

New York City Council, Committee on Immigration

Oversight-Resources and Shelter for New Arrived Asylum Seekers

September 30, 2022

My name is David Miranda, and I am the Senior Staff Attorney at Covenant House New York (CHNY.) I would like to thank the New York City Council Committee on Immigration and especially Chair Hanif for the opportunity to testify today. I am pleased to be here on behalf of our new Executive Director of Covenant House New York, Julie Farber, and our entire Covenant House community.

At CHNY, we serve youth ages 16 to 24 who are experiencing homelessness. We are the nation's largest, non-profit agency specifically dedicated to serving homeless, runaway and trafficked youth. During this past year, CHNY served more than 1,600 young people in our programs. On a nightly basis, we provide shelter to approximately 200 young people, including, LGBTQ youth and pregnant women and mothers with their children as well as survivors of human trafficking/commercial sexual exploitation. Our youth are primarily people of color and more than a third have spent time in the foster care system. Many of our young people have experienced abuse or neglect at the hands of parents or other caregivers, and a disproportionately high percentage of our youth struggle with the pervasive impacts of trauma, mental health issues, and substance abuse. We provide young people with food, shelter, clothing, medical care, mental health and substance abuse services, legal services, high school equivalency classes and other educational and job-training programs. All of these services help young people overcome the trauma of homelessness and abuse and move toward stability, security and a successful future free from exploitation.

Influx of Immigrant Youth

We are all aware that NYC is in the middle of an immigration influx of people from South and Central America, primarily Venezuela. At Covenant House NY, we are proud to be on the frontlines helping these vulnerable young people by providing food, safety, shelter, immigration legal services, mental health and medical care, among a variety of other services. These services are provided by our dedicated and caring staff who welcome these young people and work to allay their fears and make them feel comfortable and safe, while allowing them to process the trauma of their journey. We are grateful to be able to help, but we are finding that the situation is stretching the available resources for all of us that work with runaway and homeless youth, and particularly in the area of immigration legal services.

Covenant House NY's proximity to Port Authority and our dedicated youth beds and services leads CHNY to be an obvious choice for many of these young immigrants. Those who are

already staying with us will go to Port Authority to meet the arriving buses and bring back groups of youth in the hopes that we have available beds. Other times, youth are first referred to churches or shelters in the adult homeless system. Caring staff at those shelters will notice that the client is young and may fare better at CHNY and will make a referral to us.

Our legal services department first noticed an increase in immigrant youth in the early summer of 2022, prior to the arrival of buses filled with immigrants in recent weeks. By the middle of the summer, twelve young people from Venezuela were residing in our mid-town shelter. In comparison, in the past we had a handful of undocumented youth in need of immigration legal services throughout an entire year. Since the buses began arriving, we now have 38 immigrant youth from Central and South America, the majority of whom are Venezuelan. Most of these young people are fleeing persecution (some for their LGBTQ+ status, others for their or their family members' participation in political protests) parental abandonment and starvation. Almost all of the immigrant youth we are seeing are young men. We believe that young women may find the journey to the US too dangerous and filled with the risk for sexual assault and human trafficking by cartels.

Although we are pleased to be able to support these vulnerable young people, our number of beds is finite, and we are concerned about not being able to meet all of the needs that exist, whether among migrant youth or NYC youth. Prior to July, the number of young people who we needed to make referrals elsewhere because we were at capacity was in the single digits. This month, there were 58 youth we were unable to shelter.

Service Needs/Spanish Speaking Staff and Programming

Our Spanish speaking staff are doing everything they can to help at all hours of the day and night. We have implemented Spanish speaking mental health groups and life skills workshops. We have started classes to familiarize these young people with New York, including how to navigate the subway/transportation system and understand US currency. Unfortunately, a man was able to convince one of our immigrant youth that a \$100 bill he had was worth a \$1 and the cost of an ice-cream. In response, we immediately started our currency workshops. The hearts of the Covenant House and wider RHY community have gone out to these young people.

However, more resources are needed in order to support targeted services that can be delivered by Spanish speaking staff for these young people.

Immigration Legal Services

My role at CHNY is to provide direct legal representation for our youth. Since the closing of the Peter Chiccino Youth Project at the Urban Justice Center, I think I may be the only lawyer in NYC exclusively dedicated to helping young people experiencing homelessness. Navigating city transportation and services is extremely difficult/overwhelming for youth in crisis. That's why I'm here-so youth can get help right where they live. Until recently, my caseload included public benefits, orders of protection, the collateral consequences of criminal convictions, name changes for trans youth and trafficking survivors and whatever other issues a youth experiencing homeless who drops by my office might have.

In other years, we would refer our small number of youth needing immigration legal services to community partners with an expertise in immigration law, such as the Door. However, the Door now has over 300 immigrant youth on its waiting list, and no legal services agency in NYC that we are aware of is currently taking additional immigration cases. When I call Action New York looking for legal referrals, we are usually told that the only immigration help that is available without a waitlist is the HELP desk in immigration court.

Timeliness can be crucial in these cases as immigrants have only one year from entry into the US to claim asylum, and young people must have Special Immigrant Juvenile Status (SIJS) paperwork into family court before the age of 21, which many of the youth are quickly turning.

Of the immigrant youth, a majority of these young people have been paroled into the US and may need accompaniment to their ICE check ins. Many have strong asylum claims and most should be eligible for SIJS.

The City Bar Justice Center has also generously stepped in to run immigration clinics at CHNY. Their model of training and supervising corporate lawyers to handle immigration issues will greatly expand the number of young people who will be able to receive high quality, pro bono immigration legal services. I am proud not only to work at CHNY but also to be part of a homeless youth and legal services community that works together to properly care for and serve vulnerable newcomers.

Yet, even with all of this help from community partners, the resources are far from sufficient. CHNY and our colleague organizations need additional resources for civil legal services.

Young people under the age of 25 have unique developmental needs that have been compounded by the trauma they have experienced in their home countries and on their treacherous journey to the US. In conclusion, dedicated youth immigrant beds and services, especially immigration legal services, and appropriate translation and mental health services are urgently needed. Appropriate resources will enable these young immigrants to reach their full potential so they can both legally stay and thrive in their new country. CHNY is on the frontlines of this crisis and here to partner with the city. Additional beds and resources are necessary to meet the needs of this crisis, and to model to the world the right way to welcome abandoned youth and asylum seekers.

I again thank you for the opportunity to testify today.

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