



**Testimony:** Hamra Ahmad, Esq., Head of Legal Programs and Policy  
**Hearing:** New York City Council Committee on General Welfare  
**Date:** March 17, 2026

Thank you for the opportunity to submit testimony regarding the City's FY27 Preliminary Budget. I am Hamra Ahmad, Head of Legal Programs and Policy 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 Fiscal Year 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. Her Justice clients come from communities across all five boroughs of New York City. **31% of clients were from Brooklyn, 30% from Queens, 23% from the Bronx, 14% from Manhattan, and 2% from Staten Island.** 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. 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.

Her Justice is grateful for the New York City Council's longstanding partnership in expanding access to justice for survivors of gender-based violence. Council support through Citywide Domestic Violence Empowerment (DoVE), Supportive Alternatives to Violent Encounters (SAVE), and the Speaker's Initiative has allowed Her Justice to provide critical legal services to low-income survivors of domestic violence and immigrant women in New York City. We hope the City Council will reaffirm and enhance resources to survivors and recognize legal services as essential to ensuring their economic well-being and safety. Her Justice respectfully seeks support through the following City Council initiatives:

- 1) \$300,000 Supportive Alternatives to Violent Encounters (SAVE);
- 2) \$150,000 Citywide Domestic Violence Empowerment (DoVE);
- 3) \$100,000 Speaker's Initiative;
- 4) \$100,000 Immigrant Opportunities Initiative;
- 5) \$200,000 Immigration Legal Services for Survivors of Violence and Gender-Based Harm Initiative;
- 6) \$250,000 Divorce Proceedings Representation for Domestic Violence Survivors Initiative.

In this testimony, we present **strategies to address the unmet civil legal needs of women living in poverty in New York**, including through our unique pro bono legal services model with a significant return on investment; our innovative approach to system reform through our policy program to learn more about the impact of the courts and drive ideas for change; and our focus on culturally competent services through our own training and collaboration with community partners to enhance our delivery of legal services.

## **I. The Unique Her Justice Model and Impact**



### **“Pro Bono First” Model**

Her Justice recognizes that the need for legal representation in New York far outstrips the supply of help. Through our unique pro bono first model, Her Justice pairs thousands of well-trained and resourced pro bono attorneys from the City’s premier law firms with women who have urgent legal needs. This model helps fill the “civil justice gap” – the difference between the number of Americans who need civil legal assistance and the few who receive help given inability to afford legal assistance and resource constraints on the availability of free legal help. 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 access to justice.

**Her Justice serves women and gender minorities living in poverty in child/spousal support, custody and visitation, and order of protection matters in Family Court; divorces in Supreme Court; and immigration matters under the Violence Against Women Act.** Many of the people who contact us for help are matched with a pro bono volunteer lawyer. Volunteer lawyers are assigned an experienced Her Justice staff attorney mentor who helps strategize, answer substantive and procedural questions, review documents before they are filed and provide referrals for social and other services. Four law firm attorneys work full-time in our office as externs, providing court representation in complex or emergency matters.

Non-attorney volunteers translate or interpret for non-English-speaking clients. Volunteer law students and paralegals work in-house in our main office, supervised by staff attorneys. Volunteer forensic accountants and investigators support litigation by compiling and analyzing the documentation necessary to obtain fair divisions of marital assets, maintenance awards and child support orders for our clients.

This novel and holistic approach has enabled us to assist tens of thousands of women over the years, far more than we could have reached relying exclusively on direct service. It also allows Her Justice to offer representation for many of the cases other legal services organizations do not have the bandwidth to take on – for example, child and spousal support matters, and litigated divorces. Her Justice’s 13 staff attorneys actively trained and mentored 1,378 pro bono attorneys and non-attorneys (summer associates or paralegals) who worked on both open and closed cases with Her Justice clients.

Our staff responds to those who contact us with a broad array of legal information and advice, know-your-rights materials easily accessible on our website and information about other resources. In addition to training and mentoring pro bono attorneys, Her Justice in-house attorneys provide representation to some clients whose legal issues are particularly urgent or complex. This both meets critical needs and allows staff attorneys to remain fully expert on the legal issues on which we train and provide support.

### **Return on Investment and Impact**

In addition to achieving successful outcomes in individual representations, Her Justice is committed to providing legal services that help women living in poverty achieve stability in other areas of life. To measure the **impact of our legal services**, our team conducted a preliminary return on investment analysis based on our Fiscal Year 25 data. For these calculations, we used Her Justice client data across our various legal service areas, along with publicly available datasets used by other legal organizations to calculate the value of their services. During this period, Her Justice received \$7.8 million in funding from state and local government, donations, and private foundations. These core funding sources are



critical to Her Justice's ability to provide essential legal services, and we are grateful to the Council for ensuring their protection in the City budget. From the full range of investments in Her Justice, we calculated the following benefits:

- Pro bono attorneys representing Her Justice clients were able to secure \$2.6 million in lifetime child and spousal support awards.
- For immigration clients served, increased wages will result in a benefit of \$8.6 million.
- Clients leaving abusive partners will see a one-year benefit of \$2.1 million in reduced health and mental health costs associated with an average of seven physical assaults per federal health and intimate partner violence statistics.
- Clients who had a successful case outcome during this period and their children will see a five-year improved health benefit of \$4.2 million.

Her Justice plans to update our return-on-investment analysis as new data becomes available and to utilize this analysis to support advocacy around the benefits of civil legal services and the need for greater investment in providers.

### **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 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. 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. Her Justice is deeply committed to exploring the power of data to inform and support policy change. We have developed expertise in conducting original research to build civil justice data collections and leverage these to support reform.

