



Testimony of the Legal Aid Bureau of Buffalo, Inc. Presented to the New York State Senate Finance Committee and the Assembly Ways & Means Committee's Joint Legislative Budget Hearing on Public Protection

February 12, 2026

Dear Chair Krueger, Chair Weinstein, and distinguished members of the Senate Finance Committee and Assembly Ways & Means Committee:

My name is David C. Schopp, Executive Director of the Legal Aid Bureau of Buffalo, Inc. Thank you for the opportunity to submit written testimony on behalf of this organization.

The Legal Aid Bureau of Buffalo, Inc. is Western New York's oldest and largest provider of free legal services for indigent individuals, including working families, seniors, people with disabilities, immigrants, domestic violence survivors, and children. These cases concern essential matters such as housing, income, safety, healthcare, and family stability. I am highlighting key SFY 2027 budget priorities that directly affect these clients.

Core Funding for Civil Legal Services

First, I must emphasize the urgency of the Governor's Executive Budget failing to fully appropriate the Interest on Lawyer Account (IOLA) Fund, providing only \$77.5 million rather than the \$102.5 million requested and approved by the IOLA Board of Trustees. IOLA is a crucial non-taxpayer funding source created from interest on attorney escrow accounts and dedicated by statute to statewide civil legal services. The full funding amount is available in IOLA's accounts.

IOLA is now in year two of a five-year competitively bid contract cycle designed to give civil legal services providers stability and predictability, allowing organizations to responsibly plan, retain staff, and meet increasing need. Over the last year, providers worked with IOLA on Justice Infrastructure Project investments, including development of a statewide civil legal services training center and a forthcoming online intake portal. These initiatives improve service quality and support the Governor's priorities related to immigrant protections and economic hardship.

Over the past year, providers have worked closely with IOLA to plan and implement critical infrastructure investments through the Justice Infrastructure Project. These efforts aim 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 remain essential partners in advancing the Governor’s budget priorities, including protecting immigrants’ rights and helping New Yorkers navigate economic hardship.

Without the additional \$25 million requested, significant cuts will begin April 1, 2026, resulting in job losses, diminished services for vulnerable communities, and disruption of long-term system-strengthening efforts. We hope this is corrected in the 30-day amendments; if not, we urge the Legislature to include full \$102.5 million IOLA spending authority in their one-house budgets.

Judiciary Civil Legal Services Funding

We strongly support 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, totaling \$179 million for Judiciary civil legal services. These funds must remain flexible so providers can address rapidly changing community needs—including housing instability, domestic violence, and challenges faced by low-income residents.

Legal Services Assistance Fund and Upstate Legal Services

We respectfully request restoration and maintenance of \$2.83 million for the Legal Services Assistance Fund (LSAF) and an allocation of \$4 million for Upstate Legal Services Funding—an increase of \$500,000. We also request restoration and expansion of not-for-profit civil legal aid funding in Upstate New York from \$3.5 million to \$4 million. This Senate-championed initiative has supported thousands of low-income New Yorkers in marginalized communities across Western, Central, Southern Tier, and Capital regions. A \$4 million appropriation will strengthen programs that stabilize individuals and families in areas including family law, housing, and public benefits.

Safeguarding New York's Nonprofits

We urge the Legislature to address structural problems in the state's nonprofit contracting system, which causes financial strain, staff instability, and reduced services. We support reforms to State Finance Law §179, led by Senator Mayer and Assemblymember Paulin, to address chronic contracting and payment delays. Nonprofits cannot function effectively when required to front costs for months.

We also support the NY Protect Act (S.7880A / A.8583-A), which secures a state-protected nonprofit status to safeguard organizations if the IRS improperly revokes federal tax-exempt status.

Ensuring Privacy in Court-Ordered Name Changes

Although name changes for marriage, divorce, and adoption are private, court-ordered name changes are not, posing significant safety risks for transgender and nonbinary individuals and survivors of domestic violence. The Office of Court Administration implemented a helpful rule change last year, but statutory limitations remain. The law must be amended to ensure privacy for all court-ordered name changes and provide retroactive privacy protections.

Confidential information such as home addresses, birth dates, and medical records should not be publicly accessible—especially as online filings are replicated across the internet. We request inclusion of the Privacy in Name Changes bill (A.3925) in one-house and final budgets.

Protecting Immigrant New Yorkers

Immigrant communities face unprecedented threats, including federal attacks on service providers and funding cuts. 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 and the BUILD Act. These measures ensure representation in removal proceedings and strengthen provider capacity. Increased investment in Immigration Legal Services is essential to protect one-fifth of New Yorkers from unlawful detention and deportation.

We also support passage of the New York for All Act (S.2235 / A.3506), which prevents state and local resources from being used for federal immigration enforcement, and passage of SNAP for All (A.6632), creating a state-funded nutrition program for income-eligible New Yorkers excluded from SNAP solely due to immigration status. Ensuring that no New Yorker goes hungry must remain a core priority.

Housing Stability and Eviction Prevention

Housing remains one of the most urgent legal crises for low-income New Yorkers. We support \$40 million for the Homeowner Protection Program, establishment of a Statewide Right to Counsel in Evictions with initial implementation funding, and expansion of the Housing Access Voucher Program (HAVP) from \$50 million to \$250 million with permanent authorization. HAVP, created last year, will begin distributing vouchers in March 2026 and currently helps only about 1,900 households; significantly greater investment is needed to stabilize families and reduce costs associated with evictions, shelters, and homelessness.

We also support \$75 million for eviction prevention through OTDA, including \$30 million for New York City and \$45 million for the rest of the state. For upstate regions, the requested \$45 million will preserve the statewide eviction defense network of 31 organizations that have assisted over 137,000 individuals as of September 30, 2025. Eviction-defense funding keeps families housed, prevents displacement, and reduces government costs related to shelters, foster care, healthcare, and courts, while promoting better health, education, and employment outcomes.

Disability Advocacy Program

The Disability Advocacy Program (DAP) provides statewide representation for low-income disabled New Yorkers whose SSI or SSDI benefits are wrongly denied or terminated. DAP saves the state millions annually, returning more than \$2 for every \$1 invested and generating nearly \$1.5 billion in reimbursements since 1983. We request \$7.5 million in SFY 2027 funding (including executive and legislative additions before county match) and inclusion of DAP in OTDA's Human Services COLA to address inflation and respond to delays within the Social Security Administration.

SNAP Benefits Cards and Fraud

Millions rely on SNAP for essential nutrition. The state must address SNAP skimming fraud by replacing existing EBT cards with more secure chip cards—an initiative included in the Governor's budget—and providing replacement benefits for victims until chip cards are fully implemented. The state should also create a food benefit program for households excluded from SNAP because of immigration status, especially following federal restrictions enacted in 2025. These changes strengthen food security, improve health outcomes, and stimulate local economic activity, particularly as more New Yorkers face food insecurity than before the pandemic.

Closing

Civil legal services are a cornerstone of New York's safety net. They prevent crises, protect vulnerable residents, and promote fairness and efficiency in our legal system.

We respectfully urge the Legislature to fully fund these priorities and reaffirm New York's commitment to equal justice for all.

Thank you for the opportunity to provide this written testimony.

Respectfully,

A handwritten signature in black ink, reading "David C. Schopp", written over a horizontal line.

David C. Schopp

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