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Immigrant children often face deportation hearings without a lawyer.

NJ wants to change that.

Hannan Adely

More than 275,000 children — many fleeing gangs, violence and extreme poverty — have crossed the U.S. border without a parent or guardian in the past six years, seeking protection.

Many end up navigating the complex immigration system alone, because the United States does not guarantee legal counsel for unaccompanied minors.

That could change in New Jersey, which is poised to become the second state in the nation after California to fund a statewide legal support program for unaccompanied minors. State lawmakers earmarked \$3 million for legal representation and case management for immigrant youth in their \$46 billion plan passed last week.

"Most children and youth whom the government is trying to deport from New Jersey are unrepresented," said Emily Chertoff, executive director of the New Jersey Consortium for Immigrant Children. "No one should go to immigration court alone, and it is simply inhumane to demand this of children."

Of the more than 275,000 children who entered the U.S. border without legal authorization, about 15,000 have gone to New Jersey. Most have come from El Salvador, Guatemala and Honduras. They are transferred to the custody of the Office of Refugee Resettlement, which shelters them until they can be released to sponsors while they await immigration proceedings.

Across the U.S., nonprofit organizations provide a patchwork of free legal services, but immigrant advocates say far more support is needed to keep up with cases. That's especially true this year, as the number of unaccompanied minors is set to reach historically high levels, according to the consortium.

New Jersey expects to receive nearly 5,000 unaccompanied children this year, said Randi Mandelbaum of Rutgers Law School, whose clinic represents dozens of unaccompanied minors.

"No child should have to appear in court without an attorney, especially against government attorneys who are trying to have them deported," she said.

Kids in Need of Defense, American Friends Service Committee and Catholic Charities of the Archdiocese of Newark are among the groups in the consortium that rallied for the funding measure.

Gilda Holguin, acting managing attorney of the Newark office of Kids in Need of Defense, which represents unaccompanied children in immigration proceedings, said the state funding would be a huge help.

"Without attorneys to represent them in their deportation proceedings, children risk being sent back to places where they face grave harm and have no one to protect them," she said.

If approved, the New Jersey funding will go to Kids in Need of Defense and subgrantees to provide legal representation, according to the budget plan.

Gov. Phil Murphy championed the inclusion of the measure in the budget plan, Chertoff said. In the Legislature, Sen. Teresa Ruiz, D-Essex, Sen. Nellie Pou, D-Passaic, Sen. Troy Singleton, D-Burlington, and Assemblyman Raj Mukherji, D-Hudson, also were strong supporters, she added.