



Testimony in Support of Legal Services Funding

Submitted by Jericho Road Community Health Center

My name is Quinita McKinney and I work as a DOJ Accredited Representative for Jericho Road Community Health Center in Buffalo, NY. Our agency serves thousands of multi-ethnic and multi-lingual refugees and immigrants in the Western New York Area.

We are grateful to the Assembly and Senate for convening this hearing. We urge including \$25 million in funding for immigration legal services in the FY 2022 New York State Budget to ensure that New Yorkers facing intricate immigration issues have access to competent legal assistance.

Immigration law is civil law and therefore access to representation is not guaranteed as it is in our criminal justice system. This leaves immigrants who lack the financial resources to hire a private attorney unable to properly defend themselves against a trained government attorney. Imagine being placed in removal proceedings, you are in court and the government attorney alleges that you should be deported. Your job now, rebut the allegations against you and prove that you qualify for lawful status. Fail to do this and your family will be ripped apart. You'll need to enter evidence proving that you are eligible for lawful status and call witnesses if needed. When the government attorney calls a witness you'll need to cross-examine him/her. If the government attorney objects to any statements you make you'll need to argue issues of law. Can you do it? Successfully prevent yourself from being deported and your family torn apart?

There has been extensive research conducted that shows having legal representation in removal proceedings significantly affects the outcome. A study published in 2018 on the impact of the New York Immigrant Family Unity Project (NYIFUP) in New York City shows that having an attorney increased chances of winning and gaining the ability to legally remain in the United States by 1,100 percent.

Approximately one in ten immigrants in New York are currently facing deportation. There is no way to estimate how many may unknowingly qualify for immigration benefits, but undocumented immigrant New Yorkers have immense difficulties in accessing counsel to determine their options and make choices for themselves and their families.

Agencies such as ours and Journey's End Refugee Services provide quality legal services to the Western NY area. With an increase in funding, agencies like ours will be able to continue to fund legal professionals currently working with the organization and expand our capacity to assist more WNY residents. Immigration cases, whether a deportation proceeding or an affirmative application for an immigration benefit, take years to receive a final decision. By not renewing the funding now, New Yorkers who were able to gain access to counsel through these programs will effectively lose their lawyers halfway through their cases. By not increasing the funding, legal representatives will not have the capacity to take on new cases in addition to working on the cases they have already opened in previous years.

We therefore endorse the continued funding of the Liberty Defense Project and ONA Opportunity Centers and the expansion of funding to \$25 million.

Thank you for your work on behalf of the immigrant communities of New York and for the opportunity to testify today.

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