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**Testimony in Support of Increased Office of New Americans Funding
Submitted by Neighbors Link Community Law Practice for Neighbors Link
February 13th, 2023**

My name is Karin Anderson Ponzer. I am the Director of the Neighbors Link Community Law Practice, the legal department of Neighbors Link.

Neighbors Link is grateful to the New York State Assembly and Senate for convening this important hearing. Neighbors Link endorses an increase in funding for non-deportation related ONA programming from the current \$8 million to \$20 million. This increase would allow for ONA to expand geographically and provide improved services for the 4.4 million immigrants across New York State. Additional funding would allow for the creation of new ONA Opportunity Centers in underserved areas, additional staff to support affirmative non-deportation naturalization proceedings, additional adult literacy classes, increased coverage for additional languages, and improved New Americans Hotline support and staffing. These supports are critical to keeping families out of immigration courts and provide services that help immigrants fully integrate into their communities.

Neighbors Link first established our partnership with the New York State Office for New Americans or ONA in 2016, when our Mount Kisco center was awarded an ONA Opportunity Center grant, designating us as a recognized resource among a statewide network of service providers for new Americans.

For seven years, we have continued our work with ONA through various programs by facilitating community conversations on immigration, leading workshops for immigrant service providers, providing immigration legal services, acting as legal counsel in our region, offering citizenship preparation classes, and offering English classes.

ONA has allowed us to provide 8,000 community residents with critical education on immigration issues and workforce development, provide 180 free citizenship preparation classes, assist more than 750 people in processing naturalization or DACA applications, and serve hundreds of students with virtual English language instruction throughout the state.

ONA has also allowed us to dramatically expand our legal services. We provide legal assistance with the full array of immigration legal services: from consultations to representation in asylum applications, special immigration juvenile status cases and family-based petitions throughout the lower Hudson valley.



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Since 2019, ONA funds have allowed us to provide immigration legal services in over 3,000 matters and immigration legal information and education to approximately 18,000 people. In addition, as ONA Legal Counsel we are able to provide 84 legal consultation days at four opportunity centers throughout the region and have already helped approximately 250 people in consultation days so far this year.

We have seen first-hand that ONA has made an enormous difference in the lives of immigrant New Yorkers. However, at the current level, ONA is significantly underfunded to actually meet the needs of immigrants. Increasing the funding would allow improved access to critical services across the state. Our ONA consultation days are booked three out, while at the same time we get approximately sixty calls each week requesting consultations. We urgently need more legal staff to meet the needs of immigrant New Yorkers.

We see everyday the transformative power of ONA to expand access to justice for immigrant New Yorkers and to integrate them into our state's economy and the communities where they live. We are proud to help implement ONA's mission, but more must be done for ONA to realize its goals. New York created the first state-level immigrant assistance office of its kind, and it must now maintain its position as a leader for immigrant New Yorkers by continuing to expand the geographical reach and quality of services.

If New York does not adequately fund ONA, it leaves new New Yorkers in the dark, vulnerable to scams, and unaware of important requirements for meeting their legal obligations. New York has received more than 31,000 asylum seekers in the last year; this makes it even more imperative for New York to adequately fund ONA's services for new arrivals.

Therefore, Neighbors Link endorses an increase in funding for non-deportation related ONA programming from the current \$8 million to \$20 million.

Thank you for your work on behalf of immigrant communities, for calling this hearing, and for the opportunity to testify today.



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