

**THURSDAY JANUARY 25, 2024**

**TESTIMONY OF THE DOOR'S LEGAL SERVICE CENTER**

**PRESENTED TO THE NEW YORK STATE SENATE FINANCE COMMITTEE AND  
THE ASSEMBLY WAYS & MEANS COMMITTEE**

**JOINT LEGISLATIVE BUDGET HEARING ON PUBLIC PROTECTION**

I am Meena Shah, the Co-Director of the Door's Legal Service Center. The Door is a comprehensive youth development organization that has been supporting vulnerable youth in New York City since 1972. Each year, we provide services to nearly 11,000 young people, many of them immigrants, between the ages of twelve and twenty-four. The services we provide include healthcare, education, supportive housing, food and nutrition, career development, arts and recreation, mental health counseling and legal assistance—all under one roof. At The Door, we emphasize empowering and engaging the young people we serve, and we are committed to creating a safe, equitable and inclusive space for young people and staff.

The Door's Legal Service Center is an office of over 50 staff members, including attorneys, social workers, paralegals and support staff. The majority of our legal service staff are bilingual. We specialize in serving vulnerable children and young people, including many clients who are unhoused, undocumented, in foster care, and/or LGBTQIA+. Our attorneys represent youth in Family Court, Housing Court, Civil Court, Immigration Court, and before USCIS. We also host legal clinics, aimed at connecting youth with legal advice and counsel on civil and immigration matters. Last fiscal year, the Door handled 2,452 matters and closed 2,319 cases, benefiting 2,516 people. The Door's Legal Service Center is proud to be a member of the New York Legal Services Coalition. We echo testimony of New York Legal Services Coalition President Tina Monshipour Foster and our fellow members.

We submit this testimony to highlight our positions on the SFY 2025 Executive Budget:

- Support the modest increases for civil legal services through the Office of Court Administration (OCA) budget. Specifically, the proposed 6% increase in the Judiciary Civil Legal Services appropriation and the 3% Cost-of-Living Adjustment (COLA) being applied to the Interest on Lawyers Account (IOLA).
- Restore traditional legislative additions for civil legal services, including designated funding for domestic violence legal services.
- Redirect \$2.5 million of the revenue from the Legal Services Assistance Fund (LSAF) to its original purpose to support civil legal service programs with budget language assuring the same.

- Strongly oppose and urge that the legislature reject the proposed sweep of \$100M from the IOLA Private Contribution Account to the General Fund (PPGG, Part X).

We urge the legislature to reject the proposed sweep of \$100M from the IOLA Private Contribution Account to the General Fund. The proposed sweep would directly block access to justice and would frustrate our ability to offer comprehensive, interdisciplinary civil legal services for NYC youth including custody, child support, paternity, orders of protection, name changes, eviction and holdover proceedings, public benefits, tax advice, foster care advocacy, emancipation, immigration applications, removal proceedings, asylum, and Special Immigrant Juvenile status cases.

This proposed sweep comes at a particularly challenging moment as many civil legal services providers in New York are struggling to respond to an influx of asylum seekers, including children and young immigrants, who are seeking civil legal services, housing, and other crisis services. The Door and other partners representing youth and adult immigrants in New York face this same challenge – we are nearly all at capacity. Immigrant New Yorkers are bouncing from shelter to shelter and legal service provider to provider, attempting to meet their basic needs and seeking legal assistance.

The proposed sweep, compounded with the particularly challenging moment New York finds itself would frustrate efforts to ensure access to the Courts for the vulnerable populations of indigent New Yorkers. This funding is critical for civil legal service organizations like the Door. We ask this for the legislature to reject the proposal in the executive budget to sweep funding from IOLA. These funds, along with OCA's efforts are essential to our community's ability to make gains against the justice gap.

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