



Testimony: Timothy Fallon, Esq., Managing Attorney of Immigration Practice Group
Hearing: New York City Council Committee on Immigration
Date: March 25, 2026

Thank you for the opportunity to submit testimony regarding the City's FY27 Preliminary Budget. I am Timothy Fallon, Managing Attorney 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 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 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 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 1,642 pro bono attorneys and non-attorneys (summer associates or paralegals) who worked on both open and closed cases with Her Justice clients.

For those seeking assistance, our staff responds 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

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. 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. 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.**

From our years of experience representing women in the civil justice system, we know that delays in securing child support or custody orders often deepen economic instability for our clients. These challenges are even more acute for undocumented immigrant survivors, who frequently wait years for the historically under-funded immigration system to review their applications for legal status and employment authorization documentation. Without work permits or stable status, survivors face prolonged barriers to employment, housing, and financial independence – undermining their ability to achieve long term safety and stability for themselves and their families.

Addressing Removal Orders and Preventing Deportation

Our work emphasizes securing legal pathways to immigration relief through affirmative applications such as VAWA self-petitions, U visas, and T visas. Through these applications we help stabilize survivors' immigration status and reduce the likelihood that they will be placed in removal proceedings. However, this affirmative work is becoming more challenging amid heightened enforcement, increased processing delays, and barriers such as the lack of timely receipt notices, all of which can leave survivors in prolonged periods of legal uncertainty.

Heightened immigration enforcement has intensified fear within immigrant communities, deterring survivors from seeking assistance from lawyers, hospitals, and law enforcement. Many are avoiding critical services out of fear of detention or removal. Additionally, immigrant survivors face increased legal risk when pursuing U, T, or VAWA relief while asylum or removal proceedings are pending, as cases may be reopened or enforcement actions taken despite their eligibility for protection. These dynamics undermine access to justice and destabilize survivors seeking lawful status and safety.

Where appropriate, Her Justice represents clients in removal proceedings with the goal of seeking termination or administrative closure of their cases, or, in limited circumstances, helping clients obtain lawful permanent residence based on a VAWA self-petition while in proceedings. We work with a large population of clients who have experienced removal proceedings with varying outcomes, and for some, reopening their case is the only pathway to safety and stability. Motions to reopen and terminate removal proceedings are highly complex, time-intensive, and increasingly difficult in the current enforcement environment, requiring significant legal expertise and sustained representation.

Access to the Courts and other City Services

Due to heightened immigration enforcement by U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE), many of our clients express uncertainty and fear about attending court proceedings, interacting with government offices, or accessing public services. These fears 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.

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.

“We’re forced to dedicate more time to researching, writing, advising clients and pro bono attorneys. This makes our jobs much harder and divert critical time away from client consultations, in-house



representation, attorney trainings, mentoring pro-bono attorneys, Know Your Rights presentations, and community outreach.”

- Her Justice Immigration Attorney.

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.

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 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,

Timothy Fallon, Esq.

Managing Attorney of Immigration Practice Group