



Testimony: Esther Limb, Esq., Director of Immigration Practice Group
Hearing: New York City Council Committee on Immigration
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Thank you for the opportunity to submit testimony regarding the implementation of New York City's sanctuary local laws, the critical role of immigrant legal services, and the importance of ensuring that immigrant New Yorkers can safely access city services and courts. I am Esther Limb, the Director of the Immigration Practice at Her Justice, a nonprofit organization that has advocated with and for women and gender minorities living in poverty in New York City for more than 30 years. In 2025, Her Justice provided a range of legal help to more than 4,000 women and their children in our practice areas of family, matrimonial, and immigration law. Among the clients served, 92% are women of color and 85% are survivors of domestic violence. Three-fourths of our clients were born outside the U.S., coming from 103 countries across the world.

Her Justice provides direct representation and skilled advocacy in an arena that often fails to adequately serve the legal needs of the marginalized. In this moment of volatile change, as in ordinary times, legal services are essential services. Every day, our staff attorneys provide women with information about the legal remedies available to them and work with clients to weigh their options, develop strategies, and decide on the course that is right for them and their children. We are grateful for this committee's commitment to recognizing civil legal services are essential in New York. We hope this testimony underscores the **critical importance of civil legal services for immigrant women living in poverty in New York and for all New Yorkers**, and highlights the partnership we seek with the City to ensure immigrants have access to them.

Her Justice supports legislative efforts that strengthen the City's sanctuary framework and ensure that immigrant survivors can safely access services and protections. The following bills would further reinforce the City's commitment to protecting immigrant communities and supporting survivors of violence.

- **Int. 0055-2026 (Avilés) - Developing signage that describes certain constitutional and legal protections.** Clear communication of legal protections is essential to ensuring that New York City's sanctuary policies function as intended for immigrant communities. Introduction 55 would require the Mayor's Office of Immigrant Affairs (MOIA), in consultation with the New York City Law Department, to develop plain-language, multilingual signage describing key legal protections under city law and outlining the rights individuals may invoke when interacting with federal immigration authorities. For immigrant survivors of domestic violence and gender-based violence—who often must interact with courts, Family Justice Centers, social services agencies, and law enforcement to obtain safety and stability—clear information about their rights can reduce fear, counter misinformation, and help ensure they can safely access the services and legal protections they need.
- **Int. 0261-2026 (Krishnan) - Prohibiting the city of New York from contracting with immigration entities.** Introduction 261 would prohibit New York City from entering into contracts with entities engaged in immigration enforcement activities that penalize a person's presence in, entry into, or reentry into the United States. Maintaining clear boundaries between city services and federal immigration enforcement is critical for immigrant survivors of domestic and gender-based violence, whose abusers often weaponize immigration status as a tool of coercion and control. By reinforcing the integrity of the City's sanctuary framework, this



legislation would help ensure that survivors feel safe seeking help from city agencies, reporting abuse, and accessing the legal protections and services necessary to rebuild their lives.

I. Civil Legal Services are Critical for Immigrant Survivors of Violence

For 30 years, Her Justice has been committed to providing critical free legal services to undocumented immigrant women living in poverty. Her Justice recognizes that the demand for legal representation in New York far exceeds the capacity of legal services available. Through our unique pro bono first model, Her Justice pairs thousands of well-trained and resourced pro bono attorneys from the City's premiere law firms with women who have urgent legal needs. This pro bono first model helps fill the "civil justice gap" – the distance between the number of Americans who need civil legal assistance and the far few who receive it due to cost barriers and limited legal service resources. By ensuring that more women have lawyers by their side, we help make their voices heard and we begin to break down systemic barriers to accessing justice.

Our immigration practice provides free legal assistance to survivors of domestic violence, sex trafficking, labor trafficking, and other forms of gender-based violence as they seek to stabilize their immigration status in the United States. Last year our attorneys provided legal information, advice, and representation on 2,058 immigration matters, securing legal status for 802 clients and their children.

Yet most New York Family Court litigants are unrepresented, with the patchwork right-to-counsel laws providing this resource in only limited case types. They spend immeasurable hours, days and years moving through complicated litigations. From our years of experience representing women in the civil justice system, we know that the burden of economic instability due to stalled support or custody proceedings too often falls on people like our clients. This burden is even more onerous for our undocumented immigrant clients who are often disadvantaged waiting years for the historically under-funded immigration system to review their applications for legal status and employment authorization documentation (or work permits) which are critical for families' stability.

The City's Crucial Investment in Immigration Legal Services

New York City has demonstrated strong leadership in protecting immigrant survivors of domestic violence and gender-based violence through its sanctuary policies and investments in legal services. **The Council's Immigrant Opportunities Initiative and the Immigration Legal Services for Survivors of Violence and Gender-Based Harm Initiative, are instrumental in ensuring that immigrant survivors can stabilize their status and rebuild their lives.** For survivors whose abusers exploit their immigration status as a means of coercion and control, access to specialized immigration legal services can be life-changing. Through this initiative, survivors can pursue immigration relief such as VAWA self-petitions, U visas, and T visas while also addressing family court and safety-related legal needs. Securing lawful status or work authorization allows survivors to obtain employment, secure housing, pursue custody and child support, and rebuild economic independence. Continued investment in this initiative strengthens both individual safety and the City's broader sanctuary framework by ensuring that immigrant survivors can meaningfully participate in legal processes and access the protections available to them under the law.



