

Hello and welcome to Represent NYC, on the Manhattan Neighborhood Network. Thank you for joining us. I'm Council Member Keith Powers, and I represent New York City's District Four, covering the East Side, Manhattan, and Mid-Town, with some of the city's greatest landmarks, like Carnegie Hall, the Empire State Building, and the New York Public Library. I also serve as a Chair of the City Council's Criminal Justice Committee.

As a Council Member, I pay close attention to the issues that impact the community, and propose legislation to help improve the quality of life for New Yorkers. Today, I'll be discussing two relevant topics that impact New Yorkers, immigration affairs and criminal justice. My first guest is Bitta Mostofi, she's Acting Commissioner of the Mayor's Office of Immigrant Affairs, where she works to ensure that all immigrant New Yorkers are part of the city, and have access to justice.

With New York City serving as a leading Sanctuary City, and one built on diversity, I think we can all agree, this sort of work is critically important. Thank you for joining me today.

Thank you so much for having me.

Of course. Just tell us a little bit about your work, as working as the Commissioner of the Mayor's Office of Immigrant Affairs.

We are truly a city of immigrants, three million New Yorkers foreign born, 37% of our population, and when you add in their children, that takes you to 60%, so when we talk about the work that we do to promote the well being of immigrant New Yorkers, we're really talking about the well being of New York City. And so, so much of what we do in our office is looking at how to ensure that we remain an inclusive and welcoming city, that we are working for our immigrant communities, and in a way that they can more easily access services like programs like IDNYC, the city's Municipal ID Program, ensuring language access across our agencies. Through access to justice, making sure people have immigrant legal services, that we're building information and education in our communities about their rights, and then making sure that we as a city are advocating for the immigrant rights of New Yorkers, at all levels of the government, both to the state and the federal government.

Thank you, great, and I think particularly this moment in time, I'm sure it's very trying and challenging but interesting work. Before we get into the other questions, I want to, what IDNYC, just for a second, it's something that I've always been interested in. And ways we can expand it, and make it even more inclusive. Just tell us a little bit about IDNYC, and where it stands, and refresh for the viewers, how it became a thing in New York City.

Yeah happily. So, I'll start by saying we have the most successful ID program in the country. Local ID program, which is incredible. And really, the impetus for something like this is to look at, we live in moment I should say, where you would think you don't need ID or have to have ID for your most basic interactions, but you really do, right? Everything from picking up your child at school, to you know if you get caught for a minor infraction with NYPD, you must demonstrate that you live in New York City not to be arrested, so on and so forth.

And so the creation of the program was really looking at vulnerable populations, including undocumented immigrants, who have been unable to access government issued identification, as a way to move them, to be able to interact with government, to get financial access to institutions like banking

institutions. To be able to pick up their children from school, and we were thrilled when we rolled out the program, in that we had a tremendous response. We've enrolled over one million New Yorkers as of last year. And we did a survey about a year ago, where we asked card holders, why they got the card, and how they feel about it. And immigrant respondents, people who identified as immigrants who responded to the survey, 75% of them said the program made them feel a greater sense of belonging to the city.

And that is so critical in just making sure that as an immigrant individual, regardless of your status, you're comfortable interfacing with city government. It makes us safer. It makes all of us well off.

And I assume one of the important parts was also making sure that everybody gets it, so that it's not just immigrants, it's New Yorkers as well have it, so it doesn't single out any individual for status[crosstalk 00:04:42].

Yes, absolutely, and I should point out especially given your council district, that a huge part of that has been the inclusion of equity and access to cultural institutions, right? So we have over 40 cultural institutions who will offer free memberships for a year to card holders, and then thereafter, promotions and things like that, and that is important generally in the way that we look at diversifying art and equity of art for all New Yorkers, but also insuring that, you know not just our vulnerable populations, but all New Yorkers, see this as a card that's meant for them.

Right. And one of the recent topics has been around the census and 2020, and I know that a number of elected officials have called out, myself included, have called out against the use of the question around citizenship on the census, and I assume that's something that your office will be working on. Can you give us an update on what's happening with the census, and what your office might be doing around the census?

