



To: New York City Council Committee on Immigration & Committee on General Welfare

From: Meena Shah esq., Co Director, The Door's Legal Services Center

Re: Preliminary Budget for Fiscal Year 2026, the Preliminary Capital Plan for Fiscal Years 2026-2029, and the Fiscal 2025 Preliminary Mayor's Management Report

Date: March 6, 2025

The Door is a comprehensive youth development organization that has been supporting vulnerable youth in New York City since 1972. Each year, we provide services to nearly 9,000 young people between the ages of 12 and 24, many of them immigrants. The services we provide include healthcare, education, supportive housing, food and nutrition, career development, arts and recreation, mental health counseling, and legal assistance — all under one roof. We are also a Department of Youth and Community Development (DYCD) Runaway and Homeless Youth drop-in center, providing food, clothing, showers, laundry, and case management services to young people who are unhoused or unstably housed. At The Door, we emphasize empowering and engaging the young people we serve, and we are committed to creating a safe, equitable, and inclusive space for young people and staff. The Legal Services Center at The Door is an office of over 50 individuals, including attorneys, social workers, and support staff. We specialize in serving vulnerable children and young people, including many clients who are unhoused, undocumented, and/or LGBTQIA+.

Our attorneys represent youth in removal proceedings before immigration courts, as well as those seeking to regularize their status through the filing of affirmative humanitarian applications. In 2024, we handled 3,3390 immigration matters for young people. We also operate several free legal clinics, including a weekly drop-in legal clinic for runaway/homeless youth, in response to increasing demand, primarily serves recent immigrants. The need and demand for services grows every week and we do not have enough capacity to keep up. The vast majority of these young people that we have screened at our clinics are eligible for immigration benefits or relief from removal, but we do not have the capacity to represent them. Without a lawyer, it is difficult and essentially a practical impossibility for a young person to navigate the immigration system without an attorney.

Serving New York City Youth Since 1972

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The Door's Discretionary Funding

The Door is a recipient of Discretionary Funding that has allowed us to offer wrap-around services to our immigrant youth members. The Door is a recipient of ICARE funding as well as recipients of Welcome to NYC funding. With City Council funding, we offer direct representation for immigrant youth in New York as well as Know Your Rights Trainings, legal clinics, and brief services to triage and prioritize urgent cases for immigrant youth. We urge City Council to scale up funding in response to the increasing and shifting needs for immigrant youth.

Navigating hostile administration for immigrant youth

Under the current federal administration, we are facing an increasingly hostile climate for immigrant youth that depend on the Door's vital services. Since January 20, 2025, ICE has rescinded sensitive location memoranda, begun wide-scale enforcement actions, expanded expedited removal from two weeks to two years, implemented executive orders purporting to unconstitutionally end birthright citizenship, and ended vital parole programs for immigrants fleeing their home countries. Notably, the Door is fielding calls from young people inquiring if it's safe for them to attend school or go to a doctor's appointment for fear of ICE detaining them and shattering their dreams.

Due to the bureaucratic and confusing policies impacting immigrants transferred in and out of the HERCCS, we are deeply concerned about the youth housed in these adult shelters. Many of them qualify for relief but are not receiving notice of their court dates, as they lack a reliable way to receive their mail. As a result, they are missing these critical court dates and are ordered removed *in absentia*, without ever having received notice of their court date. These young people are considered high risk for deportation and need access to legal representation to help mitigate the consequences of these violations of their due process rights. These youth are facing deportation to countries where they fled conflict and extreme forms of violence.

These young people rely on the Door for drop-services as well as receive critical information about their rights as they navigate these systems.

Federal funding is imperiled

On February 18th, without warning, HHS (through the U.S. Department of the Interior) issued a national contract stop work order for Legal Services for Unaccompanied Children, effective immediately, impacting providers nationwide. The Door represents immigrant youth under these

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federal contracts, both while they are detained in facilities in New York and after their release to sponsors and family members in the NYC area. In just four months, between October 2024 and January 31, 2025, Office of Refugee Resettlement released 1,131 unaccompanied children to sponsors in New York State. In prior fiscal years, more than 8,000 youth were released in New York State. Although the stop work order was later rescinded the battle for federal funding for unaccompanied children is far from over. On March 30, this contract year will end and we are concerned that the federal government may decide not to continue this contract into the next fiscal year. This would have a catastrophic impact on unaccompanied children in New York City.

The recent federal funding freeze exposed how fragile support for unaccompanied children's legal services is. With continued threats of deportations and funding cuts, New York must step up to protect young immigrants.

As Mayor Adams noted in his testimony on March 5th in front of Congress, New York benefits to the tune of billions of dollars of tax revenue from immigrant New Yorkers. NYC is a vibrant hub for immigrants of all backgrounds. Immigrant New Yorkers are an intrinsic and essential part of New York City.

Discretionary Funding from City Council has improved the lives of immigrant youth

ICARE has not received a funding increase in six years. We urge City Council to fully fund ICARE at the Coalition's request of \$6,297,250. The Door will receive \$900,000 of that figure to continue to build up our capacity to meet the growing need for effective, comprehensive, zealous legal representation for immigrant youth. Additionally, The Door receives \$40,000 through Welcome to NYC funding and we hope that we can continue to rely City Council's support on these initiatives that support and fund vital legal services for immigrant youth.

ICARE and Welcome to NYC's critical funding has provided the Door with funding to directly represent immigrant youth and to support our wrap around services for immigrant youth. This support has transformed the lives and futures for these vulnerable young people.

We screened a young man from South America who was about to turn 21. This young person was sexually abused by trusted family members in his home country. Upon coming out as gay, he was kicked out home. Unfortunately, he ended up fleeing his home country because he was seen by gang members with his boyfriend, and they attacked him and threatened to kill him because of his sexuality. Our interdisciplinary team was able to spring into action and intake his case,

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timely filing emergency petitions in family court, filing his SIJS petition, and his asylum petition. We connected him to vital supportive services. He now has work authorization, and his attorney was able to get proceedings dismissed in immigration court. Our team social worker assisted him in applying for college and he was recently accepted to a local community college. The Door has countless stories like these, demonstrating the possibilities that adequately funded, comprehensive immigration representation can have to transform the lives of immigrant youth. Our work supports them not only in their legal cases, but also in empowering them to pursue their dreams, to thrive, and to build a brighter future. By equipping young people with the tools to succeed, we invest in our future and in building stronger, prosperous, and healthier communities.

Thank you,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Meena Shah', is centered below the text.

Meena Shah, esq.
Co-Director
The Door Legal Service Center

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