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Philadelphia City Council Members Join Immigration Advocates to Celebrate the 5th Anniversary of the Pennsylvania Immigrant Family Unity Project

(Oct 1, 2024) – As part of Welcoming Week across the nation, Philadelphia’s Office of Immigrant Affairs and the Pennsylvania Immigration Coalition co-hosted a roundtable discussion at City Hall to celebrate the leadership of the Pennsylvania Immigrant Family Unity Project, known as PAIFUP.

The event on September 26 brought city councilmembers **Jamie Gauthier** (3rd District), **Kendra Brooks** (Minority Leader At-Large), **Rue Landau** (Councilmember At-Large), and **Nina Ahmad** (Councilmember At-Large) together with legal service providers and immigration advocates.

PAIFUP is a collaborative of nonprofit organizations dedicated to achieving universal representation for detained immigrants in removal proceedings. It is Pennsylvania’s first publicly funded deportation defense counsel project for detained immigrants, and provides legal representation to Philadelphia residents detained at the Moshannon Valley Processing Center, Pike County Correctional Facility, and Clinton County Correctional Facility. Clients are represented throughout the months-to-years-long hearing process, until their case reaches a final decision.

In 2019, the City of Philadelphia allocated \$100,000 of public funds to launch PAIFUP and establish the city’s first universal representation pilot program. With the support of catalyst funding from the Vera Institute of Justice and the Samuel S. Fels Fund in the first few years, the city has steadily increased the program’s funding each year since its launch. Today, the city funds PAIFUP at \$500,000, ensuring that the program continues to grow sustainably to meet the needs of more Philadelphia residents facing the devastating consequences of detention and deportation.

Quotes from the event:

"Philadelphia has always been a city of immigrants," said **Councilmember Jamie Gauthier**. "Whether we’re talking about 2024 or 1682, immigrants enrich our communities, run small businesses, create jobs, and strengthen the social fabric of our city. PAIFUP safeguards the diversity and resilience that makes Philadelphia strong."

"No family should live in fear—whether it’s fear of eviction, fear of violence, or fear of deportation," said **Councilmember Kendra Brooks**. "For the past several years, I have

advocated for funding for PAIFUP, and I will continue to advocate for immigrant families and all working families in Philadelphia to live free of fear.”

“PAIFUP is a crucial tool for immigrants in Philadelphia. Immigrant businesses fuel our economy and drive our communities,” said **Councilmember Rue Landau**. “This initiative is pertinent to any immigrant who requires legal representation when experiencing the peril of deportation or detention. We must have due process and fair chances. We’re protecting the social fabric of our schools, our businesses, our neighborhoods, and our city at large. No matter where you come from, Philly should be a landing place for people and families of all backgrounds.”

“Philadelphia has been at the forefront of giving refuge to those in need,” said **Councilmember Nina Ahmad**. “In the spirit of William Still, the African American abolitionist who was known as the Father of the Underground Railroad, and Harriet Tubman, known as ‘Moses’ for her work freeing enslaved people at great risk to her own life, I applaud the work being done by PAIFUP. They are a lifeline for those fighting for a chance for a better life; to be productive and contributing members of Philadelphia’s social and economic landscape.”

“The majority of our clients have lived in this country for decades. They are essential workers, family members, and integral members of our communities,” said **Lilah Thompson**, of the **Nationalities Service Center**. “The stakes of deportation are extremely high, and each person deserves an expert attorney at their side to make their best case to stay with their family in the country they call home. PAIFUP’s clients have deep and longstanding ties to the community, having lived in the United States for an average of 10 years, with 35 percent of clients having children under 18. Returning people to their families keeps our communities safe, stable, and economically vibrant.”

“The City of Philadelphia’s investment in PAIFUP has not only upheld our city’s moral and ethical values but also laid the foundation for readiness to respond to crises,” said **Amy Eusebio**, of the **Philadelphia Office of Immigrant Affairs**. “Last year, Philadelphia received thousands of asylum seekers bussed from Texas, and PAIFUP providers quickly mobilized to provide legal assistance and information, consistent with our values as a Welcoming city. Philadelphia doesn’t just get ready, we stay ready—and we take care of our families and community members.”

“What we have seen demonstrated time and time again, in our neighborhoods and in the data, is that immigrants grow communities. Immigration makes communities stronger,” said **Jasmine Rivera**, of the **Pennsylvania Immigration Coalition**. “That is why programs like PAIFUP are so critical; it is in everyone’s interest to have welcoming communities that keep families safe and together.”

“The difference in outcomes with legal representation is staggering, and demonstrates that being in a removal proceeding is not a final outcome in itself. With legal representation, 65 percent of people have successfully won their right to remain in this country. Without legal representation, only 11 percent of people have successful case outcomes,” said **Fabiola Dávila**,

of the **Vera Institute of Justice**. “This huge disparity shows that legal representation is essential in promoting fairness in our immigration system. PAIFUP shows that we can advance family unity, due process, and economic prosperity by supporting people at risk of deportation with access to legal representation. The Vera Institute of Justice is proud to have played a role in supporting the early days of PAIFUP.”

“Unlike in criminal court, individuals facing deportation are not guaranteed the right to government-funded lawyer. This imbalance undermines the principle of due process by not providing a meaningful right to counsel,” said **Cathryn Miller Wilson**, of **HIAS Pennsylvania**. “While representation alone cannot end the harms of an unfair immigration system, legal counsel can mitigate the dehumanization of detention—and give people a fighting chance to return home.”

For additional information and follow-up interviews, contact gfilicori@vera.org.

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