



Free to
Be Youth
Project

Free to Be Youth Project

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NYC City Council Committee on Immigration
Oversight Hearing Addressing the Mental Health Needs of Immigrants
Public Testimony
September 16, 2025

To The NYC City Council Committee on Immigration

Good morning. Thank you so much for the opportunity to speak with you today. On behalf of the Free to Be Youth Project of the Urban Justice Center, I would like to thank the New York City Council's Committee on Immigration for convening this important hearing. My name is Morgan Torre, and I am the Community Outreach Associate at the Free to Be Youth Project, a free legal service provider for unhoused, street-involved, and at-risk LGBTQ+ youth ages 14-24.

Free to Be Youth Project: Free & Confidential LGBTQ+ Immigration Services

The Free to Be Youth Project is dedicated to serving homeless and at-risk lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender and queer (LGBTQ+) youth. We provide free legal services for individual LGBTQ+ young people up to the age of 24 and systemic advocacy for the LGBTQ+ youth community. The Project is housed at the Urban Justice Center, a non-profit law collective serving New York City's most disenfranchised populations. Since 1994, we have been providing legal services to LGBTQ+ youth and young adults who are low-income, living on the streets, in homeless shelters, in the juvenile justice system or foster care. We regularly travel to drop-in centers where homeless youth congregate for resources and community to offer free and confidential direct legal services. This accessibility has led us to support hundreds of LGBTQ+ youth as they apply for legal immigration status, fight wrongful denials of disability benefits, change their names, fight terminations of their public assistance benefits, overcome barriers to obtaining safe and stable housing, and resist being wrongly turned away from our City's homeless shelters.

Our immigration services have never been in more demand and the barriers to LGBTQ+ immigrant justice have never been higher. We have seen a significant increase in young people seeking immigration assistance, from asylum applications, visas, and work authorization documents, to support in navigating the long and arduous green card process. This past year we provided over 100 clients with free and confidential immigration services, allowing them to live safe and successful lives in New York City.

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LGBTQ+ Immigrant Youth Mental Health

As young LGBTQ+ immigrants, our clients come to us with complex trauma. Many of our clients have fled their home countries as a result of systemic persecution, abuse, neglect, or violence from community members and families unaccepting of their gender identity or sexual orientation. This is even more significant for transgender refugees and asylum seekers who are often visible in their gender nonconformity and therefore particularly vulnerable to violence and persecution. But the trauma does not stop when they leave their home countries, with LGBTQ+ asylum-seekers facing disproportionate rates of violence in transit zones and lacking financial resources upon arrival to the United States.¹ Without the proper mental health, immigration, and housing support, LGBTQ+ youth are increasingly vulnerable to mental health crises.

Many immigrants are currently ineligible for forms of shelter or housing assistance that might be available to citizens or those with lawful status such as green cards. Without access to Section 8 or CityFHEPS benefits,² folks find themselves forced into homelessness, exacerbating pre-existing trauma and creating additional life stressors.³ These heightened mental health concerns disproportionately impact LGBTQ+ immigrant youth, with 39% of LGBTQ+ young people seriously considering attempting suicide in the past year, including 46% of transgender and nonbinary young people.⁴ These statistics are all the most devastating when hearing first hand difficulties from our clients about the issues they have in accessing mental health resources

¹Shaw, Ari, and Namrata Verghese. "LGBTQI+ REFUGEES and ASYLUM SEEKERS a Review of Research and Data Needs." (last updated, June 2022), available at <https://williamsinstitute.law.ucla.edu/wp-content/uploads/LGBTQI-Refugee-Review-Jul-2022.pdf>.

²Adams, Adrienne. 2022. "NYC's Response to the Arrival of Asylum Seekers." New York City Council Speaker. <https://council.nyc.gov/press/wp-content/uploads/sites/56/2022/12/NYCs-Response-to-the-Arrival-of-Asylum-Seekers.pdf>.

³"New USCIS 'Special Agents' Will Be Given the Power to Arrest, Use Deadly Force Against Immigrants." American Immigration Council, n.d. (last updated, September 10, 2025), available at <https://www.americanimmigrationcouncil.org/blog/uscis-special-agents-arrest-immigrants/>.

⁴"2024 U.S. National Survey on the Mental Health of LGBTQ+ Young People." Trevor Project (last updated 2024), available at <https://www.thetrevorproject.org/survey-2024/>.

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amongst language, cultural and financial barriers, and the recent federal budget cut of the national LGBTQ+ suicide hotline.⁵

Our client Matthew, a young queer man from Haiti, experienced significant childhood trauma, and violence, motivating him to immigrate to the United States. Since arriving in New York City, he has struggled to connect with mental health providers that are both LGBTQ+ culturally competent and speak Haitian Creole. Matthew, like so many other clients, are in desperate need for robust mental health supports that have the capacity to meet them where they are, and address their complex needs.*

Financial Trauma of Immigration

The financial difficulties of navigating an increasingly expensive immigration system play a key role in shaping our clients' experiences with housing, employment, and mental health. Most notably, the decision to rescind federal filing fee waivers and addition of annual fees for essential document submissions has devastating impacts on the wellbeing of folks like our clients.