Yes, thank you for that question. I wanna start by emphasizing the importance of the census. So, for those who are unaware, we know the census will be in 2020, and in March of 2020, people will start to receive this survey to fill out and complete. And the census is really foundational to so much of what the city does, and how we serve our residents. It's where we get identified in terms of congressional representation, our ability to really exercise our democratic rights as a city, it identifies federal funding for programs like Headstart Programs, funding for things like bridges. It's so incredibly important to take the census seriously and to participate in the census.

So as a city, the mayor has already committed to supplementing where we see gaps in terms of being able to reach individuals. Establishing a census coordinator and an office to work on ensuring that every New Yorker is participating, because it's so vital. And in this moment in time, the Director of Commerce at the federal level announced that they would include, a question that asks individuals if they're citizens or not. It's a kind of up or down question. And from our point of view as a city, this is troubling for a number of reasons. But first and foremost, because we're in a moment in time where, there's increased fear and a chilling effect in our Immigrant communities because of this anti-immigrant rhetoric that's coming from the federal government.

So while we know that the census itself has tremendous federal protections around privacy, misuse of its data, so on and so forth, we firmly believe that it's going to have an impact on our residents feeling comfortable exercising their rights. Their ability to be counted in the census, so that the right amount of

resources can be allocated to them and their communities. So the mayor has joined the New York Attorney General in a lawsuit, calling for the question to be removed. I think a critical part of that is the Census Bureau runs tests on the census, years of testing questions to see what the response will be, to see what the impact will be. They have not tested this question. They've just run their final full test in Rhode Island. They have not tested this question.

So in terms of kind of legal concerns, and concerns about impact, we've joined this litigation, and we'll fight that, and we are trying to make sure that people are educated and aware. Like I said, there are confidentiality protections around this. We firmly believe that all communities should feel confident coming forward and being counted, and wanna make sure that we're increasing the education and awareness around this.

And if it is included, you can still skip it, right? So New Yorkers should know that they can skip the question and still complete the census, is that correct?

It's not advised that you skip questions on the census.

Right, okay. So don't skip questions, and don't hack the census, okay, got it. I want to skip to, and thank you for your work in that regard, and I know that many of us feel similar. Just taking a broader look at the work you're doing in the city, I know that your office had released a report, The State of the Immigrant City, tell us a little bit about the report and the findings, and maybe any next steps with it.

Yeah, happily, so this was the first ever report coming from our office. It's responsive to city council legislation that seeks to expand the work of the office and really codify what's happened under the de Blasio administration, and the city council, to expand the work and purview of the office. And we were really happy for the first time, one to be able to speak about what immigrant New York looks like, again emphasizing just the sheer breadth of New Yorkers who are immigrants, or who come from immigrant backgrounds. We kind of further dove into that, and looking at some of the barriers they face. The fact that over one million households are mixed status households, so there's an undocumented individual that lives in the households. The economic contributions of immigrant New Yorkers, over 195 billion dollars last year to our city's GDP, and over 52% of our small businesses owned by immigrant New Yorkers.

So really being able to color in with some kind of facts, and data, what it means to have immigrants in our city, and the contributions that they provide. And then on the other side of the report, speak to the work of our office that we've done in partnership with the council, with funders, community based organizations and immigrants themselves. And we were really proud to be able to speak about our work in the aftermath of the elections, really fighting to provide education around DACA and the Dream Act for temporary protected status holders, against the travel ban, spreading information in our communities with over 1400 outreach events. Conducting Know Your Rights forums so people know their rights, both as they interfaced with the city, but also if they're interacting with immigration enforcement.

And really the policies and programs that we've sought to advance, from things like IDNYC, to immigrant legal services that are community based, and have the cultural and linguistic competency that immigrants need to get these services, and our We Are New York program, which is a language access English education program.

I know that one of the things the council was looking at, and I think ended up doing was the immigrant services, the legal services. That's happening now, and it's funded, and tell us more about that.

Yeah, so we as New Yorkers should be very proud of what we've done. We, last year with the administration's investment, the administration invested 30 million dollars in legal services, and when you add it on the council's investment in that, that took you to over 40 million dollars, in immigrant legal services, which is historically and nationally the largest investment that we've seen at the local level. You know this allows us to try to step in and fill the gap where the federal government does nothing. They are in charge of immigrant enforcement, yet they provide no access to council or right to council, so-

In fact I think many of who we're probably protecting is against the federal government right now.

