

# To Help Unaccompanied Minors, New York City Posts Representatives at Immigration Court

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The hundreds of children who recently arrived in New York City from Central America have encountered a justice system that appears more forgiving than many faced by their counterparts elsewhere. In an immigration courtroom in Lower Manhattan, they have often met judges who have [steered them](#) through the legal process with a gentle hand.

But challenges mount outside the courtroom, beginning with the seemingly mundane obligations of registering for school and securing health care. Many young immigrants remain unaware of the available support or are afraid to seek it out.

In response, the city [announced on Tuesday](#) that it would help bring those services to children by placing representatives at federal immigration court, a move that officials called the first of its kind in the city.

As more and more children face deportation hearings under an accelerated court process meant to deal with the influx of unaccompanied minors, health and education officials have begun offering advice just outside the courtroom, closing a gap that officials say has left children in limbo.

“Connecting these vulnerable children to educational, health and social services is vital to helping our families and communities gain stability,” Mayor [Bill de Blasio](#) said in a statement, calling the city’s response “a more humanitarian approach.”

At a hearing on Tuesday morning before two State Assembly committees, the city’s commissioner for immigrant affairs, Nisha Agarwal, described the immigration court as an opportune place to reach children before they disappear into their communities, where they may lack the resources to handle everyday logistical challenges.

The city also plans to set up weekend workshops at public schools with large immigrant populations so that representatives can advise families on matters from mental health services to vaccinations.

“Rather than creating a new program, how do you link this special population to the existing programs that are already there?” Ms. Agarwal said.

By redistributing staff members who are already working on community outreach, she added, the program would not create any additional cost for the city.

State politicians and those advocating immigration rights called the plan an unprecedented example of collaboration between a city and federal court system. They said they worried that some courts in other parts of the country were trampling on due process as they sped up deportation proceedings, a cornerstone of the Obama administration's plan to accelerate the legal process for newly arrived children.

Addressing Ms. Agarwal at the hearing on Tuesday, Assemblyman Marcos A. Crespo said, "Whereas other communities have taken a staunch opposition to even indulging the needs here, you guys have done quite the opposite."

About 1,350 unaccompanied minors settled with family members or other sponsors in New York City in the first seven months of this year, according to the Office of Refugee Resettlement, a federal agency.

While immigrant children have registered for public school in New York City with relative ease, some have not known how to enroll in [Child Health Plus](#), a public health insurance system, lawyers said.

Others have had trouble proving that they were vaccinated when they crossed the border, or have had to depend on overtaxed pro bono lawyers to steer them to doctors.

Even some fledgling volunteer lawyers do not know how to gather the basic paperwork that their clients need to receive city services, supporters say.

"Getting kids in contact with the schools is frankly the second most urgent step after giving them a lawyer," said Camille Mackler, director of legal initiatives at the [New York Immigration Coalition](#). "We need to make sure kids have access to services because they won't know what they're entitled to."

Others urged the city to expand its support so that representatives can also guide children who are arriving at court in Lower Manhattan from counties on Long Island and in the Hudson Valley.

Lenni Benson, director of the New York Law School [Safe Passage Project](#), recalled a city representative recently offering to search for the right phone number on Google when a child from upstate asked how to register for school.

"Maybe they could do a little bit more," Ms. Benson said, referring to the representative.

As for school registration requirements around the state, she added, "These benign requirements are not benign."

<http://www.nytimes.com/2014/09/17/nyregion/to-help-unaccompanied-minors-city-posts-representatives-at-immigration-court.html>