

**New York City Council Hearing on Unaccompanied Minors**  
**Testimony of the New York Immigration Coalition**  
**September 29, 2014**

Dear City Council Members:

Thank you for the opportunity to testify before you today. The New York Immigration Coalition is an umbrella advocacy organization that represents nearly 200 members and partners. Since early this summer, when numbers released by the Federal Government highlighted the sudden spike in children's arrivals from El Salvador, Honduras, and Guatemala, the NYIC has worked to convene stakeholders across the city and the state to identify and respond to the needs of not only these children, but the communities that receive them. To date, New York has received the second highest number of children in the country – nearly 5,000 since October, 2013, a quarter of which have come to New York City.

Since convening our first working group meeting in early July 2014, the NYIC has hosted regular meetings of providers who serve one or more of the four broad categories of needs identified by our working group: legal, health, educational, and social services. We have also advocated at the city, state, and federal level for better resources to be allocated to these children. Finally, in partnership with community based organizations, city and state agencies, and legal service providers, we began holding bi-monthly Youth Assistance Fairs in July. These events, which take place in the communities with the largest amount of unaccompanied children, offer legal screenings along with representatives from schools, health care providers – including mental health – and a wealth of social services such as English classes, recreational opportunities, guidance and support for victims of trauma, etc. Finally, the NYIC has been tapped by the Federal government to launch a special Justice AmeriCorps program to have several attorneys and paralegals placed at key organizations serving these children.

Throughout this work, the NYIC has identified several key areas where New York City could and should respond.

First and foremost, these children need lawyers. We commend the City Council for partnering with private foundations and making a substantial investment in legal representation for 1,000 of the children over the next year. However, now that the immediate need has been met, we must ensure that on going systems are put in place to continue to support the children and the lawyers who represent them. The average length of an immigration court case in New York City is 582 days, according to the Transactional Records Access Clearinghouse, but in reality most cases where an application for relief has been filed take three to four years. Moreover, up to eighty percent of these children may qualify for relief, which will allow them to remain in the United States indefinitely. This means that systems must be put in place to continue

providing continuing legal representation for the children, and also linking the children to already-existing social, educational, and medical services.

Unrestricted, civil defense services for immigrants have been historically underfunded, leaving the most vulnerable immigrants who come to our city – refugee children – defenseless against an archaic, overly-complicated deportation system. The immigration reform bill that passed the Senate in 2013 included mandatory representation for children in deportation proceedings. Attorney General Eric Holder has himself come out in support of mandated representation of youth in removal proceedings. Faced with the lack of action by Washington, New York City must take the lead and fulfill that broken promise.

Second, the City must assure that funding is provided to schools and other services to integrate these children into their communities. Schools play a critical role in the life and development of any child, but in the cases of recently arrived unaccompanied minors, their function is invaluable. Only school staff, including teachers, guidance counselors, and other staff will see each child every day and can track their progress, their adjustment into a new county and a new home, and identify issues such as abuse or trafficking. Therefore, schools must be given the proper tools to support these children, who have suffered trauma and hardships much beyond what they are used to seeing.

Third, in addition to education, it is critical to meet these children's physical, mental, and oral health needs. Pediatricians can play a key role in serving as a medical home that will coordinate various types of physician and behavioral health services. They should receive guidance in identifying and referring minors to appropriate services. Most children are immunized while in the custody of the Office for Refugee Resettlement. However, there have been reports of immunization records getting lost or not being attached to release documents, making it hard for children to enroll in school.

Moreover, most children and their families are not aware of the different resources available to them for health services and coverage. Thus, an aggressive outreach campaign is necessary to ensure that children take advantage of their ability to enroll in Child Health Plus. In addition, access to behavioral health services addressing trauma will be especially important for this population, who maybe more likely to have post-traumatic stress disorder.

Finally, social support for both the children and their families will be critical. Though most children are reunited with family members, this often does not mean a happy ending. The children are sometimes unexpected additions to overburdened, struggling households. Even when the reuniting guardian is a parent, there can be feelings of resentment, abandonment, and other issues. There are increasing reports of children being pushed out of homes or running away, of being held out of school to work and bring in a supplemental income, and of suicidal ideations or other signs of deep depression. The City must create networks designed to promote the welfare of these children and families so that they do not become a lost generation, but instead grow from their difficult beginnings to contributing members of our communities.

The NYIC believes that the City Council can play a key role in this effort. With sufficient resources, we can make sure that these children will not be wards of the state, but instead become the dynamic, thriving immigrant achievers that have enriched New York State from its birth – and the Council can play a signal role in ensuring that these resources are there. And just as importantly, the City Council can also make a public statement that New York is a welcoming state, that opens its arms to newcomers and is not afraid of welcoming the stranger, and that the promise that Lady Liberty extends to the world remains alive and well today for these children.

Respectfully,

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