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SERVICES
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City Council Committee on Housing and Buildings
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Equal Access to Housing Services Act

Testimony of
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Good afternoon, members of the Committee. Thank you for inviting MFY to this hearing and giving us this opportunity to share with you our support for the Equal Access to Housing Services Act.

My name is Donna Chiu and I am a staff attorney for the Lower Manhattan Justice Project at MFY Legal Services. This project is made possible by a grant from the Lower Manhattan Development Corporation. MFY is a non-profit legal services organization that serves low income New Yorkers through advice, counsel and full representation. The Lower Manhattan Justice Project aims to save affordable housing and preserve the diversity of the neighborhoods south of Houston Street.

Part of the philosophy and practice at MFY Legal Services is to provide equal access to justice and the legal system here in the city. Thus, it is a priority at MFY to ensure that non-English speaking and limited-English proficient clients receive legal assistance in their native languages. Aside from the more frequently spoken languages such as Spanish and various dialects of Chinese, MFY has provided direct assistance to clients in Tagalog, Russian, Albanian, Haitian-Creole, and Hindi, just to name a few.

As a bilingual attorney at MFY, I have witnessed the overwhelming need for multilingual legal and administrative services. I have helped many non-English speaking tenants translate correspondence and fill out forms from HPD. Individuals would not need an attorney in these cases if they were provided with forms and correspondence in their native language. And legal services agencies with limited resources would not have to expend resources that could otherwise be used for more complicated legal interventions. With guaranteed multilingual outreach and services from HPD, tenants will be informed no matter what their language is. They will no longer feel discouraged from filing complaints because they do not speak English. They will be better informed about HPD hearings by having a translator present. And they will no longer have to worry about miscommunication with the HPD housing inspector or having a friend or family member present at the apartment to translate.

The language barriers that non-English speaking or limited-English proficient clients have experienced at HPD are a needless burden that can easily be eliminated by providing them with true equal access through the provision of language translation services. The Equal Access to Housing Services Act accomplishes this admirable goal.

On both a professional and personal level, I am excited about the positive change this new legislation will bring in improving people's lives. It's about time residents in immigrant communities who are often linguistically isolated and in need of housing maintenance services and protection are informed about HPD and provided with real access to its services. The city cannot honestly celebrate and boast its immigrant and multicultural characteristics without ensuring equal access to city services for all its residents.