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Libraries, An Invaluable Resource for Immigrants

By Jonathan Bowles

EARLIER THIS SUMMER, MAYOR BLOOMBERG and the City Council struck a deal to restore six day a week service to the city's public libraries. While overshadowed by other initiatives, like the mayor's congestion pricing plan, the agreement to extend libraries hours is a huge victory for immigrants, children, seniors and working adults—many of whom couldn't previously take advantage of this tremendous resource.

While most everyone supports libraries, few recognize how significant they are in the context of workforce and community development. Yet, New York's three public library systems—Brooklyn Public Library, Queens Public Library and New York Public Library, which serves Manhattan, the Bronx and Staten Island—are much more than just places to borrow books. They foster reading skills in kids, assist adults in addressing skills gaps, help immigrants assimilate and bolster technology access for individuals who don't have the Internet at home. Libraries complement the public schools in improving student achievement by offering after school tutoring and other learning initiatives. And through GED prep courses, entrepreneurship workshops and ESOL classes, they help equip adults with the tools to compete in today's economy.

These resources are invaluable because New York desperately needs to invest in its human capital. Currently, 57 percent of all elementary and middle school students read below state and city standards; 1.5 million New Yorkers have limited literacy skills;

a quarter of all adults across the city have inadequate English skills; and the teen unemployment rate is nearly double the national rate.

Government agencies and nonprofit organizations provide some of the same services as libraries, but no other institution serves such a diverse mix of New Yorkers—from first graders to seniors, new immigrants to long-time residents and would-be entrepreneurs to first-time job applicants. With branches throughout the five boroughs, libraries are easily accessible for most New Yorkers. They are also probably the one public institution at which immigrants feel comfortable accessing services, a fact that can't be overlooked since immigrants and their children comprise 60 percent of the city's population.

Until now, however, too few of the city's library branches were open when New Yorkers who need them the most could use them. Branches in every borough were open under 40 hours per week, on average. Scores of branches weren't open on a single weekend day, and the vast majority of them shut their doors by 6pm on most nights. New York's libraries averaged fewer hours per week than libraries in every one of the other 20 largest cities in the U.S. For instance, libraries are open 59 hours a week in Chicago, 53 hours in Los Angeles and 66 hours in Phoenix.

Most immigrants and working New Yorkers already know that the city's libraries offer an array of services from which they can benefit. Now, many more of them will be able to take advantage of these opportunities.