

How to Testify at NYC Council Meetings

Testifying before the New York City Council is a valuable opportunity for nonprofits and community-based organizations to make our voices, expertise, and opinions heard on the public record. As a legislative and oversight body, the NYC Council frequently convenes hearings on a wide range of subjects—from small businesses to mental health funding to public safety and more—gathering public input on City programs and services as well as proposed legislation.

Anyone who is a resident of New York City can sign up to testify before the City Council and speak directly to Council Members, agency officials, and other key policymakers within our local government. Nonprofits and community-based organizations often work directly with vulnerable, underserved New Yorkers, and **testifying before the City Council is another important way to advocate for equitable, just policies that improve the lives of the communities we serve.**

The Asian American Federation has prepared this primer on crafting effective testimonies with some frequently asked questions about the process, a suggested template, best practices, and an example of both a written and oral testimony. Whether it's your first time testifying or your hundredth, we hope this guide can be a useful tool in creating concise, powerful testimonies that help tell the story of your community.

Additionally, we are also more than happy to coordinate with member organizations on testifying at upcoming hearings to amplify our collective voices. Please reach out to us if you're interested!

For further questions on testifying before City Council, contact navdeep.bains@aafederation.org.

NYC Council Hearings 101

The schedule of all hearings is posted online at <https://legistar.council.nyc.gov/Calendar.aspx>. You can filter by specific committee to more easily find upcoming hearings relevant to your organization's work.

New York residents can testify either in person or virtually at City Council by signing up at <https://council.nyc.gov/testify/> no less than 24 hours before the hearing. Written testimonies can be submitted at the same link and will be accepted up to 72 hours after the hearing has ended.

If you're unable to testify during the hearing, written testimonies can also be emailed to testimony@council.nyc.gov. Include the date and hearing title in your subject line and your contact information in the body of the email. We recommend also cc'ing the chair of the hearing and any key Council Members. This information can be found in the agenda of any given hearing, which is also available on the online schedule.

If you're testifying in person, the schedule also includes the meeting location of each hearing. Most in-person hearings take place either at City Hall or the building next door at 250 Broadway. Arrive early and check in with the Sergeant-at-Arms, but be prepared to wait for your turn to testify. We also print about 5 extra copies of the testimony for the Council Members and hand them to the Sergeant-at-Arms during check-in. We strongly recommend testifying in person rather than virtually, if possible.

If you're testifying virtually, you will receive a Zoom link to the hearing at the email address you registered with. Be prepared as well to wait for your turn to testify.

Suggested Template for Written Testimonies

[Sections discussed below are color-coded in this testimony example.](#)

Testimony to the New York City Council
Committee on [Fill in relevant committee(s)]
Date of the hearing

Introduction:

Write a boilerplate introduction to begin your testimonies. Change and add additional committees or committee chair names as necessary (there are often joint committee hearings). We always want to thank the Committee chairs and Council Members. They actually notice this and are appreciative of it!

Example: Thank you Chair [Last Name] and members of the Committee on [Committee Name] for holding this hearing and giving us an opportunity to testify. I am [Name of person speaking], [Title] at [Your Organization], that [Your Organization's Mission Statement],

State the Problem:

Why are you testifying today?

Example: We are here today because too many Asian New Yorkers have unmet mental health needs and they do not have access to culturally competent providers.

Share a short, impactful story about your organization's work.

Example: Recently a Chinese man in his 30's told us: "My grandmother needed someone who spoke a certain dialect of Chinese that is not Cantonese or Mandarin. And that made it exponentially more difficult to find a mental health provider who spoke that particular dialect." His words resonate with thousands of New Yorkers whose loved ones need mental health support but can't explain their emotions in English. We help New York's Asian community access culturally competent mental health care in their native languages.

Use Data to Frame Your Points:

We want to make sure we use data that refers to the top-line issue area we are covering in the testimony. Try highlighting the data relevant to the communities you serve in New York.

