

## **TESTIMONY OF REV. PAUL FLECK**

### **EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR, IMMIGRATION LAW & JUSTICE NEW YORK**

My name is Rev. Paul Fleck and I serve as Executive Director of Immigration Law & Justice New York, an immigration legal ministry of The United Methodist Church. Our model is to partner with local congregations to provide pop-up legal clinics where we intake clients.

With the recent election, our partner congregations are very alarmed about the mass deportation orders of our neighbors. We look to the state of New York to do everything in its power to resist deportation while supporting programs which make it easier for our immigrant New Yorkers to use their gifts and graces to contribute to our communities and to stabilize their families. The Legislature needs to be as forthright as possible to counter threats of mass deportation and work tirelessly to protect the rights of immigrants and those who employ them. She needs to emphasize at every turn that offering a bold welcome to immigrants is not only the right moral thing to do but is good for their livelihood and our economy as a whole.

We urge the Governor to prioritize a more equitable allocation of resources for immigrant resettlement in the FY 2025-2026 budget. Rural and suburban areas received only \$25 million through the MRAP program last year to assist with housing and other services to asylum seeker leaving them woefully underfunded compared to New York City.

These upstate regions need increased support to build sustainable infrastructure for housing, legal assistance, and social services. Additionally, the Office for New Americans (ONA) requires \$150 million in funding to expand access to essential legal services, which are critical for immigrants navigating complex legal processes. As a cruel federal enforcement agenda threatens to devastate New York's community, workforce, and families, investing in compassionate immigration policies is not just a moral imperative but a strategic move for our collective safety and economic prosperity. Immigrants facing deportation risk permanent separation from their families and forced return to dangerous or deadly conditions in another

country, yet they are not guaranteed a lawyer if they cannot afford one. As of December 2024, [over 160 thousand people](#) in New York found themselves navigating the complexities of immigration court alone, desperately fighting for their lives. The data demonstrates the critical importance of representation: detained immigrants with legal representation are up to 10.5 times more likely to win their case compared to those left without the lifeline that representation offers. For non-detained individuals, 60% of people with legal representation succeed in their cases, compared to a mere 17% of their unrepresented counterparts. This is a call to action—these numbers represent a need for immediate intervention and support for those in dire need.

For these reasons, the Fiscal Year 2026 State Enacted Budget must allocate **\$165 million** to meet urgent and long-term legal and social service needs of immigrant families in New York. This investment should comprise:

- \$100 million for the Office of New Americans
  - \$80 million to sustain and supplement existing grants to ensure that legal services providers can recruit and retain staff to keep pace with growing needs;
  - \$10 million to fund and connect immigrants with programs that help them preserve their rights, gain citizenship and other immigration benefits, participate in the workforce, and learn English; and
  - \$10 million for capacity building for legal service providers so that these organizations have the resources to strengthen and expand their programs and continue to offer high-quality, life-saving assistance.
- \$65 million for the Department of Education
  - \$25 million to expand immigration law clinics and fellowships at accredited New York law schools;
  - \$20 million for a Student Loan Contribution Plan for attorneys committing to pro bono immigration work; and
  - \$20 million to create a five-year program to support individuals seeking Department of Justice accreditation to represent immigrants at risk of deportation.

Our State must equip all immigrants facing deportation with the basic tools and support they need to protect their rights, secure economic stability, and remain united with their families. The \$44.2 million proposed in the FY26 Executive Budget to fund immigration legal services falls short of last year's \$64.2 million investment amounts to a cut of \$20 million for critical services that are now needed more than ever.

We also urge the passage of the **Access to Representation Act** (ARA, A.270 / S.141) and the **Bolstering Unrepresented Immigrant Legal Defense** (BUILD, A.2689) Act. The ARA, if passed, would create a statutory right to counsel for immigrants facing deportation in New York and would create stable and sustainable funding streams for providers trying to meet the urgent need. This bill would guarantee that no one is left to defend themselves against a trained government lawyer alone because they cannot afford representation. It would ensure that instead, people would have the right to an attorney to help them protect themselves and their families from deportation. The BUILD Act would lay the groundwork for the ARA by funding the infrastructure necessary for legal services providers to create, maintain, and expand robust programs to protect immigrant communities under attack over the next four years. The BUILD Act establishes a dedicated multi-year investment for legal service providers to fund training, holistic services, local and regional coordinations strategies, and other measures that build the capacity of legal programs to effectively and efficiently protect the rights of immigrant New Yorkers in the short and long term.

New York State must protect the legacy it began with the groundbreaking New York Immigrant Family Unity Project (NYIFUP), which during the first Trump administration, was the first publicly funded deportation defense program in the country. Since then over 50 jurisdictions have followed suit and established and funded their own programs because of New York's success. It is imperative that we lead the way again and stand up for immigrant New Yorkers. We must sustainably expand our acclaimed immigration legal services programs to meet the needs of the moment. The importance of New York's leadership in upholding freedom, fairness, and family unity cannot be overstated—it is a lifeline for the well-being of not only immigrant New Yorkers, but all communities across the state. The current landscape demands swift action. Let us fortify our commitment to a state where everyone, immigrant or not, can thrive—safely at home, in their jobs, and with their families.

Therefore, [ORGANIZATION] endorses the continued funding of immigration legal services, the expansion of funding to \$165 million, and the immediate passage of the BUILD Act and the Access to Representation Act. Thank you for your work on behalf of immigrant communities, for calling this hearing, and for the opportunity to testify.

We also for the Legislature's leadership in passing the following bills:

**New York for All Act:** Protects immigrants from being funneled to ICE by prohibiting all state and local agencies from conspiring with ICE and CBP or participating in their cruelty

**Dignity Not Detention:** Ends ICE's contracts with local jails, reuniting people with their families and communities while also enabling them to more capably fight deportation.

**Access to Representation:** Enacts the first right to counsel for immigrants and help stabilize immigrants' lives

**Clemency Justice Act:** Creates transparency around the clemency process in New York State.

Making all immigrants eligible for Medicaid is essential to public health and upholds our state's values. We also support the Bridge Unemployment program for people, including immigrants, who cannot access state unemployment benefits. In addition, we support \$100 million to enable businesses to hire asylum seekers with work permits while offering other supports but only as part of a comprehensive approach to immigrant assistance which includes non-cooperation with ICE, legal services, and medical, housing and language support.

As Leviticus 19:34 reminds us, "The stranger who resides with you shall be to you as one of your citizens; you shall love him as yourself." Welcoming immigrants is not only a moral responsibility but also an economic opportunity, strengthening communities and driving growth.

By addressing these needs, New York can lead the nation in fostering inclusion, justice, and

prosperity for all its residents.