



Testimony: Hamra Ahmad, Esq., Head of Legal Programs and Policy
Hearing: New York State Legislature Executive Budget Hearing – Human Services
Date: February 5, 2026 (written submission January 30, 2026)

Thank you for the opportunity to submit testimony on the critical nature of civil legal services in New York and to the Legislature for support for these essential services. I am Hamra Ahmad, the Head of Legal Programs and Policy at Her Justice, a nonprofit organization that has advocated with and for women and gender minorities living in poverty in New York City for more than 30 years.

In 2025, Her Justice provided a range of legal help to more than 4,000 women and their children in our practice areas of family, matrimonial and immigration law. Among the clients served, 92% are women of color and 85% are survivors of domestic violence. Three-fourths of our clients were born outside the U.S., coming from 103 countries across the world.

Her Justice provides direct representation and skilled advocacy in an arena that often fails to adequately serve the legal needs of the marginalized. In this moment of volatile change, as in ordinary times, legal services are essential services. Every day, our staff attorneys provide women with information about the legal remedies available to them and advise and strategize with clients to help them weigh their options and decide the course that is right for them and their children. We are grateful for the Legislature’s commitment to recognizing civil legal services as essential in New York.

We hope this testimony will serve to underscore the **current scope of unmet civil legal services needs of women living in poverty in New York**, along with the **economic benefits** that flow from the provision of civil legal services in essential areas of life. Any planned decreases to IOLA funding in the FY27 Executive Budget would be particularly harmful to Her Justice and our ability to meet the essential legal needs of our clients. We are grateful for the Legislature’s actions in protecting that funding given increasingly urgent need for legal assistance.

Within that environment, we also aim with this testimony to present **strategies to address the unmet civil legal needs of women living in poverty in New York**, including through our unique pro bono legal services model with a significant return on investment; our innovative approach to system reform through our policy program to learn more about the impact of the courts and drive ideas for change; and our focus on culturally competent services through our own training and collaboration with community partners to enhance our delivery of legal services.

I. The Unique Her Justice Model and Impact

A. “Pro Bono First” Model

Her Justice recognizes that the need for legal representation in New York far outstrips the supply of help. Through our unique pro bono first model, Her Justice pairs thousands of well-trained and resourced pro bono attorneys from the City’s premiere law firms with women who have urgent legal needs. This pro bono first model helps fill the “civil justice gap” – the difference between the number of Americans who need civil legal assistance and the few who receive help given inability to afford legal assistance and resource constraints on the availability of free legal help. By ensuring that



more women have lawyers by their side, we help make their voices heard and we begin to break down systemic barriers to access to justice.

Her Justice serves women and gender minorities living in poverty in child/spousal support, custody and visitation, and order of protection matters in Family Court; divorces in Supreme Court; and immigration matters under the Violence Against Women Act. Many of the people who contact us for help are matched with a pro bono volunteer lawyer. Volunteer lawyers are assigned an experienced Her Justice staff attorney mentor who helps strategize, answer substantive and procedural questions, review documents before they are filed and provide referrals for social and other services. Four law firm attorneys work full-time in our office as externs, providing court representation in complex or emergency matters.

Non-attorney volunteers translate or interpret for non-English-speaking clients. Volunteer law students and paralegals work in-house in our main office, supervised by staff attorneys. Volunteer forensic accountants and investigators support litigation by compiling and analyzing the documentation necessary to obtain fair divisions of marital assets, maintenance awards and child support orders for our clients.

This novel and holistic approach has enabled us to assist tens of thousands of women over the years, far more than we could have reached relying exclusively on direct service. It also allows Her Justice to offer representation for many of the cases other legal services organizations do not have the bandwidth to take on – for example, child and spousal support matters, and litigated divorces. As we reported in the FY2024-25 Judiciary Civil Legal Services (“JCLS”) Report, Her Justice’s 13 staff attorneys actively trained and mentored 1,378 pro bono attorneys and non-attorneys (summer associates or paralegals) who worked on both open and closed cases with Her Justice clients during the grant period.