Example: Since 2010, the Asian population in New York City has increased 34%, growing from over 1.1 million in 2010 to over 1.5 million in 2020, making up 17.3% of our city's total population. Overwhelmingly, Asian New Yorkers are immigrants, with two out of three in the city being foreign-born. Of those Asian immigrants, 47% arrived in 2010 or after. Overall, 48% of Asians have limited English proficiency in New York City, compared to a citywide rate of 23%.

For data on Asian New Yorkers, including disaggregated data on specific ethnic groups, AAF's [reports and briefs](#) are available on our website and our [data center](#).

Remember to cite your sources in the footnotes.

Share Why Your Organization's Work is Relevant

Establish your authority in this work area and the importance of testimony from your community on the topic of the hearing.

- How is your organization involved in the work that is the focus of the hearing?
- If you're a member of an organizational coalition (ex: AAF working group or roundtable), how does your work with this group address this issue?
- What specific services are being offered in the topic area?
- What are the needs of your community in this area?
- What's the status of the work being done to address these needs?

Provide Recommendations and/or Make Specific Funding Asks:

Legislation

- If the legislation from an elected official works well for your communities, raise it up and thank them.
- There are often times when electeds will introduce or make changes to certain legislation that may or may not be beneficial to the population you serve. You could provide recommendations on how to change certain aspects of legislation to better address the needs you are seeing on the ground.
 - Have any of the electeds reached out to you prior to the hearing to get an opinion about the legislation? If yes, mention that and thank them.

Budget/Funding

- Are there budget asks pertinent to the hearing?
- There will always be requests for more funding. Be as specific as possible on where the funding should go and base your request on a specific need.

Example: Invest in CBOs that provide culturally and linguistically competent mental health services to the Asian American community in New York City.

Conclusion:

- Summarize your key points clearly and concisely.
- Highlight critical areas important to your work. For example, funding, benefits, etc.
- Reference specific legislation to emphasize actionable steps.
- Acknowledge the audience and the Council Members, showing appreciation and fostering goodwill.
- Emphasize willingness to continue working together, promoting ongoing partnership.

Example: Improving access to city-wide benefits, providing valid identification, and increasing employment opportunities are necessary for immigrants in New York to build strong support systems, gain trust in institutions, and participate fully as members of society. Efficient processes for programs aimed to meet the needs of immigrants are the primary way immigrants experience a smoother transition to thriving in our communities. Int. 216, Res. 235, and Res. 230 open the door for more inclusive institutions that allow immigrants to legally work, access social safety networks, and build safer, strong futures.

At the Asian American Federation we thank you for allowing us to testify on this critical subject. We are grateful to see City Council move ahead with policies that protect our immigrant communities. We look forward to continuing this work with all of you.

Adapting a Written Testimony into an Oral Testimony

[Please see this doc as an example of how to condense your written testimony into an oral one.](#)

In-person or virtual testimonies are limited to approximately **two minutes**. To deliver a concise, impactful message in a limited time frame you will need to focus on key statistics and direct impacts. You can streamline your written testimony by pulling out the **introduction**, **problem statement**, **recommendations**, and **conclusion**.

Introduction:

- Introduction and thank yous will be most similar to the written testimony

Problem Statement:

- Highlight statistics in short bullets.

Example:

- *The majority of Asian New Yorkers are immigrants – 2/3 of us are foreign-born.*
- *47% of Asian immigrants to NYC arrived in 2010 or after.*
- *13% of AAPI immigrants in NYC are undocumented.*

Recommendations:

- Mention the legislative comment (if one) and state the ask clearly.

Example: Regarding Int. 216, AAF believes this proposal is crucial to meet the growing demand for IDNYC amongst immigrants for the following reasons.

Conclusion:

- Re-state key points to end strong.

Example: Improving access to city-wide benefits, providing identification, and increasing employment opportunities are necessary for immigrants in New York to build strong social safety networks, gain trust in institutions, and participate fully as members of society.

Make sure to practice reading aloud your testimony with a timer!