



New York State Legislature
Joint Legislative Budget Hearing - Public Protection
Testimony in Support of Increased Immigration Legal Services Funding
Submitted by the New York Immigration Coalition
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My name is Taina Wagnac, I am the Senior Manager of State and Local Policy at the New York Immigration Coalition (NYIC), an umbrella policy and advocacy organization for more than 200 groups serving immigrants and refugees across New York State. Our organization is one of the organizational leads of the Campaign for Access, Representation, and Equity (CARE) for Immigrant Families, a coalition of community based organizations, legal services providers, faith-based groups, unions, and advocates across New York State. We have consistently emphasized the vital need for immigrants to have access to legal representation, this year, we are requesting that you allocate \$165 million for life saving immigration legal services.

We thank you Chair Pretlow and Chair Krueger for convening this important hearing. We have long been vocal advocates of the critical importance of access to legal representation for immigrants in removal proceedings and while applying for immigration benefits.

For years, advocates, like my colleagues here, have tirelessly called for robust, sustained funding to ensure New York has the necessary mechanisms and infrastructure to protect all residents, regardless of immigration status. The need for legal service funding is not new. We have long warned that without sufficient investment, immigrant New Yorkers—both undocumented and legal residents—would be left vulnerable to arrests, detention, and deportation. Today, this reality is upon us, exacerbated by the recent rescission of the Sensitive Locations policies that previously provided some protection from immigration enforcement actions.

The rollback of these policies has fueled increased enforcement actions, sowing fear, destabilizing communities, and threatening the well-being of immigrant families across the state. New York must act decisively to counteract these harmful developments by ensuring universal access to competent legal representation. The fact being, 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, NYIC calls for a \$165 million investment in the State Budget to provide urgent and long-term support for immigrant families in New York. This funding should be allocated as follows:

- \$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.

We also urge the Legislature to pass the **Access to Representation Act (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.

Investing in immigration legal services is not just a moral imperative but an economic and public safety necessity. When immigrants have legal representation, they are more likely to win their cases, remain with their families, and contribute to their communities. Moreover, legal representation reduces the burden on the state's social services by preventing unnecessary detentions and deportations that tear families apart and disrupt local economies.

Thank you for the opportunity to testify.

Submitted by:

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