

Consortium Youth Mental Health Advocates at the New Jersey Senate Highlight the Costs of Excluding Undocumented Children from Insurance

[Health Care - State Advocacy - Undocumented Immigrants](#)

Trenton, New Jersey — The New Jersey Consortium for Immigrant Children welcomes the commitment of Sen. Joseph Vitale and other legislators to expanding insurance to undocumented children, and applauds its youth leaders, members, and coalition partners who testified as S3798 was voted out of the Senate Health, Human Services and Senior Citizens Committee. The Consortium’s Mental Health Advocates Sergio Crespo-Flores and Jazmin Margalef offered powerful in-person testimony that spoke to the moral imperative to provide healthcare for all children regardless of status, supported by written testimony from other Advocates and Consortium members.

When a child is sick, they need medical care. While for most people the decision is as simple as that, for undocumented families access to care is fraught with fear, stress, and heartache. There are 20,000 children in New Jersey who are ineligible for NJ Family Care due to their immigration status, and 80,000 total uninsured. S3798 intends to grant more children in New Jersey access to healthcare, though additional work will be needed to ensure that all undocumented children can actually access health insurance.

The Consortium’s Mental Health Advocates drew on their life experiences to emphasize the moral urgency of passing health insurance for all children.

Sergio, 23, a PhD candidate at Rutgers University who grew up undocumented, told the Committee: "In high school, on the day of my national honor society induction, I was hit by a car. It was supposed to be a day where parents celebrated the excellent academic performance of their kids. Instead, I sat in the back of an ambulance with my mother, telling the EMTs that I did not want to go to the hospital because I was afraid of the costs. This event inspired me to become an EMT, and to provide the best care I could as a first responder, despite me being afraid of approaching a hospital."



Jazmin, a second year sociology major at Hudson County Community College, observed that "as a formerly undocumented tax payer, I can say that we do not reap the benefits of having quality healthcare. My younger self suffered from lung and mental health issues, all which could have been prevented at an early age if I was able to afford health care services. My younger self would plead with you to pass this bill."



Consortium members and Advocates who submitted written testimony underscored these points. Dr. Melany Rivera-Maldonado, a Hudson County psychologist who provides or supervises care for a hundred immigrant families, wrote: “The COVID-19 pandemic has clearly exacerbated the need for all children to have health insurance. As a mental health provider, I have witnessed an increase in parents seeking out help for children and adolescents expressing higher levels of anxiety and depression. Telehealth has certainly facilitated access for some young people, but the breach between those who are uninsured and those who have insurance continues to grow.”

Diana Gonzalez-Argúeta, a first-generation American who lived for much of her childhood without health insurance, told the Committee: “I’ve been to a plethora of doctor’s offices over my life; enduring 5-plus hours of waiting to be treated while being sick, having to turn down treatments because of the fees, and avoiding hospitals and doctors altogether. Now that I am an adult, I’ve heard of colleagues’ experiences and realize our exposure to the healthcare setting was very different. . . I cannot imagine the fear of an undocumented child having to bear through all of those complicated procedures alone.”

Jazmin, Sergio, and Diana offered testimony as part of their participation in the Consortium’s Mental Health Advocates Summer Fellowship, which aims to bring immigrant and first-generation youth into policy debates and decision-making on a topic of deep interest to young people statewide. “Immigrant youth have to play a central role in setting an agenda for immigrant communities. They are the next generation, and policy-makers and advocates need to engage them when making decisions,” said Emily Chertoff, Executive Director of the Consortium. “With these fellowships, we are trying to offer our youth leaders a deeper experiential education in how policy advocacy works and how laws are made in New Jersey. We are hoping not only to empower them as individuals, but to broaden the group of people who feel they can access the machinery of government to include more folks from historically excluded communities.”



The New Jersey Consortium for Immigrant Children is a statewide coalition of immigration legal services providers, healthcare providers, educators, community organizations, and community leaders. We work with New Jersey’s young immigrants and their allies to advance their full, fearless participation in our society.