



Free to  
Be Youth  
Project

**Free to Be Youth Project**

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**NYC City Council Committee on Youth & Children's Services  
Preliminary Budget Hearings -  
Public Testimony  
March 22, 2024**

To The NYC City Council Committee on Youth & Children's Services:

Good morning. Thank you so much for the opportunity to speak with you today. On behalf of the Free to Be Youth Project (formerly the Peter Cicchino Youth Project) of the Urban Justice Center, I would like to thank the New York City Council's Committee on Youth and Children's Services for convening this important hearing. My name is Amy Leipziger, and I am the Project Director of the Free to Be Youth Project.

Free to Be Youth Project

The Free to Be Youth Project (FYP) is a direct legal service provider dedicated to serving homeless and at-risk lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender and queer (LGBTQ+) youth. The Project is housed at the Urban Justice Center, a non-profit law collective serving New York City's most disenfranchised poverty 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 in foster care. We regularly travel to Department of Youth and Community Development (DYCD) drop-in centers, such as the Ali Forney Center, Safe Horizon's Streetwork Project, and Covenant House, where homeless youth congregate to offer direct legal services and know-your-rights workshops. We have helped hundreds of LGBTQ+ youth with legal problems like applying for legal immigration status, fighting wrongful denials of disability benefits, changing their names, fighting terminations of their public assistance benefits, overcoming barriers to obtaining safe and stable housing, and being wrongly turned away from our City's homeless shelters.

The Department of Youth & Community Development

The shelter crisis at DYCD is already dire, with insufficient resources to meet the needs of a growing unhoused youth population. From July 2023 to December 2023, at total of 482 youth were "turned away" from DYCD shelters.<sup>1</sup> This number is almost a 7000% increase from the

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<sup>1</sup> [https://www.nyc.gov/assets/dycd/downloads/pdf/Local\\_Law\\_79\\_Runaway-and-Homeless\\_Youth\\_Shelter\\_Access\\_july\\_to\\_December-2023\\_Final.pdf](https://www.nyc.gov/assets/dycd/downloads/pdf/Local_Law_79_Runaway-and-Homeless_Youth_Shelter_Access_july_to_December-2023_Final.pdf) LL79 July - Dec 2023



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2023 January-June report, where only 7 youth were reportedly turned away from the shelters.<sup>2</sup> These reports define a “turned away” youth as an individual that was not able to be matched to a DYCD funded bed on the day they sought placement. When turned away from the system, these youth are stranded without alternatives, thereby exacerbating the challenges they are navigating as unhoused youth in the city. While some of this statistical increase can be attributed to improved data collection and sourcing, it is clear the demand for resources has grown beyond what DYCD can maintain with its current funding.

Mayor Adams claims that this is the result of the so-called “migrant crisis,” but in reality, this tipping point where young people are being turned away from critical, and often life-saving shelter and support services, is a reflection of systemic and pervasive deficits in public service, housing insecurity, and socio-economic inequality. As new arrivals, young migrants are disproportionately impacted by these systems, pushing them into cycles of homelessness and criminalization. While this indicates a pressing need for targeted immigration support services in the DYCD system, many youth, like our clients, have faced unique challenges in navigating the shelter system and accessing support. The cuts in the coming fiscal year will only exacerbate the shelter crisis, pushing more young people into unstable living situations and hindering their ability to access essential services. The city must prioritize the needs of our most vulnerable with legal services and additional support available to young new arrivals and unaccompanied minors.

Introducing youth-specific immigration legal services is critical to effectively support and protect vulnerable youth populations. The city is grappling with an influx of immigrant youth seeking refuge from violence, persecution, and instability in their home countries, but the availability of specialized legal assistance has remained insufficient. These services not only ensure that youth have access to crucial legal protections and pathways to residency or asylum but also help them navigate complex immigration systems with guidance and support.

While the barriers to seeking services can be daunting for a young person, the sooner they can meet with an immigration advocate, the more options remain open. This can create a lifeline for the homeless and marginally housed youth in New York. A change in status often leads to secure housing, stable employment, and better access to healthcare, financial aid, and much-needed public assistance.

By integrating youth-specific immigration legal services into DYCD shelters, we can empower immigrant youth to secure their rights, advocate for their safety, and ultimately transition into

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<sup>2</sup> [https://www.nyc.gov/assets/dycd/downloads/pdf/Local\\_Law\\_79\\_Runaway-and-Homeless\\_Youth\\_Shelter\\_Access-January-to-June-2023.pdf](https://www.nyc.gov/assets/dycd/downloads/pdf/Local_Law_79_Runaway-and-Homeless_Youth_Shelter_Access-January-to-June-2023.pdf)



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stable housing. This self-sufficiency is essential for emerging adults like our clients, who are currently working to become part of the culture and workforce of our city. Equipping young migrants to become vibrant community members and find stable employment makes our city stronger.