- In November 2024, Her Justice launched our newest policy research project, [Report From Court](#), which surveys pro bono attorneys representing Her Justice clients in New York City Family Court about their experiences and case outcomes and presents survey data in real time on a website. By making visible the Family Court experience and the perspectives of pro bono attorneys, *Report From Court* aims to fill a critical gap in Family Court data and support meaningful reform.
- Her Justice has also conducted research on the legal needs of immigrants in our community to support policy reform. Our 2023 report, [Stories from Immigrant Survivors of Gender-Based Violence: The Impact of Work Authorization](#), features findings from qualitative interviews with 31 undocumented immigrant survivors about the impact of employment authorization on their employment, income, housing, access to government services, interactions with the criminal justice system, and mental health. Her Justice continues to highlight this research in local and federal advocacy around rights and benefits for immigrants.
- In 2021, Her Justice released our first policy research report, [Towards Justice for Parents in Child Support Courts](#), which presented an analysis of 800 court observations in New York City child support cases and recommendations for Family Court reform. Her Justice leveraged this research to support a legislative campaign focused on reforming the New York child support courts.



## II. Strengthening Legal Protections for New York Families

Women living in poverty, particularly Black and Brown women, are forced to rely on a civil justice system that has been historically and systematically under-resourced. Many access the Family Courts to secure basic freedoms – personal autonomy, financial independence, and safety from abuse – through orders of protection, financial support from partners, or court-ordered visitation schedules. 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 doubly 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 need for legal representation in litigated matters, such as custody, visitation, child support, and litigated divorces, is great. In FY2025 **Her Justice worked on 866 family and matrimonial matters serving 2,048 women and children**. And the impact of our legal services in these areas is significant. **With our services, Her Justice clients obtained financial awards and settlements totaling \$1,092,560 and monthly benefits totaling \$36,102.**

### **Divorce as a Pathway to Economic Stability**

New York City has demonstrated important leadership in recognizing the need for legal representation in divorce for survivors of domestic violence. Her Justice, alongside our pro bono partners, provides legal advice and representation to hundreds of women seeking divorce each year. Navigating the legal process of divorce is especially critical for women who are often the lower-earning spouse within a marriage. A fair divorce process helps ensure equitable determinations of child support, spousal support, and the division of marital assets, providing single mothers with a critical financial safety net as they transition to independent households. For survivors of domestic violence, financial stability is often essential to maintaining safety and independence after leaving an abusive relationship. **Her Justice was proud to support the passage of Int. 1175-2025 (Menin), which recognizes the importance of legal representation for survivors navigating divorce proceedings.** Passed as a pilot program, this measure creates an opportunity to assess the need for and impact of providing divorce representation for domestic violence survivors in New York City. The newly established **Divorce Proceedings Representation for Domestic Violence Survivors Initiative will play a critical role in supporting this work by funding legal services that allow survivors to safely and effectively navigate divorce proceedings.** Continued investment in this initiative will ensure that survivors have meaningful access to legal representation, enabling them to secure fair financial outcomes and rebuild stability and independence for themselves and their children.

### **Addressing Financial Abuse and Coerced Debt**

Domestic violence often extends beyond physical harm. Many of our clients experience financial abuse, a form of coercive control in which one partner restricts the other's access to financial resources, undermining their ability to achieve economic independence. Financial abuse can include coerced debt, identity theft, and manipulation of credit or financial



accounts. To address these challenges, Her Justice has developed specialized expertise in financial abuse and coerced debt that is widely recognized within the New York legal community. As part of our holistic legal services, we provide representation, legal advice, brief services, referrals, and financial advocacy across both family and divorce matters. We now run credit reports for 100 percent of our family and matrimonial clients to identify whether additional financial advocacy or services may be necessary. These legal services are essential to helping survivors rebuild financial stability and autonomy. In parallel with our direct services work, Her Justice remains committed to advocating for greater recognition of the economic realities of domestic violence within the law and the courts to ensure survivors receive full and meaningful relief.

**We were proud to support the passage of the New York State coerced debt law (S.1353/A.3038), which provides critical relief for survivors of domestic violence, elder abuse, human trafficking, and abuse by caretakers who have been burdened with debt incurred through coercion or control.** This law represents an important step toward recognizing and remedying the lasting economic harms survivors face. City investments in legal services play a key role in ensuring that survivors can access the protections available under this law. Through initiatives such as DoVE and SAVE, Her Justice is able to provide **legal advocacy that addresses the financial consequences of abuse while helping survivors rebuild economic stability.** Continued support for these initiatives ensures that survivors can obtain meaningful relief from coerced debt, restore their financial footing, and move forward safely and independently.

### **III. Civil Legal Services are Critical for Immigrant Survivors of Violence**

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.

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.

Her Justice partners with trusted community-based organizations across New York City to reach women in need of legal assistance. These partnerships help ensure that survivors of domestic violence and women living in poverty learn about their legal rights and can access critical civil legal services. Community partners play an essential role in connecting clients to legal support. **In FY2025, Her Justice conducted 60 community outreaches, including informational and know-your-rights presentations, reaching 1,237 individuals across New York City.**

Thank you again for the opportunity to highlight Her Justice's longstanding commitment to meeting the need for critical civil legal services in our community through our innovative pro bono first model and our research-driven policy and advocacy efforts. We thank the Council for continued support for the essential services we provide. We look forward to continued collaboration and partnership around new ideas and greater investment in legal services for indigent New Yorkers.

Respectfully,

Hamra Ahmad, Esq.  
Head of Legal Programs and Policy  
[hahmad@herjustice.org](mailto:hahmad@herjustice.org)