Our staff responds to those who contact us with a broad array of legal information and advice, know-your-rights materials easily accessible on our website and information about other resources. In addition to training and mentoring pro bono attorneys, Her Justice in-house attorneys provide representation to some clients whose legal issues are particularly urgent or complex. This both meets critical needs and allows staff attorneys to remain fully expert on the legal issues on which we train and provide support.

B. Legal Expertise in Family and Supreme Court Matrimonial Cases

Women living in poverty, particularly Black and Brown women, are forced to rely on a civil justice system that has been historically and systematically under-resourced. Many access the Family Courts to secure basic freedoms – personal autonomy, financial independence, and safety from abuse – through orders of protection, financial support from partners, or court-ordered visitation schedules. Yet most New York Family Court litigants are unrepresented, with the patchwork right-to-counsel laws providing this resource in only limited case types. They spend immeasurable hours, days and years moving through complicated litigations. From our years of experience representing women in the civil justice system, we know that the burden of economic instability due to stalled support or custody proceedings too often falls on people like our clients.



This burden is even more onerous for our undocumented immigrant clients who are often doubly disadvantaged waiting years for the historically under-funded immigration system to review their applications for legal status and employment authorization documentation (or work permits) which are critical for families' stability.

The need for legal representation in litigated matters, such as custody, visitation, child support, and litigated divorces, is great. As we stated in our JCLS FY2024-25 report, during the reporting period, Her Justice worked on 866 family and matrimonial matters serving 2,048 women and children. And the impact of our legal services in these areas is significant. With our services, Her Justice clients obtained financial awards and settlements totaling \$1,092,560 and monthly benefits totaling \$36,102.

Child support. Her Justice has had a robust Family Court practice since our founding, providing essential legal assistance to women seeking child and spousal support, custody, and orders of protection. We developed expertise in child support because it is a great area of need in New York and because the Her Justice model uniquely can meet some of that need. Child support is critical for families living poverty; for some, court-ordered child support can comprise more than half of income. With no right to counsel for parents establishing child support in the courts, more than 90 percent of litigants in these New York court cases are unrepresented. Her Justice's pro bono model helps address the needs of parents in complex child support cases, including access to pro bono financial services firms in cases involving asset discovery or valuation. Our legal services make a difference, helping custodial parent clients secure first-time child support awards that are affordable for noncustodial parents or enforce orders to secure financial support for children and ensure family stability.

Divorce. Her Justice, along with our pro bono partners, provides legal advice and representation to hundreds of women each year in both uncontested and contested or litigated divorce cases. Engaging in a formal legal process in divorce is especially important for women who are typically the lesser-earning spouse. The legal process should ensure a fair child or spousal support award which gives single mothers a critical safety net. A fair divorce can be especially critical for victims of domestic violence, for whom financial stability is key to remaining free from abusive relationships.

Her Justice's pro bono first model is well-suited to filling gaps in divorce representation without a right to counsel for indigent New Yorkers in divorce cases as to financial issues, including spousal and child support and equitable distribution of marital assets and debts. In addition to providing representation on hundreds of uncontested divorce cases each year, Her Justice has expertise in high stakes contested divorces that demand extensive legal work to uncover assets and secure equitable distribution for clients, along with negotiation or trial advocacy. These cases typically last months if not years.

Generally, legal representation in these complex cases can be incredibly costly and for many, it is simply unaffordable. Research shows that the average cost of divorce in New York is substantial, at an overall average of \$13,835, rising to \$18,853 for cases involving children and \$12,401 for those without. (These figures are higher than the nationwide average divorce cost of \$11,300, which breaks down to \$15,500 for child-related disputes and \$10,100 without children.) The out-of-reach cost of legal representation creates a significant disadvantage for many individuals, especially those with limited income, in achieving a fair financial settlement through divorce. Her Justice takes a flexible approach to financial



eligibility for our services, acknowledging that the Federal Poverty Line – \$26,650 for a family of three in 2025 – fails to capture the immense financial struggle of tens of thousands of New Yorkers who live with resources at or above this line. We engage in a well-informed and sensitive intake process around eligibility for services, which also takes into account that many survivors of domestic violence suffer coercive financial control in marriage and do not have access to marital assets. These practices ensure that a broader range of survivors, along with clients who are not victims of abuse, can access critical support.

