Over 12 million immigrants first stepped foot on U.S. soil right here in Jersey City. It’s an exclusive part of our country’s history that only we can claim. For decades, Ellis Island served as an immigration station, welcoming newcomers of various ethnicities and backgrounds to become part of the local community. I am proud that this tradition lives on, that America’s Golden Door remains open, and that Jersey City is a home that offers sanctuary, opportunity, and hope to so many.

Building a life in a new home can often be met with struggle and hardship. My parents had many obstacles to overcome when they fled Romania to begin a new life in New Jersey. My two brothers and I worked in our father’s delicatessen, while my mother went on to open an office to assist immigrants in Newark. My parents are a reminder for me that everyone deserves the opportunity for a better life.

Today, my work as Mayor allows me the opportunity to help people in various ways, including efforts to assist immigrants trying to make a new life for themselves and their families. One of my proudest examples is when I signed Ordinance 13-047 creating the Immigrant Affairs Committee. Since then, our city government has benefited from a team of experts and community leaders to help us be more inclusive of newcomers. In the past year, the Immigrant Affairs Committee has worked closely with our city’s free immigration legal services team, the Immigrant Affairs Division at the Department of Health and Human Services. Together, the Division and the Committee have been able to serve and advocate for our immigrant neighbors in incredible ways.

This, their annual report, is just another demonstration of how Jersey City is stronger by including our immigrant neighbors, and I invite you to celebrate these meaningful achievements.

Sincerely,

Steven M. Fulop
Mayor
As Director of Health and Human Services, there is nothing more important than the health and wellbeing of Jersey City’s residents. But health is more than what we eat or how much we exercise. Our overall health is determined by every part of daily life: our jobs, our homes, our air, our sense of security. In a city where two of every five residents were born in another country, the health of immigrants is a barometer of the city’s public health at large.

To support our immigrant neighbors, our Division of Immigrant Affairs is proud to offer free legal services to immigrants living in Jersey City. Those seeking citizenship, green cards, immigration-medical exams, special statuses, and answers to immigration questions can speak to our multi-lingual and federally accredited staff. What’s more, we offer newcomers a host of resources aimed at civic engagement, community, wellness, and more. Even better—all of this is free to Jersey City residents.

This work of genuine service and integration cannot be done alone, which is why the Department of Health and Human Services is honored to convene the Jersey City Immigrant Affairs Committee. This panel of experts and community leaders provides essential insights and advisement on how Jersey City can continue to be one of the most welcoming cities in America. We share their 2022-2023 Annual Report as an invitation for you to support and join these meaningful efforts in our vibrant, inclusive, and healthy city.

Sincerely,

Director
Department of Health and Human Services
I am fortunate to not only be the child of South Asian immigrants, and lead a successful career as an immigration attorney, but I am proud to be an inaugural member of the Jersey City Immigrant Affairs Committee. As chairwoman, our group of appointed community leaders and experts plays a key role in how Jersey City — America’s “Golden Door” — welcomes newcomers from across the globe. We appreciate and celebrate these various journeys, from working class families to highly skilled professionals, in part, because we as Committee Members have walked similar paths. Our group of volunteer professionals have come from diverse parts of the globe to integrated into our growing, diverse, and most welcoming city.

This report chronicles one year of how our Immigrant Affairs Committee has used its connection to communities and expertise to advise the Mayor and City Council on how to advance and deepen Jersey City’s commitment to integration. You will see that each month has featured initiatives, informed in part by the Health and Human Services Division of Immigrant Affairs, on how elected officials can build unity, serve the underserved, and strengthen the fabric of our city.

Our concerns are local, but our advocacy aims both near and far. The IAC has given insights into local protocols on non-English messaging and led a successful effort to establish Muslim Heritage Month. We have helped Jersey City join a chorus of cities seeking changes to federal immigration rules that affect our residents, especially the disabled, digitally divided, and other vulnerable groups. The details of this report include multifaceted, thoughtful approaches that only this unique group of leaders can achieve.

I invite you to celebrate the previous year of the Immigrant Affairs Committee, and whether foreign, or native-born, join the great mission of integration and prosperity being realized in this great city, Jersey City.

Sincerely,

Chairperson
If there is an international migrant crisis anywhere in the world, chances are it affects Jersey City. This was certainly the case when Afghanistan fell to the Taliban in August 2021 and more than 70,000 Afghans evacuees came to the U.S. The HHS Division of Immigrant Affairs’ legal services team helped Afghan residents in Jersey City prepare thousands of pages of petitions, successfully reunited nine family members directly threatened with persecution. Thereafter, the Immigrant Affairs Committee voiced concern over the unorthodox way in which federal authorities admitted Afghan evacuees, not as refugees but as recipients of a tenuous Humanitarian Parole. In October 2022, IAC drafted a resolution later approved by the Jersey City Municipal Council calling on congressional passage of the Afghan Adjustment Act, which would create a path to permanent residency for vetted Afghan arrivals who have received refugee, but not the legal status of Refugee. Similar policies affect Ukrainian parolees as well.
When Seema Kakar came to the Jersey City Division of Immigration Affairs HHS, federally accredited experts helped her prepare petitions for her family members in Afghanistan. After her family escaped, the petitions, which detailed direct threats from the Taliban, were approved. In April 2022, Seema was reunited with eight of her family members in Jersey City. Several other petitions from Jersey City residents await adjudication from federal immigration authorities.

