



Grounded in community.
Advocating for all.

THURSDAY FEBRUARY 12, 2026

WRITTEN TESTIMONY OF BUILD UP JUSTICE NYC

SUBMITTED TO THE NEW YORK STATE SENATE FINANCE COMMITTEE AND THE ASSEMBLY
WAYS & MEANS COMMITTEE

JOINT LEGISLATIVE BUDGET HEARING ON PUBLIC PROTECTION

Thank you for the opportunity to submit this written testimony to the Joint Legislative Budget Hearing on Public Protection. My name is Jessica Rose, Esq., and I am the Executive Director of Build Up Justice NYC (BUJNYC)—formerly Brooklyn Legal Services Corporation A. BUJNYC is a member of the New York Legal Services Coalition (NYLSC), which represents civil legal services providers and their clients—I serve as the Co-Vice President and the Legislative Steering Committee Co-Chair. Collectively, NYLSC members provide representation to low-income New Yorkers in each region of the state in the areas of family law, domestic violence, immigration, housing, public benefits, consumer issues, elder law, and LGBTQIA+ rights. BUJNYC provides low- and moderate-income clients throughout the five boroughs of New York City with services for tenants, homeowners, small business owners, community nonprofits, taxpayers, survivors of domestic violence, and more. Last year, our work impacted nearly 9,600 New Yorkers across our many programs.

BUJNYC and the entire Coalition share the core goal of advancing access to justice. As New Yorkers continue to face burdensome affordability challenges, it is critical that civil legal services remain accessible to everyone and that no one faces injustice simply because they cannot afford an attorney. In order to achieve our mission, we need the support of our state government that will offer lasting stability to our organizations.

Fully funding IOLA

BUJNYC and our fellow NYLSC members are deeply concerned that the Governor's Executive Budget did not include full appropriation authority for the Interest on Lawyer Account (IOLA) Fund. The Executive budget included \$77.5 million, far short of the \$102.5 million IOLA requested, and was approved by IOLA's Board of Trustees.

IOLA is a critical, non-taxpayer funding source for civil legal services for low-income New Yorkers. This funding is not taxpayer money; it is generated through interest on attorney escrow accounts for the sole purpose of supporting civil legal services statewide as prescribed in statute. The full amount of money needed is currently in IOLA's accounts.

IOLA is now entering the second year of a five-year, competitively bid contract process that was designed specifically to provide stability and predictability for civil legal services providers. This multi-year approach allows nonprofit organizations to plan responsibly, retain staff, and meet growing demand for services at a time of unprecedented need. This approach is already supporting more effective, coordinated service delivery across the state.



**Grounded in community.
Advocating for all.**

Over the past year, providers have also worked closely with IOLA to plan and implement critical infrastructure investments through the Justice Infrastructure Project. These efforts are intended to create long-term efficiencies and improve service quality, including the recently announced statewide civil legal services training center and a planned online intake portal that will expand access and streamline assistance for New Yorkers seeking help. Civil legal services providers are essential partners in implementing the Governor’s own budget priorities, including protecting immigrants’ rights and helping New Yorkers navigate economic hardship

Without the additional \$25 million needed to fully fund IOLA’s request, there will be significant cuts in funding starting April 1, 2026 when year two contracts begin. Those reductions will mean the loss of jobs, fewer services for vulnerable communities, and the potential unraveling of carefully planned investments that were intended to strengthen the civil legal services system for the long term—directly undermining the policy goals this budget seeks to advance.

These cuts have the potential to directly impact BUJNYC’s staffing of key programs. Thanks to our five-year IOLA award of \$6.3 million, we were able to hire a new domestic violence attorney, a housing attorney in our recently-formed tenant advocacy team in Queens, a group representation attorney in Brooklyn, and a Wills & Estates attorney—forming a new practice area for our organization. These hires have expanded the breadth of the services we can offer New Yorkers and have already proven vital to the communities we serve. Losing these team members would not just hurt BUJNYC but also impact the New Yorkers who rely on our services.

We are hoping the Executive will realize their mistake and correct this in the 30-day amendments, however, if they do not, our ask to the legislature is that the final budget include \$102.5 million spending authority for IOLA in their one house bills.

Pass the contracts bill and pressure Gov. Hochul to sign it

Last year, Governor Kathy Hochul vetoed a bill that would have addressed chronic delays, inefficiencies, and inconsistencies in State contracts. Despite being passed unanimously by the legislature, the Governor rejected an opportunity to improve the financial situation of nonprofits across the state providing free civil legal services. Many of our fellow providers operate at narrow margins, which means delays in contract payments from the State can prevent hiring new staff, paying and retaining current staff, or keeping their doors open altogether. This year, we urge the legislature to once again support the efforts of Senator Mayer and Assemblymember Paulin to enact meaningful, common-sense legislation to guarantee civil legal service providers are not harmed by bureaucratic shortfalls.

Restoring funding for Upstate New York providers

We respectfully request that the SFY 2027 Budget restore and increase funding for not-for-profit legal aid service providers in Upstate New York from \$3.5 million to \$4 million. This initiative has been championed by the Senate for the past five years and has benefited thousands of low-income New Yorkers and communities facing marginalization in Western NY, Central NY, Southern Tier, and the Capital Region. Focusing on individual and family stability, a \$4 million appropriation will allow important programs to continue and enhance support in the areas of family law, housing, public benefits, and more.



Grounded in community.
Advocating for all.

Additional funding to support

We are encouraged to see in the preliminary budget the \$40 million allocation to the Homeowner Protection Program (HOPP) and the executive baseline of \$35 million for Eviction Defense Funding. We hope to see these allocations supported and enhanced by State lawmakers. We are calling for an increase of \$40 million for Eviction Defense Funding, \$260 million to establish a statewide Office of Civil Representation for the first-year rollout, and increase funding for the Housing Access Voucher Program from \$50 million to \$250 million to make that program permanent.

Ensuring privacy in court-ordered name changes

While all other types of name changes—such as for marriage, divorce, or adoption—have categorical privacy, court-ordered name changes do not. This poses a safety and privacy concern for all petitioners, and particularly for transgender, and nonbinary people, and those who are victims of domestic violence. The Office of Court Administration implemented a new rule last year, which is a positive step, but OCA can only go as far as the law allows. We must change the law to treat name changes in court the same way as all other name changes, and we must provide a path to privacy for people who had name changes before the new rule took effect. There is no reason for New York state to allow confidential information—including home addresses, birth certificates, birth dates and medical records—available to the public. Especially considering that online filings are scraped and data is re-published online, and changes at the federal level, this is of utmost urgency.

We join our fellow NYLSC members in calling for the Privacy in Name Changes bill (A.3925 Lavine) to be included in the one-house and final budgets this year.

Thank you for considering our written testimony. I am happy to answer any questions that you may have—you may reach me at the email below.

Jessica A. Rose

Executive Director

Build Up Justice NYC

jrose@buj.org