



RURAL LAW CENTER OF NEW YORK

THURSDAY FEBRUARY 12, 2026

TESTIMONY

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

JOINT LEGISLATIVE BUDGET HEARING ON PUBLIC PROTECTION

My name is Heidi Dennis and I am the Executive Director of the Rural Law Center of New York, Inc. The Rural Law Center is a statewide not for profit legal services program devoted to addressing the systemic legal and economic issues that affect low-income New Yorkers who live in our state's 44 rural counties.

We appreciate the opportunity to submit written testimony to the Joint Legislative Budget Hearing on Public Protection. Thank you for your leadership and willingness to listen to the concerns of our organization and others who work to provide civil legal services and access to justice for those who otherwise would not be represented.

The challenges we face as providers of legal services in rural areas are extensive. Location, large geographic locations with limited public services, fewer social services, and an overall lack of civil legal service providers to cover these rural spaces.

Many of New York's 44 rural counties do not have a physical legal services office. They seek assistance from regional offices or helplines. There are no attorneys to refer them to in their home county. With the emergence of remote technology that was relied upon during the Pandemic, the court system in many ways became more accessible to rural poor. While still plagued with lack of internet availability, many were able to access the court system from their smart phones. Unfortunately since we returned to in person court proceedings, remote appearances are often not available or severely restricted. Additionally, much of the work that the Rural Law Center does, and has done for the past thirty years, has been remote. We offer clients document preparation, consultations, and advocacy, but often cannot commit to make a physical appearance with the client in court. Were more courts open to remote appearances by

attorneys, and limited scope appearances by attorneys, we could provide in court services for clients across the state. We could provide attorney consultations at the courthouse – by remotely accessing those needing assistance.

Rural New York encompasses over 41,000 square miles, and that represents over 85% of the state's physical area. As a comparison, rural New York is geographically about the size of Virginia. The aggregate population of rural New York is approximately 3.2 million, which is roughly the total population of Connecticut. 17% of New York's population lives in 80% of the land mass of New York.

Therefore, when we talk about rural New York, we are talking about a large area, with a substantial population. Were this population and geographic size its own state, resources would not be denied simply due to the locations of the population. 16 of our 50 states have a similar amount of land mass, and 15 of our 50 states have a similar population - yet in New York, legal and human services to rural counties are sparse, and that sparseness results in unfair encounters with the legal system and persistent, generational poverty.

There are also some problems that are uniquely rural. Lack of transportation stands out as a barrier for legal access as well as access to other human services. There are virtually no homeless shelters in rural counties. People purchase homes with land contracts, only to find out the seller owes a mortgage that is now in foreclosure, and the buyers do not know how to protect themselves. The rural poor are targets for predatory lending and for illegal debt collection practices. Illegal evictions can take place because there is no one to enforce eviction procedure. Victims of domestic violence live in small communities, where privacy is a rare commodity, and therefore a victim fears taking protective action.

Below represent specific issues and funding streams that are important to the Rural Law Center. Our funding stands to be significantly impacted by the changes in the funding that are proposed under the Governor's initial budget release. Without the restoration of these funds, our services will undoubtedly be impacted as our ability to service the number of clients that we have will decline. We are already unable to assist all qualified individuals who contact us for assistance, and this will only increase the number of individuals we must turn away due to lack of resources.

JCLS Funding

We urge adoption of the Office of Court Administration's proposed SFY 2027 Judiciary budget, which includes a \$25 million increase and a 3 percent cost-of-living adjustment, for a total of \$179 million in Judiciary civil legal services funding. This funding must remain flexible, allowing providers to respond to rapidly changing community needs, including housing instability, domestic violence, and the continued strain on low-income households.

Upstate NY Legal Services Funding

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.

Privacy in 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, however, 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 – to be available to the public. Therefore we seek support of the bill introduced as **Privacy in Name Changes (S.XXXX Krueger /A.3925 Lavine)** in the one-house and final budgets.

State contracting/Not-for-profit Status

We urge the Legislature to address systemic challenges facing nonprofit service providers.

First, we support comprehensive reforms to State Finance Law § 179, led by Senator Mayer and Assemblymember Paulin, to address chronic contracting and payment delays. Nonprofits cannot deliver services effectively when they are forced to front costs for months without reimbursement.

Second, we urge passage of the NY Protect Act (S.7880A Krueger / A.8583-A Glick), which protects New York nonprofits from federal attacks by creating a state-protected not-for-profit status. This ensures that organizations can continue to operate, contract, and serve communities even if the IRS wrongfully revokes federal tax-exempt status.

Immigrants

New York's immigrant communities are facing unprecedented threats, including federal attacks on legal services providers, cuts to funding, and increased enforcement actions. In this moment, New York must lead.

We support:

- \$175 million for the CARE for Immigrant Families initiative, including passage and implementation of the Access to Representation Act, ensuring legal representation in removal proceedings; and the BUILD Act, which strengthens provider capacity and infrastructure. In the past year, immigration law has become more complex, and the number of New Yorkers

threatened with deportation has skyrocketed. A substantial increase in funding for Immigration Legal Services is critical to protect the 1 in 5 New Yorkers who are immigrants from unlawful detention and deportation.

- Passage of the New York for All Act (S.2235 Gounardes / A.3506 Reyes), which preserves state and local resources for community safety and ensures New York funds are not used for federal immigration enforcement.
- Passage of SNAP for All (A.6632 Gonzalez-Rojas), establishing a state-funded nutrition assistance program for income-eligible New Yorkers excluded from SNAP solely due to immigration status. While New York cannot fill all of the gaps created by the austere cuts included in last year's HR1 budget bill, ensuring that no New Yorker goes hungry should be a central commitment to all.

Access to counsel and basic supports is essential to keeping families together and communities stable.

IOLA

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 which 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.

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.

The Governor's proposed reduction 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.

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.

Thank you for considering our issues and the needs that would be met by funding the various priorities that are important to us, our fellow civil legal service organizations, and our clients.