Well you know, just as the right to council attaches in a criminal proceeding, and you would think that the federal government would step in and do something here. They haven't, so where there's been this tremendous gap, the city, the mayor, and the city council have stepped in to try to meet some of this gap. Looking to see how we can prioritize use of this money to make sure we're reaching the right folks, we're reaching people who are seeking asylum, and children, unaccompanied minors who come here, so on and so forth. So this is a tremendous investment, and hopefully we're able to kind of minimally get as many people as we can through those doors and provide those services.

Great, so I know our time's winding down, but anything we should be looking out for in the future, in terms of work your office is doing?

Yes, we are planning an expansion of our We Are New York program in the coming months. This is again, an English language program and curricula. It's really designed for people to be able to do this in part on their own, through web and social innovations we'll be launching, as well as we're increasing a series of episodes that people, videos that people can share. They can use in their own classrooms, that speak to city services, that feature immigrants kind of going through their daily lives, but also the needs that they might have, and how they can access those resources.

Well, that's great. Well we look forward to seeing more of your work. Thank you for the work you're doing already on behalf of the entire city and so many New Yorkers. And thank you for educating us on all the great work you're doing. So we're gonna take a short break, and then continue discussion with the shift to criminal justice in New York City, featuring Controller Scott Stringer. We'll be right back.

Welcome back to represent NYC. New York City Controller Scott Stringer is responsible for auditing and monitoring finances of city agencies. As part of that roll, Controller Stringer has taken a close look at our criminal justice system, and has proposed suggestions for ways that we can improve it, including why we must close Ryker's Island. Controller, thank you for joining me today, it's a pleasure.

Great to be on the show, and good to be with you.

Thank you, I appreciate it. So before we jump into the conversation on criminal justice, why don't you just tell us a little bit about your office and what the city Controller's up to.

Well it's great to be on MNN and have an opportunity to talk directly to Manhattan constituents about this role. As a former Manhattan Borough President, we did a lot of land use and zoning work,

protecting the skyline of Manhattan. Now as Controller, we protect the retirement security of 700,000 retirees, as the fiduciary of this now 195 billion dollar pension fund. We also audit and monitor city agencies, so we hold city hall accountable. We watch out for people's tax dollars, and we try to offer solutions about how we can grow and sustain our economy, so I believe every dollar counts, but we also have to make sure that we're fighting for our seniors, our young people, and the amazing diversity of New York City.

I like it, and one of the things I think you've done well with your office is to expand its mandate beyond just the auditing, and monitoring, is to look at issues in the city from a citywide perspective. And one of them that you had done a report on recently was around the use of commercial bail bonds, which I think has gotten a lot of attention. Even the New York Times covered this just recently. Give us a little bit of information about your report, what your findings were, and where you think we were going, in terms of commercial bail bonds.

Well first of all, I wanna say that in the few months you've been in office, I've really enjoyed our collaboration on some of the fundamental criminal justice issues facing our city, and that we have to think in a smart way about how we deal with all people who come into the criminal justice system. So for me, we did an analysis of the bail bonds industry, and found that bail basically, is an economic tool that enriches the bail bondsman, but doesn't necessarily actually accomplish what it set out to do, which is to make sure that people return to court to answer a summons or some charge. We believe there's a different way of doing this. The bail bonds industry is taking millions of dollars from people who could be charged with a very low crime and yet, they have to go out and borrow money, or they're at the beck and call of the bail bondsman. They're getting enriched at the expense of people, who are very often innocent of any charges, but have to go through this cumbersome bail bondsman process.

I've also said, that the judges have to wake up and smell the coffee. I know their calendars are great, I know they have a lot to do, but there's no reason they should pass off every defendant to the bail bondsman, and say, "Well, we'll see what happens to you, we don't have anything to do with it," when in fact the judge can offer concrete alternatives with different ways to guarantee court return.

I note that your report I think has already spurred some action. I know the council's looking at the issue with some bills we're looking at, in response to both the work you've highlighted. Do you have any next steps in terms of your report?

