



Testimony in Support of Increased Immigration Legal Services Funding

Submitted by Neighbors Link

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Neighbors Link is a non-profit organization that works to build stronger communities through immigrant empowerment and integration. Our programs include English classes, programs for parents and children, early childhood programs and academic support for school-age children, workforce development, immigration legal services, crisis support services, advocacy and more. Our legal team represents a wide array of immigrant New Yorkers on matters ranging from deportation defense to naturalization. In 2025, we served more than 3,000 unique clients in complex legal cases, limited scope cases and consultations.

The demand for immigration legal services in New York State is skyrocketing due to new aggressive federal enforcement tactics, an exponential increase in detentions without bond, expedited removals and deportations, and a rapid surge in federal resources devoted to immigration.

We see the impact of legal services on a daily basis at Neighbors Link. Miriam was subject to a forced marriage and female genital mutilation in her home country. She fled with her infant child because she did not want her daughter to go through the same horrific things that she had to endure. She began working with Neighbors Link Community Law Practice and received asylum. She will also be eligible for a green card in the future. Miriam clearly fulfilled the requirements for asylum and we are grateful for the outcome in her case. However, if Miriam did not have an immigration attorney, it would have been very difficult for her to achieve this result. Immigration law has always been complicated and difficult for individuals to navigate without an attorney and it has become dramatically more difficult under the current administration. Without an attorney, many individuals with strong, valid claims are often denied asylum.

New York must act now to ensure that immigrant New Yorkers can access sustainable and comprehensive legal help so they can stay with their families, work, go to school, and remain in their communities.

Neighbors Link is joining the CARE for Immigrant Families Coalition in calling for the 2027 New York State Budget to allocate \$175 million in immigration legal services via the Office for New Americans. This investment should include:

- \$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.

We also urge the passage of the Access to Representation Act and the Building Up Immigrant Legal Defense Act. The ARA would establish a right to universal representation, meaning anyone at risk of deportation who is unable to afford a lawyer would be provided with one. The BUILD Act would invest four years of funding to grow and strengthen legal services.

New York has long been a leader in upholding freedom, fairness, and family unity. Now is not the time to back down from these commitments, but to stand fast to what is just, defending the rights, humanity, and contributions of immigrants. Therefore, Neighbors Link endorses the expansion of immigration legal services funding to \$175 million, and the immediate passage of the Access to Representation and BUILD Acts.