UNIVERSITY & IAC WORK FOR CIVIC ENGAGEMENT

In October, the IAC opened dialogue with New Jersey City University on how students can build bridges for integration. Professor Jennifer Musial, PhD presented at the monthly meeting on how she facilitates student-led projects aimed at increasing the civic engagement and enfranchisement of immigrants and other peripheral constituencies. Committee members provided input and references for how students can support newly naturalized first-time voters, immigrants seeking asylum and other paths to citizenship, as well as other cultural and religious groups.

IAC CALLS FOR LOWER BARRIERS FOR SICK, DISABLED APPLICANTS

Sick and disabled citizenship applicants face enormous barriers when seeking accommodation for their naturalization exam. The HHS Division of Immigration Affairs has assisted residents whose medical exemption requests are very unfortunately delayed, denied, or seemingly ignored by federal officials. In the worst of cases, one Jersey City applicant succumbed to illnesses while waiting months for a medical exemption. After Mayor Steven M. Fulop joined a successful national call for reform, the IAC authored a resolution in November, later approved by the Jersey City Municipal Council, celebrating the simplification of medical exemption requests. The resolution deftly points out that disable residents seeking naturalization deserve adjudication of their requests prior to appearing for the interview.
In January 2023, federal officials proposed a series of increases to immigration application fees. IAC members analyzed the proposal and found the increases would affect Jersey City business owners seeking to sponsor highly qualified immigrant workers, as well as recently wed spouse petitioners and those without access to tools needed to submit digital applications. The most severe increases were a staggering 300% higher. The IAC advised the Mayor and Council to post comments to Federal Registry criticizing the severity of the proposed increases and celebrating the exclusion of naturalization fee hikes.

In March, the New Jersey State Legislature considered the creation of Muslim Heritage Month, as New Jersey is home to three times the national average of Muslims. The IAC authored a supportive resolution later passed by the Municipal Council citing the successes of Muslim immigrants and the Muslim tradition of Zakat charitable giving.

New Jersey is home to more than 15,000 people who can’t safely return to their home countries and have received Temporary Protected Status (TPS). In late 2022 the U.S. Department of Homeland Security renewed several countries’ TPS designations, some with automatic extensions and others with new application requirements. While TPS designations expanded to include Ukraine, Afghanistan, and Venezuela, so did the prevalence of fraudulent service providers seeking to take advantage of Jersey City residents applying for TPS. In December 2022, the IAC authored a resolution, later passed by the Municipal Council, celebrating the TPS extensions and calling for state measures to protect TPS seekers from fraud.
MUSLIM HERITAGE MADE OFFICIAL IN JERSEY CITY

With the New Jersey State legislature’s successful passage of AJR194/SJR105 establishing Muslim Heritage Month, the IAC authored a resolution later approved by the Municipal Council to establish a local recognition of the same. With it, city agencies will be fully authorized to prepare for the first annual Muslim Heritage month in March 2024.

APRIL 2023

IMMIGRANT AFFAIRS COMMITTEE PANEL ON ANTI-DISCRIMINATION

One year after the IAC authored a City Council resolution recognizing Equality Day in honor of civil rights in India, the IAC hosted a panel discussion on how the caste system impacts South Asian immigrants in America. Open to the public, the meeting featured a group of professors and attorneys who detailed historical backgrounds and how U.S. anti-discrimination laws may protect minorities.

AFGHAN AND UKRAINIAN PAROLEES DESERVE EASIER STATUS RENEWALS

As the Afghan migrant crisis approached its third year, Jersey City’s new residents who arrived as part of Operation Allies Welcome faced the expiration of their parole status. When federal agencies signaled the creation of unprecedented processes to renew the already unorthodox granting of parole, IAC advised the Mayor and Municipal Council to call for a simplified renewal process, the continuance of federal benefits, and the passage of the Afghan Adjustment Act to facilitate the fullest integration and health of our new Afghan neighbors.