Well we wanna work with you and your committee so we can reform this process, I mean at the end of the day, people who end up in court are the poorest of the poor. And so they're, to go to a bail bondsman, to try to take out loans, get collateral, it just doesn't work. And we're still in a process that's decades old. But the people who benefit are the bail bondsmen, and we have to change that. So we do think, I do think that there is legislative work that we can collaborate on, and you know, it gets to your first question, what does a Controller do? Well we do these reports so that we can then work with the legislative branch and the mayor's office, to actually get results.

Yeah and I appreciate that. And one of the big issues that you've talked about and I've talked about, is the big question on Ryker's Island, and the future of Ryker's Island, and eventually closing it down. In one of the reports that you've done really highlighted how much money we're spending in our correctional system, period. Can you tell us more about your findings in terms of how much money we're spending. I think New Yorkers would be surprised about that.

Like you, I believe that it's time to shut down Ryker's Island, and come up with a more humane and more cost effective criminal justice processing. So we're spending now 1.3 billion dollars on Ryker's Island. We keep spending more, even though the population is down to 9500. So we have more violence, between guards and inmates, inmates on inmates, we have less prisoners, and yet we're spending more. We now spend \$270,000 per inmate, in terms of incarcerating them on Ryker's Island. That's a ridiculous sum of money. And so you have this huge Ryker's Island facility, that is antiquated, this is literally falling apart. You and I have both been there to see what's going on there. It's sort of like a thing of the past.

Now I know, decades and decades ago, Ryker's Island was meant to be the high standard of criminal justice. But it's not today, and we need to step up and say, "It's time to close it." Save all that money from closing it, and figure out a way to deal with these prisoners. Now we believe that we're gonna see a further decrease in incarcerated prisoners. We could get as low as 5000. That is a manageable number that can be dealt with throughout the city.

Yeah I agree, and one of the questions that has come up is the safety, and you and I were both actually on a panel recently talking about safety, I mean in addition to the new jail facilities, how do we make it, how can we make sure that anybody who's either in our custody, or working on the Island stays safe?

Well this is the question I think has boggled the mind. We see less prisoners, higher cost, more violence. Now how is that possible? So there's clearly management issues that we've documented through our reports. There cannot be a situation where someone who is innocent goes to Ryker's Island, gets beaten and thrown into a jail cell with dangerous conditions surrounding them. We also have to make sure that our correctional guards are safe at all times. So there's been a systematic attack on inmates and correction officers. That has to change, and we have to start thinking about ways to do that.

Yeah, appreciate it. Just shifting to another big topic in the city MTA, you've done a recent report around the MTA, especially I think about off peak hours. Tell us about your report, your findings, and maybe any next steps around it.

Well I also wanna work with you on these issues with the city council. We've issued a number of reports. We've highlighted the lack of elevator service and escalators around the system. We looked at how much money businesses were losing because the trains weren't running, and people were literally losing hundreds of millions of dollars in revenue to our business community, and now we just issued a report that I think people would find very interesting. I would argue today, that the rush hour that we all grew up with is no more. People are going to work as early as 5:00 am, people are coming home as late as 11:00 pm, and our subway and bus service is not, it does not correspond to the new way people are working. With now have economic hubs in Queens, and Brooklyn, Bronx, and Staten Island. They were not there 20, 30 years ago. Yet our mass transit system is not increasing service at those off peak hours that actually have become the new rush hour.

So if we're really gonna create an opportunity for all New Yorkers to get to and from work, to drive the economy, yes it's a matter of dollars to the system, but it's also Management 101. If you see people working later at night, then you get bus and subway service to those New Yorkers. If you see people starting work at 5:00 am, well you need to increase that. We see 14% uptick in people going to work during those early morning hours and later at night. It's a huge explosion of workers, so let's create a subway system to meet the new working needs in the city.

I guess the nine to five is really not the way of the world that it used to be as you mentioned.

Well we went from 53% of people going to work during the traditional rush hour. We're now down to 28%. So the other 25 or so percent of people have to be accounted for, and that just means we have to change the way our subways run. They should be running at night. They should be running earlier in the morning, because look, our economy is based on the subway grid. Make no mistake. Economic opportunity comes from an expanded subway service. That was true a hundred years ago, and that is very true today. So let's meet those needs.

