

Vera Institute of Justice

Criminal Justice Issues and Prisoners' Rights

<https://www.vera.org/blog/mayoral-transition-opportunities-for-improved-justice-for-immigrant-families-in-new-york-city>

Public Facing Advocacy Writing

As New York prepares for its first new mayor in 12 years, a coalition of organizations hosted a series of discussions about the future of the city, called [Talking Transition](#). This nonpartisan event was organized to provide a forum for ordinary New Yorkers to have their voices heard during the mayoral transition. The [New York Immigrant Family Unity Program \(NYIFUP\)](#), a pilot project administered by the Vera Institute of Justice (Vera), was discussed at Talking Transition as an opportunity for the new administration to increase justice for immigrants and their families.

During a panel entitled [Accessing Justice for New York Immigrants](#), Chief Judge Robert A. Katzmann of the Second Circuit Court of Appeals, Professor Peter L. Markowitz from Cardozo Law School, and Angela Fernandez from the Northern Manhattan Coalition for Immigrant Rights, discussed NYIFUP and another immigrant justice initiative.

The context for the presentation was the crisis in legal representation for immigrants in the city a crisis of both quantity and quality. A recent [study](#) showed that in New York City, a city where more than 35 percent of residents are foreign-born, more than 63,000 individuals were placed on deportation proceedings in a five-year period. Each year, 3,500 of those individuals went through removal proceedings on their own, being unable to afford legal counsel to represent them in court. In terms of quality, a survey of local immigration judges found that nearly 50 percent of those immigrants who had attorneys received inadequate or grossly inadequate representation.

As a response to the findings of the study, a working group led by Judge Katzmann has devised two service models to spark a sea change in the access to justice for immigrants in New York.

NYIFUP launched Nov. 6, 2013 with funding from the New York City Council to provide high-quality legal representation to 190 indigent immigrants with cases venued at the Varick Street Immigration Court. Two legal services providers, The Bronx Defenders and Brooklyn Defender Services, are offering representation at all stages of immigration court proceedings. The pilot will generate concrete data that Vera will use to study the impact of the first institutionally provided deportation defense system in the country.

At current funding levels, NYIFUP will be able to represent about only 20 percent of the estimated 900 unrepresented cases per year at the Varick Street Immigration Court. A collaborative of organizations supporting NYIFUP is seeking additional funds from New York City and State so that NYIFUP will be able to serve all New Yorkers at Varick Street, as well as three other immigration court locations. In support of their efforts, the organizations have recently released a study entitled, [The New York Immigrant Family Unity Project: Good for Families, Good for Employers, and Good for all New Yorkers](#), outlining the programs significant savings to the government and employers. The study recommends that the office of the Mayor and the New York City Council include a \$5.3 million appropriation for NYIFUP in the 2014-2015 budget.

The second representation initiative discussed by the panel was the [Immigrant Justice Corps](#), which is currently under development with the support of the Robin Hood Foundation. Once in place, the Corps would provide 25 attorneys with three-year fellowships to serve indigent immigrants, 15 college graduates with two-year fellowships to serve as community advocates, and the opportunity for interested senior lawyers to be engaged in the program by providing their experience to support new attorneys and advocates.

[Talking Transition](#) has provided a unique opportunity to voice New Yorkers concerns and to showcase innovative public policy initiatives for the future of the city. Since the announcement of the pilot, NYIFUP supporters have received inquiries from California, Arizona, Chicago and Washington, D.C. seeking information about how they might start a similar project in their areas. Both the NYIFUP pilot and the Immigrant Justice Corps are clear examples of innovative policy thinking that can test new justice models for the future of the City of New York and the country.

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