who we feel should or should not have political power. Allowing 900,000 New Yorkers with legal status the ability to vote in our local elections is a step towards acknowledging and expanding representation in our city; it sends a powerful message that New York does not support the national movement to restrict voting access; and it will build a better city for every New Yorker.

Furthermore, there is nothing in the federal or state constitution that prohibits New York City from passing Intro 1867.

The Our City Our Vote coalition, of which UNH co-leads with the New York Immigration Coalition, is calling on New York City to restore municipal voting rights for 900,000 Legal Permanent Residents and individuals with work authorization.

### **National Context and Momentum**

We are seeing states across the country take action to suppress voting rights, and here in New York City we have an opportunity to change the national discussion by expanding voting rights

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<sup>1</sup> <https://www1.nyc.gov/assets/immigrants/downloads/pdf/MOIA-Annual-Report-for-2020.pdf>

in municipal elections. As of today, the Our City, Our Vote coalition has over 65 partners, 28 endorsements, and 34 bill sponsors advocating for this legislation.

New York City would be the largest municipality in the nation to implement noncitizen voting in local elections, but it would not be the first. Takoma Park, Maryland implemented noncitizen voting for local elections in 1992, and they were soon followed by ten other Maryland municipalities. Implementation has been smooth and we have consulted with them to inform Intro 1867 bill language. San Francisco, California began allowing noncitizen voting in school board elections following a ballot initiative vote in 2016. Two municipalities in Vermont approved non-citizen municipal voting in June 2021. The movement is spreading, with new proposals now active in Chicago, Washington DC, and several municipalities in Massachusetts, among others.

### **Intro 2316**

In addition, UNH supports Intro 2316 introduced by Council Member Salamanca, which would provide that in any case in which testimony is presented by a City agency at a City Council committee hearing, an officer or employee of the City agency must be in attendance for the entirety of the hearing to listen to all the questions and testimony presented at the hearing. The bill would only apply to a City Council committee hearing that is open to the general public. This bill is necessary to ensure City agencies are listening to the public's ideas and concerns at critical City Council hearings.

### **Conclusion**

Expanding the right to vote in municipal elections to residents with legal status would provide more New Yorkers with the opportunity to have a say on issues that affect them and strengthen the voices of all our communities.

With citywide support and a super majority of City Council sponsors, now is the time to pass Intro 1867. The only thing standing in the way is a vote. We're proud to join our partners in calling on the Speaker of the City Council to move this bill forward and pass Intro 1867 immediately.

Thank you for the opportunity to testify today and for the Council's leadership on this critical issue. For more information, please contact me at [nmoran@unhny.org](mailto:nmoran@unhny.org).