

March 18, 2020

The Honorable Andrew M. Cuomo  
New York State Capitol Building  
Albany, NY 12224

The Honorable Andrea Stewart-Cousins  
188 State Street Room 907  
Legislative Office Building  
Albany, NY 12247

The Honorable Carl Heastie  
188 State Street Room 907  
Legislative Office Building  
Albany, NY 12248

**Re: Securing funding in FY20/21 for lawyers on the front lines of standing up to federal attacks on immigrants and safeguarding health, safety, and dignity for all New Yorkers**

Dear Governor Cuomo, Senate Majority Leader Stewart-Cousins, and Assembly Speaker Heastie,

On behalf of the Vera Institute of Justice, I am writing to urge that New York State continue to prioritize funding in FY20/21 to protect acutely vulnerable immigrant communities through the New York Immigrant Family Unity Project (NYIFUP) and immigrant legal services funded under the Liberty Defense Project (LDP), especially amid the current public health crisis.

As you know, NYIFUP is the country's first and only statewide public defender system for detained immigrants facing deportation. New York State's bold leadership in funding upstate NYIFUP through LDP has been critical to protecting our immigrant communities facing relentless attacks. Even under the current pandemic, the federal assault on immigrant New Yorkers has continued, putting all New Yorkers at heightened risk. In this treacherous environment, NYIFUP lawyers are on the front lines in fighting for health, freedom, and due process for immigrants in detention. We therefore urge you to continue funding for NYIFUP and all LDP attorneys who are fighting back against the harm federal enforcement is bringing to this State.

Even in this crisis, New York State remains a target of active federal immigration enforcement. ICE and border patrol agents are active in several New York counties and the Immigrant Defense Project has reported over one dozen recent ICE arrests and sightings. As more people are needlessly brought into detention, the threat to the health of immigrants, staff, and the surrounding communities will compound, deepening the crisis and thwarting your impressive efforts to stem the spread of the virus.

The stakes for people in immigration detention could not be higher: on top of the risk of permanent family separation and the forced return to dangerous or deadly conditions in another country, they now face a rising health risk caused by irresponsible federal enforcement in New York.

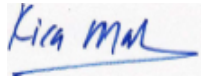
Currently, approximately 500 people are represented by a NYIFUP attorney in upstate New York and over the course of this year, 1,400 people are projected to need NYIFUP representation. With full funding, NYIFUP lawyers will continue to fight for freedom and fair treatment for people in detention and facing deportation.

Since the onset of the current crisis, NYIFUP lawyers have been advocating for the release of people in detention so they can engage in social distancing in their own homes. They are calling for court policies to promote safety and health. All the while they continue to advocate vigorously for their clients while monitoring some of the grave challenges facing vulnerable immigrants and standing up to federal enforcement by demanding sensible, humane, and dignified measures to protect New Yorkers.

During this unprecedented crisis in which our core values are under attack and the health and lives of all New Yorkers are at stake, New York should continue its historic leadership in serving all of those in need, standing with immigrants, and supporting a program that will bolster New York's efforts to promote health and safety. As you begin FY20/21 budget deliberations during this very challenging time, we urge you to fully fund NYIFUP and the Liberty Defense Project.

Thank you for your attention and your consideration.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in blue ink that reads "Kica Matos". The signature is written in a cursive style and is positioned above a horizontal line.

Kica Matos  
Director, Center on Immigration and Justice  
Vera Institute of Justice