II. Sanctuary Protections Help Immigrant Survivors of Violence Access Legal Services and Relief

Her Justice policy and system reform approach

We believe that our client-centered services must also be paired with policy work to advance systemic reform while meeting individual needs, this is achieved through independent efforts and partnerships with peer organizations and coalitions. Our policy work is informed by the lived experiences of our clients, women and gender minorities living in poverty, whose livelihoods and well-being are often shaped by the civil justice system. Yet this system often remains invisible to those outside of it, making it all the more essential to elevate the need for reforms in this area for all who depend on it. Through this framework, we work to break down systemic barriers embedded in the civil justice system that reinforce and exacerbate economic, gender, and racial inequities.

Access to the Courts

In recent years, heightened immigration enforcement and increased U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) activity have created significant concern within immigrant communities. Many of our clients express uncertainty and fear about attending court proceedings, interacting with government offices, or accessing public services. For survivors of gender-based violence, these concerns can be especially pronounced. Survivors may worry that seeking help could expose them or their family members to immigration consequences, even when they are eligible for protections such as U visas, T visas, or VAWA relief. These fears can make it more difficult for survivors to safely engage with the systems designed to protect them, including the Family Courts, law enforcement, and other city agencies. Ensuring that immigrant survivors understand their rights and feel safe accessing these institutions is essential to advancing both survivor safety and public trust. New York City's sanctuary local laws and investments play a critical role in ensuring that immigrant survivors of domestic violence and gender-based violence can safely seek help.

Work Authorization as a Pathway to Safety

We pair our legal services for undocumented survivors of gender-based violence with research and policy advocacy. Through our direct services work, we know that the ability to work legally in the U.S. with an employment authorization document makes a significant difference in the quality of life, safety, and stability of our clients and their children. In 2023, we released our policy research report, [*Stories from Immigrant Survivors of Gender-Based Violence: the Impact of Work Authorization*](#). The report is the culmination of a multi-year qualitative research project; we interviewed our immigrant clients about how delays in work authorization impacted their lives. The report presents findings about the benefits of legal work permits in terms of our clients' economic independence and freedom from abuse, housing stability, mental health and well-being. The research illustrates the strong connection between our clients having legal work authorization and their likelihood of seeking help from other systems, including the Family Courts and the civil justice system and law enforcement. The report also contains recommendations for reform, including enhancing and investing in immigration legal services. Her Justice measured the **impact of our legal services** in Fiscal Year 2025 and found that with \$6.8 million in funding from state and local government, donations, and private foundations, the immigration clients served will see increased wages resulting in a benefit of \$8.6 million— proving civil legal services matter.



III. Her Justice Is Expanding Outreach and Legal Education for Immigrant Survivors

Her Justice is actively responding to the current climate of heightened immigration enforcement and rapidly evolving federal immigration policies by expanding our outreach and education efforts to ensure that immigrant survivors understand their rights and know where they can safely seek help. Our staff regularly conduct “Know Your Rights” presentations and trainings for community-based organizations across New York City, providing survivors and frontline service providers with information about federal immigration protections, as well as the rights afforded to immigrant New Yorkers under the City’s sanctuary policies. These presentations are an important tool for countering misinformation and empowering survivors to access legal and social services without fear.

At the same time, our immigration attorneys are closely monitoring changes in federal immigration policy and enforcement practices to ensure that we can provide accurate, timely guidance to our clients and pro bono partners. Immigration law is complex and constantly evolving, particularly for humanitarian protections such as VAWA self-petitions, U visas, and T visas, which are critical pathways for survivors of abuse and trafficking. Our team tracks policy developments, consults with national immigration advocacy networks, and adapts our legal strategies to protect our clients’ safety and stability. Through this work, Her Justice seeks not only to provide direct legal assistance, but also to ensure that immigrant survivors and the organizations that support them have the information and tools necessary to navigate an increasingly complex and uncertain immigration landscape. By combining expert legal representation with proactive outreach and education, we help ensure survivors of violence can access justice and safety in New York City.

Thank you again for the opportunity to highlight Her Justice’s longstanding commitment to ensuring that immigrant survivors of domestic violence and gender-based violence can safely access the legal protections and services they need. Through our pro bono first model, immigration legal services, and research-driven policy and advocacy efforts, we work to help survivors stabilize their status, secure safety for themselves and their families, and rebuild their lives. We thank the City Council for its continued leadership and investment in protecting immigrant communities, including through sanctuary policies and legal services for survivors. We look forward to continued collaboration and partnership with the Council, the Mayor’s Office of Immigrant Affairs, and community partners to strengthen access to justice and ensure that immigrant survivors across New York City can live free from violence and fear.

Respectfully,
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