Our attorneys and partners consistently achieve favorable outcomes for our divorce clients. Between January 1, 2023 and December 31, 2024, Her Justice resolved 43 litigated divorces in which attorneys secured a total of \$637,847 in lump sum awards and \$55,508 in monthly support payments.

C. Return on Investment and Impact

In addition to achieving successful outcomes in individual representations, Her Justice is committed to providing legal services that help women living in poverty achieve stability in other areas of life. To measure the **impact of our legal services**, our team conducted a preliminary return on investment analysis based on data from July 2024 to June 2025. For these calculations we used Her Justice client data across our various legal service areas, along with publicly available datasets used by other legal organizations to calculate the value of their services. During this period, Her Justice received \$7.8 million in funding from state and local government, donations, and private foundations. Of particular note is the support Her Justice receives through New York State IOLA and Judiciary Civil Legal Services. These core funding sources are critical to Her Justice's ability to provide essential legal services, and we are grateful to the Legislature for ensuring their protection in the State budget. From the full range of investments in Her Justice, we calculated the following benefits:

- Pro bono attorneys representing Her Justice clients were able to secure \$2.6 million in lifetime child and spousal support awards.
- For immigration clients served, increased wages will result in a benefit of \$8.6 million.
- Clients leaving abusive partners will see a one-year benefit of \$2.1 million in reduced health and mental health costs associated with an average of seven physical assaults per federal health and intimate partner violence statistics.
- Clients who had a successful case outcome during this period and their children will see a five-year improved health benefit of \$4.2 million.

Her Justice plans to update our return-on-investment analysis as new data becomes available and to utilize this analysis to support advocacy around the benefits of civil legal services and the need for greater investment in providers.

II. Innovative Approach to System Reform

Her Justice policy and system reform approach. We believe that our client-centered services must also be paired with policy work – through independent efforts and in partnership with peer organizations and coalitions – to advance



systemic reform while meeting individual needs. Our policy work is informed by the lived experience of our clients – women and gender minorities living in poverty, whose livelihood and well-being are often determined by the civil justice system. That civil justice system is often invisible to those outside of it, which makes a focus on elevating the reforms to this area that much more essential for our clients and all who depend on it. Through this framework, we begin to break down systemic barriers that are built into our civil justice system and that reinforce and exacerbate economic, gender and racial imbalances.

Family Court research. Her Justice has expertise in developing original research projects to support our advocacy for improvements to the New York Family Courts. The Family Courts make life-changing decisions in the lives of thousands of people each year, but are under-resourced to meet the volume of need. The current patchwork of legal services for indigent litigants affects the client population that Her Justice serves, along with the other parties in the cases we handle. Most critically, backlogs and delays in Family Court impact individual litigants when they defer needed support or legal protections, or cause litigants to miss work or incur childcare costs. At the same time, delays impact pro bono attorneys' capacity to dedicate time to complex litigations in Family Court and help serve the substantial need for legal representation.

To study the impact of Family Court on litigants and lawyers, in November 2024, we launched our newest policy research initiative, [Report From Court](#). This groundbreaking new policy research project surveys pro bono attorneys representing Her Justice clients in New York City Family Court about court experiences and outcomes. Even with the high volume of Family Court filings and the number of lives they touch, there is scant publicly available data about court experiences or outcomes at a system level. And the high-level data that *is* available from Family Court – about the number of cases that are filed, the number that are concluded, and the number still in progress – neither informs those engaging with the system about what to expect in court nor supports advocacy for system improvements.

This vital project aims to address the Family Court data gap and illuminate the litigant experience by sharing insights from our key pro bono partners to support meaningful reform and engaging them in advocacy in a new way. We look forward to the opportunity to discuss the project and what it reveals about the experience of New York City residents in Family Court.

Child support reform. Child support is a key priority for Her Justice in our policy reform efforts. We believe that the fairness and efficiency of the child support system should be improved to ensure that children receive the most support parents can afford. With decades of experience providing legal representation to parents in child support cases, Her Justice decided to study the child support system and its impact on individuals. In 2021, we released a report from our first court watch project, [Towards Justice for Parents in Child Support Courts](#), which presented findings from almost 800 observations of child support appearances in New York City Family Courts. We have since leveraged the data about court experiences and outcomes to support advocacy for reform.

