

Wednesday, February 9, 2022

2022 Joint Legislative Budget Hearing Testimony - *Local Government*

My name is Cindy VandenBosch, and I represent Turnstile Tours. We are a social enterprise that works with non-profit organizations to develop and operate tour programs across New York City. Over the past decade, our team has had the honor to work with dozens of vendors leading tours about the city's street food industry for locals and tourists alike. We have hosted well over 10,000 visitors from around the world on our Food Cart Tours in Midtown and the Financial District, sharing the food, stories, and struggles of this amazing community of workers and entrepreneurs.

I am writing to express my support the passage of bill S1175 Ramos | A5081 González-Rojas to enable street vendors in cities of one million or more to access licenses so that they can operate lawfully and don't have to operate in the shadows.

For centuries, street vending has been the vocation of people new to this country, providing opportunities for people to earn a living as they navigate a new country, a new language, a new culture, and a new legal system. Street vending allows people to become small business owners and build a better life for their families. It is inspiring, and sometimes heartbreaking, to hear the stories of vendors today, whom we have gotten to know personally and professionally, and how they built their businesses.

One way we introduce our tour guests to the mobile food vending industry is by walking them through the steps to start your own business. Vendors need to find a cart or truck, work with a fabricator, get equipment. They need to get a food handling license. They need to find a commissary to park, clean, and provision their cart. All pretty logical steps. But where the story goes off the rails is when we describe the process of getting a license. The maze of waiting lists, lotteries, and back-alley deals is the story of a broken system that we believe this bill will go a long way in solving, if passed.

We know so many vendors who try, desperately, to do the right thing, to follow the law, to pursue the only profession that they know, the only means they have to support their families. They use their life's savings to invest in their business. They pay to get a cart fabricated. They get their food handler's license. Then they try to get a license to operate, but the waitlists are so long that they are forced to rent a license from another vendor, which is technically not allowed, or vend without a license, risking harassment from the police, arrest, fines, and the loss of their supplies and equipment.

We have a unique perspective on this issue because we have the opportunity to describe it, on a near-daily basis, to thousands of people from all over the world. And the near-unanimous response is: that

makes no sense. Why would you have a system that maximizes debt, risk, and uncertainty for some of our poorest and most vulnerable fellow New Yorkers? Why do we criminalize vending just because vendors can't gain access to licenses to operate? Why wouldn't we want to formalize the system so that vendors have clear pathways for starting and growing their businesses without being criminalized?

Vendors have been essential workers during the pandemic. We've seen our partners volunteer their time to feed their neighbors over the past year, even while seeing a decline of up to 90% in business. Street vendors are the eyes and ears of our communities. They are and have always largely been first and second-generation immigrants. After all the struggles vendors have been through due to the confusing regulatory landscape, it's time we pay them back by creating a fair, more logical, and more efficient system for everybody. On behalf of my team at Turnstile Tours, I respectfully request that both chambers of the legislature allocate \$19 million in funding and include legislative language in other one-house budget bills and advocate for its inclusion in the final state budget to formalize the street vending industry.

**Cindy VandenBosch (she/hers), [CPACC](#)**

*Turnstile Tours & Studio*

[turnstiletours.com](http://turnstiletours.com) / (347) 903-8687

Follow us on [Facebook](#) / [Twitter](#) / [Instagram](#)

Write a review on [TripAdvisor](#)