JUNE 2023

LOCAL DOCTOR PROMOTES CHANGES FOR IMMIGRATION & HEALTH

During the month of Ramadan, Muslim-American Dr. Saquiba Syed, MD shared insights with the IAC about her local medical practices and the barriers facing her immigrant patients. Important items included deficits in language access, barriers to health insurance enrollment, and the complexity of immigration-medical processes. Dr. Syed applauded HHS Immigrant Affairs for offering free Civil Surgeon medical exams to refugee residents and seeking cooperation between physicians and immigration legal services providers. This same month, Dr. Syed was honored with a Jersey City Women of Action Award.
In June, the Jersey City Municipal Council voted to amend the ordinance that created the IAC, officially aligning it with the Department of Health and Human Services. This enabled the Immigrant Affairs Committee’s advisory mission to be unified with the HHS Division of Immigrant Affairs’ service programs. Together they offer unified services and advocacy for the fullest integration of foreign-born residents, for the betterment of health and prosperity of all.

**IAC WELCOMES THREE NEW COMMITTEE MEMBERS**

Ebony Anuforo, Esq. MPP is an immigration attorney who serves victims of domestic violence, asylum seekers, family petitioners, and many others. She has given years of pro-bono legal services to immigrant detainees on behalf of the American Friends Service Committee, taught law at Southern New Hampshire University, and recently authored *The Marriage Green Card Guide*.

Yamilée J. Bazile brings 18 years of project management experience in nonprofit and educational institutions. She currently serves on the leadership boards of the Haiti Solidarity Network, Haitians Unified for Development and Education, and Mobile Missions for Haiti. She is a first generation Haitian American, born and raised in Jersey City, and a graduate of Saint Peter’s University.

Stephen M. De Luca, S.J.D. is a litigator with three decades of experience, admitted in three states and ten federal courts. He serves on the Board of Trustees of the NJ Coalition Against Human Trafficking and on the Jersey City Division of Immigrant Affairs’ Fellows Program to assist low-income citizenship seekers.

**IAC EXTENDS THANKS TO OUTGOING MEMBERS**

Cecilia Aranzamendez, JD MSW was an inaugural member of the IAC, serving to elevate the voices of Asian American and Pacific Islander communities, as well as refugees and other new immigrants. With credentials in both law and social work, Cecilia serves as the Executive Director of Community Services at Lutheran Social Services of New York. Her presence and contributions on the IAC were instrumental, prolific, and meaningful.

Swati Sawant, Esq. served on the IAC for five years and was instrumental in the recognition of Equality Day in honor of civil rights in India, as well as public awareness surrounding caste discrimination. Her experience as an immigration attorney defending the rights of human trafficking victims both informed and invigorated her services as a Committee member.
IAC STUDIES IMPROVEMENTS TO LANGUAGE ACCESS

In August, IAC members deepened their investigation into ways of improving non-English communication for Jersey City’s residents. The group embarked on a multi-month study of language proficiencies, preferred modes of communication, best practices, and comparative studies. The resulting consensus is that Jersey City, with its highly unique language profile, is poised to become the most linguistically inclusive city of its kind.

MORE SUPPORT FOR NONPROFITS THAT HELP IMMIGRANT APPLICANTS

As the federal government’s keystone grant for naturalization seekers opened for applicants, IAC members advised the Mayor and City Council to support efforts calling for funding increases in targeted areas. While the HHS Division of Immigrant Affairs is not a recipient of the USCIS Naturalization and Integration Grant, many citizenship-seeking residents with complex applications depend on local nonprofit organizations. The call for grant reforms was led by the National Association of Latino Elected Officials Education Fund, and addresses both funding and backlogs for future citizenship seekers currently awaiting asylum adjudication.
IAC STRATEGIZES INCLUSIVITY FOR
DIGITAL APPLICATIONS

As the U.S. Department of Homeland Security expands digital filing of immigration applications, many residents have found themselves on the wrong side of the ‘Digital Divide.’ In a communication to the City Council, the IAC suggested strategic ways to call for more inclusive digital expansions and more equitable fees for digital and non-digital immigration applicants. The policies affect Family Petitioners, Refugees and Asylees, as well as all those seeking Employment Authorization Documents.

JERSEY CITY STILL #1 IN
LEGAL SERVICES

In October, the Immigrant Affairs Division’s Accreditation and Recognition was renewed by the U.S. Department of Justice, authorizing trained city employees to provide free legal services to immigrant residents. There are now three Accredited Representatives assisting with applications for citizenship, Green Cards, TPS, and other benefits. Jersey City remains the first and only city in America with an accredited Department of Health and Human Services.

IMMIGRANT AFFAIRS COMMITTEE CALLS FOR
LINGUISTIC INCLUSIVITY

Following its multi-month investigation and discussions with various city officials, the Immigrant Affairs Committee authored its recommendation to the City Council for a comprehensive plan for expanding its non-English messaging. The plan calls for official target languages informed by local language audits, certified translation and interpretation, and strategic expansion of digital communications to non-English speakers.