One area of focus in system reform advocacy is creating more options for how parents resolve child support in court. We believe this is especially important since almost all parents in New York navigate child support cases without legal representation. For several years, Her Justice has been advocating for New York State legislation that we drafted



(Persaud/S.245, Reyes/A.3531; 2025-26 session), which would authorize the development of an expedited settlement conference process in New York Family Court for parents who agree on support. Her Justice is committed to providing legal representation in Family Court where it is most needed – for example, to parents who must utilize legal discovery mechanisms to determine income available for child support or to families with multiple cases pending simultaneously such as child support and custody or orders of protection. In those cases, our clients need more time before support magistrates during court appearances, with shorter adjournments between court dates, so that affordable child support orders can be established and support can be delivered to children more quickly.

We strongly believe that if straightforward cases between parents who want to reach agreement on support are resolved through an expedited process, the courts will be able to dedicate urgently needed time and resources to complicated child support cases. The proposed solution will critically provide more resources to the Family Courts and will benefit all families in the child support system, getting support to children more quickly. We believe that passage of this legislation remains critical even with the recent passage in the State Legislature of the Judiciary’s proposal around child support mediation and court navigation. Families should have multiple options for securing court-ordered child support that are responsive to their needs. We have been grateful to the Judiciary and the Office of Court Administration for engaging in discussions around child support and Family Court reform, and we look forward to continuing to collaborate on this area of need for New Yorkers.

III. A Trauma-Informed and Collaborative Approach to Ensure Access to Justice

Access to justice requires careful and expert delivery of civil legal services to ensure that clients can meaningfully participate in the legal cases that so often determine their future. Her Justice takes a holistic approach in centering our clients’ social services needs within our delivery of legal services. We do this through our pro bono first model with our team’s expert mentorship and support, including social work services, and through longstanding and broad community partnerships.

Working with survivors and immigrant clients. As the Judiciary is aware, domestic violence takes many forms – including physical, psychological, and economic abuse. Her Justice attorneys often work with clients who have experienced severe and repeated traumatic events. These events impact the way clients see themselves, the world, and others. They often have difficulty trusting and sharing information with other people; this can be a massive roadblock to an attorney who is trying to assist them in their legal case. By understanding and incorporating a trauma-informed framework into our own lawyering and our training for pro bono attorneys, our attorneys can ethically and effectively manage their relationship with clients and build an active partnership. Trauma-informed lawyering enhances trust, improves communication, and leads to more equitable and sustainable legal outcomes for survivors.

Many of our clients experience economic abuse – the control by one intimate partner of the other’s access to economic resources, which diminishes the victim’s self-sufficiency and forces them to depend financially on the abuser. To address this issue, Her Justice has developed expertise in coerced debt, identity theft and financial abuse that is recognized by the New York legal community. We provide holistic legal representation, essential information, advice, brief services, referrals and financial advocacy across our family and divorce cases. We now run credit reports for 100%



of our family/matrimonial clients to determine if other financial services are needed. These legal services are critical to creating stability, safety, autonomy and a sense of freedom in our clients' lives. As a complement to our work with individual clients, Her Justice is committed to advocating for full recognition of the economic realities of domestic violence under the law and in the courts to ensure full redress for survivors. We were thrilled to be part of the coalition that successfully advocated this past legislative session for a change to New York's consumer laws to create a pathway for survivors to seek release from liability for coerced debt, and we will partner with others in the implementation of that law once the chapter amendment is signed by the Governor.

At Her Justice, we understand that our **immigrant communities are an essential part of the fabric of our city**. For 30 years, we have been committed to providing critical free legal services to undocumented immigrant women living in poverty. The Her Justice Immigration Practice provides free legal assistance to clients who have experienced domestic violence, sex trafficking, labor trafficking, and other forms of gender-based violence as they seek to stabilize their immigration status in the United States. The legal services we provide are especially important for survivors of violence since abusers and traffickers commonly exploit a survivor's lack of status as a powerful way to exercise control. Our Immigration Practice has a proven track record of excellence, and its impact grows every year. Her Justice attorneys directly represent clients and mentor pro bono attorneys in a range of immigration matters, including VAWA self-petitions, U and T nonimmigrant status petitions, applications to adjust status, waivers of the joint petition to remove conditions on residence, naturalization applications, and employment authorization applications.

