



Testimony in Support of Increased Immigration Legal Services Funding
Submitted by Neighbors Link
February 6, 2025

My name is Karin Anderson Ponzer, Director of Neighbors Link Community Law Practice. 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 2024, we served more than 3,000 unique clients in complex legal cases, limited scope cases and consultations.

At Neighbors Link, we know the transformative power of immigration law to protect the vulnerable, keep families together and transform lives, but this can only happen if individuals facing the immigration system have access to high quality immigration legal services. New York State has been a national leader in supporting immigration legal services. However, even with strong existing programs, as of October 2024, more than 170,000 people in New York were fighting for their lives in immigration court without a lawyer. Given the policies of the new administration, New York needs to urgently prioritize investments to provide deportation defense services for immigrants, to fund recruitment and training of legal teams, build needed infrastructure, and responsibly expand rapid-response services.

For these reasons, Neighbors Link is joining the Campaign for Access, Representation, and Equity (CARE) for Immigrant Families Coalition in calling for the 2026 New York State Budget to allocate \$165 million to meet urgent and long -term legal and social service needs of immigrant families in New York. This investment should comprise:

- \$100M for the Office of New Americans (ONA)
 - \$80 million to sustain and supplement existing grants to ensure that legal services providers can recruit and retain staff to keep pace with growing needs
 - \$10 million to fund and connect immigrants with programs that help them preserve their rights, gain citizenship and other immigration benefits, participate in the workforce, and learn English
 - \$10 million for capacity building for legal service providers so that these organizations have the resources to strengthen their programs and continue to offer high-quality, life-saving assistance.

- \$65M for the Department of Education
 - \$25 million to expand immigration law clinics and fellowships at accredited New York law schools
 - \$20 million for a Student Loan Contribution Plan for attorneys committing to pro bono immigration work
 - \$20 million to create a five-year program to support individuals seeking Department of Justice accreditation to represent immigrants at risk of deportation

Our State must equip all immigrants facing deportation with the basic tools and support they need to protect their rights, secure economic stability, and remain united with their families. The \$44.2 million the Governor proposed to fund immigration services in the Executive Budget fails to adequately address the immediate need for legal services in this critical moment.

We also urge the passage of the Access to Representation Act (ARA) and the Bolstering Unrepresented Immigrant Legal Defense Act (BUILD) 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 set the groundwork for the ARA by providing funding for necessary infrastructure for legal services providers to create and sustain strong programs to protect immigrant communities.

New York has 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 continued funding of immigration legal services, the expansion of funding to \$165 million, and the immediate passage of the Access to Representation and BUILD Acts. Thank you for your work on behalf of immigrant communities, for calling this hearing, and for the opportunity to provide this testimony.