- For the first time, **asylum** seekers must now pay a \$100 application fee and an annual \$100 fee for each year their case remains pending — costs that are non-waivable regardless of financial hardship. Clients often wait years for asylum interviews, some as many as 9-10 years, and the annual fee poses an incredible hardship.
- **Special Immigrant Juveniles**, an immigration status reserved for children in the immigration system who cannot reunite with their parent, will now face a \$250 filing fee for Form I-360. Young people, who were abused, abandoned, and neglected, many unaccompanied minors with no parental support or assistance, now have to find \$250, all while navigating a life not knowing where they might sleep or eat next.
- Immigrants who file for an **Employment Authorization Document** will now pay \$550 as a first time applicant under asylum, parole, or TPS with a \$275 renewal fee. For unhoused youth, the ability to obtain gainful steady employment is critical to their efforts to create stability in their lives.

⁵NBC News. "Trump Administration Shuts down LGBTQ Youth Suicide Hotline." (last updated, July 17, 2025), available at <https://www.nbcnews.com/nbc-out/out-news/trump-shuts-down-lgbtq-youth-suicide-hotline-rcna219090>.

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Our client Ian, a young Salvadorian gay man, spent five years navigating homelessness after he was kicked out of his home and had his immigration papers stolen by a relative. We assisted him with his asylum application prior to the implementation of new fees, but now Ian* has no financial means to afford the exorbitant fee for a work permit or pay the annual recurring fees while he awaits an asylum interview. Were it not for our efforts to pay this fee on Ian's behalf, his efforts to work would be hindered or halted. He would not be able to earn sufficient income to move out of an emergency shelter, nor would he have the ability to contribute to a housing subsidy for long term housing. While we remain steadfast in our mission to provide free legal services, absorbing the cost of these new fees serves as a short term solution for a long term economic burden with the capacity to financially disempower the organizations that serve as a lifeline for the most vulnerable New Yorkers.*

Traumatic Court Appearances

The increased presence of ICE agents across the city and at courthouses is having a detrimental impact on our clients' mental health, with many experiencing fear and anxiety surrounding the risk of being apprehended by ICE when attending mandatory court appearances. Our clients also face increased risk of being targeted by ICE agents for identifying as LGBTQ+.⁶ This has led to a noticeable increase in client requests for virtual appearances, but many have been denied.

Our client Eric was experiencing such profound fear of detention or deportation at his court appearance that he considered the possibility of not attending. After collaborating with his therapist, we provided the court with evidence in support of our request for a virtual appearance. Eric's virtual appearance was approved, and he was able to attend and participate in his immigration proceeding without the crippling anxiety.*

⁶Immigration Equality, National Immigrant Justice Center, and Human Rights First. 2024. "“No Human Being Should Be Held There” the Mistreatment of LGBTQ and HIV-Positive People in U.S. Federal Immigration Jails.” (last updated June 2022), available at <https://immigrantjustice.org/sites/default/files/content-type/research-item/documents/2024-06/No%20Human%20Being%20Should%20Be%20Held%20There%20-%20THE%20MISTREATMENT%20OF%20LGBTQ%20AND%20HIV%20POSITIVE%20PEOPLE%20IN%20U.S.%20FEDERAL%20IMMIGRATION%20JAILS.pdf>.

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This fear is warranted, with unlawful policies allowing ICE to arrest those showing up to court and preventing immigrants from pursuing pathways to lawful residency and employment.⁷ While our client was able to access mental health support, this is not the case for the majority of immigrants in New York City. The importance of accessible mental health services from an emotional and legal standpoint cannot be understated when considering recommendations for LGBTQ+ immigrant youth wellbeing.

Our Recommendation

New York City pledges to be a sanctuary city for vulnerable LGBTQ+ immigrants amongst daily federal attacks, but this requires a lasting commitment to protecting our most vulnerable. Our recommendation for the betterment of young LGBTQ+ migrants is as follows:

1. **Expanding the B-Heard Model:** The B-Heard model (Behavioral Health Emergency Assistance Response Division) aims to treat mental health crises as public health problems, not public safety issues. This program has been continuously expanded, allowing teams of health professionals to respond to 911 mental health calls rather than NYPD.⁸ We recommend this program is expanded across all five boroughs with the explicit inclusion of migrants and language access, ensuring newly arrived youth receive trauma-informed mental health support through a harm reduction lens.
2. **Increasing City Funding for Immigration Legal Services:** Immigration legal service providers must receive supplemental funding in the absence of filing fee waivers and the addition of new and annually incurred fees. Without the support of stable city funded CBOs, vulnerable migrant New Yorkers have no means to access lawful residence or employment leaving them more vulnerable to mental health crises.

Thank you to the members of this NYC City Council Committee on Immigration and to the community advocates who have been working hard to address the needs of immigrant

⁷Ferré-Sadurní, Luis. "Immigrants File Class-Action Lawsuit to Stop ICE Courthouse Arrests." The New York Times, (last updated July 16, 2025), available at <https://www.nytimes.com/2025/07/16/nyregion/trump-ice-arrests-lawsuit-immigrants.html>.

⁸"B-HEARD 911 Mental Health Response." Mayor's Office of Community Mental Health, n.d. (available at <https://mentalhealth.cityofnewyork.us/b-heard>).



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communities. The Free to Be Youth Project stands ready to assist the NYC City Council Committee on Immigration in any way that we can.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in cursive script that reads "M. Torre".

Morgan Torre
Community Outreach Associate
Free to Be Youth Project
Urban Justice Center