



**Testimony in Support of Increased Immigration Legal Services Funding
Submitted by Columbia County Sanctuary Movement
February 12, 2026**

My name is Jennifer Benn and I am the Board President at Columbia County Sanctuary Movement.

Columbia County Sanctuary Movement (CCSM) organizes with immigrants and allies to collectively support, empower and defend our communities. CCSM is based in the upper Hudson Valley and Capital Region and more specifically, our membership consists of over X people spanning the following counties; Dutchess, Columbia, Greene, Rensselaer and Albany counties. Thank you for the opportunity to submit written testimony for the Human Services Hearing.

Columbia County Sanctuary Movement is grateful to the New York State Assembly and Senate for convening this important hearing. We have long been vocal advocates for the critical importance of access to legal representation for immigrants in removal proceedings.

Our organization is a member of the Campaign for Access, Representation, and Equity for Immigrant Families (CARE4IF) Campaign and Coalition, a coalition of community-based organizations, legal services providers, faith-based groups, unions, and advocates across New York State. At the end of the calendar year, CCSM holds its annual Member Assembly, where we convene our members to vote on what they want CCSM to prioritize for the following year, and specifically in regards to our Legislative and Budget Campaigns. Our membership resoundingly voted for the CARE4IF Campaign as their number one campaign, which speaks to the urgent need regarding the Campaign and Coalition's demands.

Our organization has been having to refer people to other attorneys or other organizations almost daily, because we don't have capacity to take on cases ourselves, or a large enough budget to hire a staff attorney. Many community members come back and tell us those organizations are also at capacity, and that private attorneys are too expensive. Some people have chosen to miss court for this reason; some appear without an attorney and their chances of winning their case, or even understanding what takes place at the hearing without an attorney are severely negatively impacted; some have had to take on other jobs just to pay for



an attorney. At least 3 detained members we worked with, had their attorneys drop their case when they were detained, since the attorney's case load was too high and the individual hearings were too soon for them to responsibly prepare filings, or because the members were transferred to other states like Louisiana and Texas. We had to scramble to find new attorneys-- we could only find a pro-bono lawyer for one person, and the others were left without representation. Another detained member had to pay 10 thousand dollars for a private attorney, which did help the detained person get out on bond— however that family is now in debt because of the combined cost of the bond and paying for representation. Several other detained people we work with simply have never been able to retain lawyers to begin with and they are swiftly moved through the deportation machine.

Having an attorney at ICE check-ins can also determine whether the person will get detained or not— several people we've worked with have been detained at their mandatory ICE check-ins, and because the attorneys are at capacity they have not been able to accompany their clients to these appointments. One time we did find a pro bono, retired attorney to accompany someone to her check-in, and she was not detained. We believe in a large reason because of the attorney at her side.

And as a cruel federal deportation agenda continues to threaten and devastate New York's communities, workforce, and families at an unprecedented scale, the state's response must match the urgency of the moment. Strategic investment in compassionate immigration policy is not only a moral obligation, but a matter of public safety and economic stability. Immigrants facing deportation risk permanent separation from their families and forced return to dangerous or deadly conditions in another country, yet those who cannot afford counsel are not guaranteed legal representation. As of December 2025, [more than 91,000 people](#) in New York found themselves navigating the complexities of immigration court alone, desperately fighting for their lives without counsel. The data demonstrates the importance of representation: detained immigrants with legal representation are [up to 10.5 times](#) more likely to win their case compared to those without it. Every one of those 91,026 people is a New Yorker who deserves a fair day in court and the opportunity to exercise their legal right to stay in the country—and it is incumbent upon us as a state to meet this moment when the federal government will not.

For these reasons, the Fiscal Year 2027 State Enacted Budget must allocate **\$175 million** to meet urgent and long-term legal and social service needs of immigrant families in New York.



This investment should comprise:

- \$85 million to sustain existing legal and social services programs, fund recruitment and retention initiatives, and ensure equitable compensation.
- \$50 million to stand up new emergency deportation defense and social services.
- \$40 million for capacity-building and infrastructure investments to expand the pipeline of immigration legal professionals entering the field and strengthen provider infrastructure to support scaling up services.

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 their families.

We also urge the passage of the **Access to Representation Act** (ARA, [A.270 / S.141](#)) and the **Building Up Immigrant Legal Defense** (BUILD, [A.2689/ S.4538](#)) Act.

The ARA would create a statutory right to counsel for immigrants facing deportation in New York and stable, sustainable funding streams for legal services providers. It would guarantee that no immigrant is left to defend themselves against a trained government lawyer alone because they cannot afford representation. Instead, it would ensure that people would have the right to an attorney to help them protect themselves and exercise their legal rights.

The BUILD Act would fund 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 training, supportive services, local and regional coordinations strategies, and other measures to build the capacity of legal programs to effectively and efficiently protect the rights of immigrant New Yorkers in the short and long terms.

New York State must protect the legacy it began by creating the groundbreaking [New York Immigrant Family Unity Project](#) (NYIFUP) during the first Trump administration. NYIFUP was the first publicly funded deportation defense program in the country. Since then, more than 70 jurisdictions have followed suit, establishing and funding 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.



Therefore, Columbia County Sanctuary Movement endorses the continued funding of immigration legal services, the expansion of funding to \$175 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.