



**New York State Joint Budget Hearing
January 31, 2022
Volunteers of Legal Service (VOLS)
Testimony in Support of Continued Excluded Workers Fund**

Good afternoon. My name is Stephanie Taylor. I am the Project Director of the Unemployed Workers Project (UWP) at Volunteers of Legal Service (VOLS). Our office is based out of New York City.

Since 1984, VOLS has provided free, civil legal services to low-income New Yorkers, including unemployed workers, seniors and older veterans, immigrant young people, small business owners, and children & families. Our programs – which rely on trusted partnerships with pro bono attorneys and community-based organizations (CBOs) – reach underserved communities across all five boroughs of New York City, inclusive of racial, gender and LGBTQ identity, ability, uniformed service, and immigration status. Each year, we recruit, train, and mentor 1,000+ volunteer attorneys from 70 law firms and companies, and we collaborate with 150+ CBOs to ensure our services accessibly meet local legal needs.

VOLS UWP serves clients who are low-income, generally up to 200% of the federal poverty level, in any borough of New York City and occasionally in other parts of New York State. We consider other factors, such as disability, citizenship, veteran status, LGBTQ status, gender or racial identity, English language proficiency, or survival of intimate partner violence or trafficking when prioritizing community outreach.

Thank you for the opportunity to submit testimony for today's Workforce Hearing. We are submitting this testimony as members of the Fund Excluded Workers coalition, which includes more than 100 organizations across New York State. We write to state our strong support of replenishing the Excluded Worker Fund (EWF) with \$3 billion and establishing a permanent alternative to unemployment for excluded workers because this legislation will greatly benefit our clients.

My organization hears from workers every day who are shut out of traditional New York State benefits due to the intersection of our country's antiquated and racist immigration laws and New York State's unemployment insurance laws. These workers give as much or more to New York State than any worker eligible for UI. It is unjust and arbitrary to exclude them from benefits, especially during a pandemic.

Leading up to the launch of the EWF, my team and I reached out to various immigrants' rights organizations around New York City. Most of the organizations had heard of the EWF but several didn't have it on their radar. We sent materials and spoke with organizational staff and members so that everyone was aware of this opportunity. Once the Fund went live, we alerted our partner organizations and encouraged members to apply. Some of these community members were able to gather their documents quickly and submit their applications before the Fund closed. Others, however, had to spend inordinate amounts of time gathering documents, tracking down their employers, only to be shut out. We assisted a trafficking survivor who struggled to prove employment; by the time he located evidence, the Fund had closed. These New Yorkers were, and are, eligible for the Fund and desperately need to access the money they should receive.

These are not unique stories; we speak with excluded workers from so many different communities around New York City who were shut out of this Fund. The Immigration Research Initiative reports that only 103,000 excluded workers in NYC were able to access the 2021 Fund.

By replenishing the Excluded Workers Fund with an additional \$3 billion dollars, New York State can serve an additional 120,000 workers in New York City.

New York State should act this session to establish a permanent alternative to unemployment insurance by passing the "Excluded No More" legislation, which is sponsored by State Senator Jessica Ramos and Assemblymember Karines Reyes and awaiting a bill number. The pandemic showed that our safety net has massive holes and the Excluded Workers Fund demonstrated that more than just undocumented workers are



excluded from unemployment insurance benefits. We need to make sure low-wage undocumented workers, workers paid in cash (like domestic workers and day laborers), and self-employed workers have access to support.

The Assembly, Senate and Governor should deliver justice to workers who are still awaiting COVID relief and a true safety net for excluded workers in the long run. To summarize, VOLS submits this testimony in support of \$3 billion more for the Excluded Workers Fund and the “Excluded No More” legislation. Thank you for your time.