And one of the, as we discuss the MTA ongoing, throughout the city and the state, one of the concerns from many, and probably the viewers as well, has been cost overruns, and management of the funds, and as we put more money into the system, making sure that money goes directly into service, rather than projects that take 10 years longer than expected. And as the city Controller, you may not have direct oversight of it, but what is the feeling in terms of how we can improve management of the actual funding that goes into the system.

Look we have to, certainly with our capital projects that we fund, they have to come in on budget and on time. When I was borough President, I was invited to fourth opening of the Second Avenue subway. And the waste and collateral damage to the businesses on Second Avenue still stay with me today. If we're really gonna transform our subway system, we're also gonna have to think about ways to better manage our money, and better manage our systems, and that is something that worries me as Controller, and we have to think about that. The city is now giving 400+ million dollars to the emergency loader plan. Something I advocated for early on, but we also have to have a memo of understanding that those projects that we're gonna fund go to New York City projects, and also that they are coming in on time and on budget. This is a crucial time in terms of the relationship between the city, and the MTA.

Yeah, agree. So we're gonna move to one other large topic. We're just gonna cover them all, our NYCHA, New York City rapid fire, this is New York City powered rapid fire questions. While we got you here, we wanna know what's going on with the New York City public housing. You sent a report related to, I think the condition of the open spaces and the playgrounds in public housing, and obviously this has been a topic, the conditions and NYCHA period. Over the top you've looked at, and the city and state have looked at, and talked about a lot recently. Tell us a little bit about your report, and your findings around public housing.

This is our ninth audit of NYCHA since I've been Controller. We've audited NYCHA more than all the Controllers combined in modern history. But this particular audit is a heartbreaker, because this is about the 100,000 children in NYCHA who use NYCHA playgrounds. And what we found is that 75% of these playgrounds are in total disrepair. Now for parents who are listening, think about the horror story of your six or four year old, and I have personal experience with this with my kids, who run off to play, they jump on all the play area equipment, and suddenly they're coming down the slide and there's a jagged knife sticking out of the slide or the swing. This is what we documented. We took pictures, we have the evidence.

And where are the NYCHA inspections? Some of these sites were never inspected in the 17 months we did the audits, even though there should be monthly inspections, and a lot of these inspections, quite frankly were bogus, because they didn't reflect the conditions we saw. So from the boilers to lead paint, to now this issue with playgrounds, you know who's getting hurt in all this? It's the kids, who are growing up in substandard conditions, both within their apartment, and now in the play areas that they

have. We need to continue to insist, that NYCHA creates management systems that protect residents, protect children, and as long as I'm Controller Keith, I'm gonna work with you to make sure that every NYCHA resident is protected.

Yeah, it was, I mean horrifying to realize the conditions around heat, hot water, we did a hearing at the city council, and it was cities, cities like the size of Cincinnati, Ohio, and Oakland, that were in NYCHA, so horrifying. Any next steps that you're taking in terms of NYCHA, public housing? Whether it's this audit or a past audit?

Well I stood with the governor along with other elected officials, I do think we need an independent monitor. As part of my responsibility in the executive order is to work with the city council. You're gonna select that monitor, and then we have to look at the data that we've accumulated, and then create a management system that's gonna get boilers in, we're gonna make sure that we fix those playgrounds. We don't cordon them off. And that we bring NYCHA into the 21st century. I still believe that we should use Battery Park city proceeds, as a way of creating a 400 million dollar fund, so that we can fix broken windows, help create a revenue stream for those capital repairs.

Look, Washington is not our friend. NYCHA needs 17 billion dollars. We're not gonna see that from Washington, but we have to help ourselves, and we cannot concede or use that as an excuse.

Well NYCHA, MTA, and Ryker's Island, not too bad a day for Scott Stringer. We're out of time.

Again, I'd like to thank both of my guests, Controller Scott Stringer, and Commissioner Bitta Mostofi, for great conversations. And thank you for watching Represent NWC, on Manhattan Neighborhood Network. I'm Council Member Keith Powers, and I look forward to seeing you in the neighborhood. Goodbye.