Last year, our attorneys provided legal information, advice, and representation on 2,058 immigration matters, securing legal status for 802 clients and their children. Immigration status is a common concern among our clients, including those seeking help with divorce and family matters. In times of political upheaval and increased immigration enforcement, our immigrant clients fear accessing the New York courts and our attorneys play an even more critical role in providing guidance on how to remain safe while accessing needed legal protections. Our attorneys are cross-trained and have legal expertise in the ways that immigration status impacts domestic violence and economic stability for our clients, including through successful Family Court and divorce representation.

We pair our legal services for undocumented survivors of gender-based violence with research and policy advocacy. In 2023, we released our policy research report, [*Stories from Immigrant Survivors of Gender-Based Violence: the Impact of Work Authorization*](#). Through our direct services work, we know that the ability to work legally in the U.S. with an employment authorization document makes a significant difference in the quality of life, safety, and stability of our clients and their children. The report is the culmination of a multi-year qualitative research project to interview our immigrant clients about the impact on their lives of delays in access to work authorization.

It presents findings about the benefits of legal work permits in terms of our clients' economic independence and freedom from abuse, housing stability, mental health and well-being. It illustrates the strong connection between our clients having legal work authorization and their likelihood of seeking help from other systems, including the Family Courts and the civil justice system and law enforcement. In the words of one client interviewed for the project, "The stability of having a fixed job and waking up knowing that I will be able to provide for my kids – it's like the world opens." The report also presents recommendations for reform, including enhancing and investing in immigration legal services.



Community Partnerships. Her Justice takes a broad view of the needs of women living in poverty. While our focus is on critical legal services and reform of legal systems, we know that access to and participation in legal processes depends on clients' overall stability. Stability, in turn, is dependent on clients' range of needs being adequately addressed by social services and other providers. This approach ensures lasting positive impacts of legal services. Women living in poverty need financial stability, safe and adequate housing, and food security. Without outside support, these issues can cause them to miss court appearances or meetings with lawyers and ultimately disengage from their legal cases. With access to critical social services that address these non-legal needs, clients can fully participate in their legal cases. Recognizing this, Her Justice has established strong partnerships with community-based organizations. Through those partnerships, Her Justice provides reliable information, legal resources, and mutual referrals to high-need populations. Our partnerships strengthened during and following the pandemic, as organizations serving women living in poverty, including survivors of gender-based and domestic violence, have become even more reliant on one another to meet the complex and urgent needs of our clients.

Her Justice also works to ensure that women living in poverty in New York City are knowledgeable about their legal rights and available remedies, reducing barriers to access to justice. We use a targeted, culturally sensitive community outreach strategy that involves conducting informational and know-your-rights presentations and capacity-building trainings for community-based not-for-profit organizations. Prospective clients learn of our services from colleagues at legal and social services agencies throughout New York City, including the Family Justice Centers, bar associations, elected officials' constituent services offices, court and law enforcement personnel, schools, shelters, hospitals, our website, LawHelp.org and word of mouth.

The "Get Help" section on our website provides women and their advocates with easy access to information about their legal rights and detailed instruction about how to secure free legal assistance from Her Justice through our online intake application. Her Justice staff also conduct presentations to community-based organizations across New York City to provide organization staff and their clients with information on various legal issues and ways to access legal services at Her Justice. As we reported in the FY2024-25 JCLS report, during the grant period, we conducted 60 outreaches, including informational and know-your-rights presentations, serving a total of 1,237 people. By engaging in strategic partnerships with allied organizations, Her Justice enhances our critical services for those most in need.

Thank you again for the opportunity to highlight Her Justice's longstanding commitment to meeting the need for critical civil legal services in our community through our innovative pro bono first model and our research-driven policy and advocacy efforts. We thank the Legislature for continued support for the essential services we provide. We look forward to continued collaboration and partnership around new ideas and greater investment in legal services for indigent New Yorkers.

Respectfully,

Hamra Ahmad, Esq.