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FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

City Council to Pass Bill Requiring Multilingual Medications from Pharmacies; First Law of Its Kind in the Nation

Success declared in long fought battle by Public Advocate, community organizers and civil rights lawyers to protect the rights of immigrants to understand their medications

SIGNALS END OF PHARMACIES ROUTINELY PUTTING IMMIGRANTS AT RISK BY PROVIDING MEDICINES WITH ENGLISH-ONLY LABELS AND INSTRUCTIONS

New York, NY, August 20, 2009—Today the New York City Council will approve a bill to require all chain pharmacies in New York City to provide non-English language speakers with translations of their medication labels and interpreter services for medication counseling. The victory is championed by Public Advocate Betsy Gotbaum, Make the Road New York, a group that advocates for equal rights for non-English speakers, and New York Lawyers for the Public Interest (NYLPI), a civil rights law firm that has been fighting for this cause for over two years and drafted the initial version of the bill. The law will also require pharmacies to post notice to their customers of the availability of language assistance services and details penalties for violators.

Make the Road New York and NYLPI conducted investigations that revealed numerous cases of non-English speakers incorrectly using medicine prescribed to them because prescription labels were not translated into the patients' primary languages. The patients were forced to put their health or that of their children at risk because they did not understand the labels on the medicines they were prescribed. Incidents included ingestion of medicine intended only for external use as well as dosage confusion.

"For non-English speakers, going to the pharmacy and taking medicine is a scary and confusing experience. Pharmacists have the duty to protect the health of their patients and make sure they understand their medicines, no matter what language they speak. Basic translation and interpretation services at all pharmacies would protect the lives of millions of New Yorkers" said Theo Oshiro, Director of Health Advocacy at Make the Road New York.

"Many pharmacies in New York have been systematically depriving non-English speakers equal access to prescription medication," said Nisha Agarwal, Director of the Health Justice Program at NYLPI. "This law – the first of its kind in the country--provides an enforcement mechanism that will adequately punish violating pharmacies for their neglect."

The bill is the latest in a series of victories by Make the Road New York and NYLPI to improve access to translation services for non-English language speakers who use prescription drugs. On November 13, 2008 and April 21, 2009, New York State Attorney General Andrew Cuomo signed settlement agreements with CVS, Rite Aid, Duane Reade, Target, Wal-Mart, Costco and A&P pharmacies that required these chains to provide free language assistance services to non-English speaking patients. The agreements were a result of civil rights complaints filed NYLPI on behalf of Make the Road New York, alleging violations of New York City non-discrimination laws by the pharmacies and affected thousands of pharmacies citywide.

About Make the Road New York

Make the Road New York is a community organization that advocates for equal access and opportunities for all New Yorkers. The group works to change behaviors on a local level through community organizing as well as on an institutional level by reaching out to policy makers and thought leaders. Make the Road New York's efforts are focused on expanding civil rights and civic engagement; promoting health for all New Yorkers; improving housing and fostering environmental justice; winning justice in the workplace; and promoting access, excellence and opportunity in education.

About New York Lawyers for the Public Interest

New York Lawyers for the Public Interest (NYLPI) is a nonprofit civil rights law firm that strives for social justice in New York City through litigation, community organizing, policy advocacy and public education. NYLPI's Health Justice program partners with low-income immigrant communities and communities of color across New York City to challenge inequalities in the health care system based on race, national origin, language or immigration status. NYLPI's in-house expertise is extended by a network of volunteers from New York's top law firms and corporate legal departments that work with NYLPI to provide pro bono legal assistance to nonprofit organizations and individuals in need.