### Impact on Unhoused LGBTQ+ Youth

In New York City, estimates of homeless youth can be as high as 20,000, though an accurate estimate of the number of homeless youth in New York City is difficult to obtain, as many are completely disconnected from services. As the city is a magnet for teens thrown out of their homes, as well as those unaccompanied youth under the age of 25 that have arrived in the city in the last three years, all without stable housing, the actual numbers for these youth may be even higher.

Young people become homeless for many complex reasons including family conflict, shortage of affordable housing, family poverty, violence, abuse or neglect in the home, mental illness or substance abuse among family members, challenges at school. Others are rejected by their families or experience family conflict because of their sexual orientation or gender identity, an unplanned pregnancy, use of drugs or alcohol, or inability to comply with parent/caretaker rules. Unsurprisingly, LGBTQ+ youth are disproportionately impacted by these factors, with national statistics citing that nearly 40% of unhoused youth self-identify as LGBTQ+. This suggests that there are likely, at minimum, 8,000 homeless LGBTQ+ youth in New York City, lacking the legal, financial, and social resources needed to live independently. Without access to the proper supports, our clients find themselves in dire circumstances, often more precarious than the ones that brought them to our door in the first place.

Even before a young person is considered runaway or homeless, they have likely experienced trauma. This trauma is only exacerbated each day they are without services, creating an overwhelming lack of stability. For young people, this can impact their ability to continue with school, or find and maintain employment. As a result, homeless LGBTQ+ youth are two to four times more likely to report depression, anxiety, self-harm, suicidal thoughts and suicide attempts. Notably, homeless LGBTQ+ youth are also more likely to experience bullying, sexual assault, violence, trauma, HIV infection, and substance abuse than either heterosexual or stably housed LGBTQ+ peers. Queer youth of color are hit the hardest, particularly when examining the elevated risk of involvement with the juvenile or criminal justice system due to their homelessness.

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Our clients came to New York seeking refuge from these abhorrent circumstances, and are only further traumatized by the very systems in place that are intended to stabilize, not derail, them. Funding youth-specific immigration legal services, like those offered by FYP, and additional support services for youth new arrivals and unaccompanied minors, would set migrant youth up to become assets in our city's community and economy.

- A. Dan, a young twenty-one year old man from Mauritania came to us after escaping homophobic and racist violence endorsed by the government of his home country. In addition to seeking immigration relief, Dan was struggling because he was unable to find any services or support that could communicate with him in his particular dialect. With our assistance, Dan was connected with language support that has been instrumental as we help him navigate the asylum process, and secure him a work authorization that will enable him to obtain meaningful employment in the city.
- B. Fleeing from his violent family in Morocco, Sam sought help in the asylum application process after being threatened with deportation. As a member of the LGBTQ+ community, Sam faced significant harm and trauma in his country making it unsafe for him to ever return. While navigating this process, Sam has needed the assistance of shelter services, public benefits and Medicaid to ensure he can receive medical support. Our office has continued to work with him through these processes.
- C. After escaping his violent household, Brad, a nineteen-year-old from El Salvador, came to us seeking replacement immigration documents that his stepmother had refused to release to him. Not only did we get help him get a temporary order of protection from his abuser, but we were able to get his documents returned. We are now working with him to get the protection and benefits he needs to move forward.

These stories are not isolated, or unique, but while our clients have been fortunate enough to obtain our services, equipping them with the advocacy tools they need to transition from homelessness to stable housing, there are thousands of migrant youth in the city that don't have access to these essential resources. Our capacity is limited, as are the capacities of our partner organizations, and more support is needed. We are currently staffed by a Project Director, two attorneys, and an outreach associate, relying on the assistance of volunteers and pro bono support to ensure excellent legal advocacy for our clients. We cannot be everywhere at once, and the needs of the community will soon outpace our abilities, especially with the proposed budget cuts.

### Conclusion

Budget cuts will not solve this crisis, a lasting commitment to protecting our most vulnerable will. Our budget ask for FY2025 is as follows:



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- **Fund Youth-specific Immigration Legal Services: \$625,000**
  - Young people in DYCD programs have been excluded from access to city-funded legal support, and most young people qualify for youth-specific immigration relief (ie SIJS) that the city does not currently fund. Funding should be made immediately available for five positions for full-time experienced lawyers, who will be awarded to DYCD-funded RHY programs through an RFP based on the documented need for such services.
- **Fund Support Services for Youth New Arrivals and Unaccompanied Minors: \$1.63M**
  - DYCD-funded Drop-in Centers have been going above and beyond to meet the growing needs of newly arrived youth and unaccompanied minors without any additional support. We are asking for a one-time 30% contract increase for DYCD-funded Drop-in Center contracts. This additional funding will support meeting the basic needs of young people and fund more appropriate staffing across the sites.

Without adequate support services, young, queer, and trans unhoused new New Yorkers will continue to face shelter turn aways and struggle to access the advocacy resources they need to become successful contributors to the New York City community. Thank you to the members of this Committee and to the community of youth advocates who have been working hard to address the needs of this community. The Free to Be Youth Project stands ready to assist the NYC City Council Committee on Youth & Children's Services in any way that we can.

Sincerely,

/s/ AL

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