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Newcomer Immigrant Youth in the Bay Area: Uplifting Voices, Identifying Solutions

Acknowledgments

We are deeply grateful to the newcomer youth who participated in our focus groups and to the service providers who shared their time and insight with us. Your openness and honesty made this report possible. We also thank the schools and community-based organizations that welcomed us into their spaces and trusted us to speak with their students and youth participants. A special thank you to Alejandra Aguilar Lopez and Laura Alvarez for leading the youth focus groups and interviews with such care and respect.

We also thank the newcomer youth leaders of the CalNEW Newcomer Youth Leadership Group and to the California Department of Social Services' Office of Immigrant Youth for their partnership and generosity in allowing us to include their insights in this report.

Finally, we thank the Precita Eyes Muralists Association for granting permission to feature two of their murals - *The Bay* (2019) and *Cycles of Life* (2020) - as artwork in this report.

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"Cycles of Life" ©2020 Precita Eyes Muralists

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Founded in 1977 in San Francisco's Mission District, Precita Eyes Muralists Association is a community-based nonprofit dedicated to enriching neighborhoods through collaborative mural art. One of the few community mural centers in the United States, Precita Eyes brings art into daily life by celebrating culture, unity, and social justice through public murals, arts education, and restoration projects. Learn more at precitaeyes.org.

Suggested Citation

Melissa Adamson, *Newcomer Immigrant Youth in the Bay Area: Uplifting Voices, Identifying Solutions*, National Center for Youth Law, 2025, <https://youthlaw.org/newcomerreport>.

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Introduction

All children – including newcomer immigrant children recently arrived in the United States – deserve protections that safeguard their health, safety, and well-being.

For decades, the National Center for Youth Law has served as counsel in multiple class action lawsuits on behalf of children in federal immigration custody. We have always hoped that our class members would find safety and stability after their release from custody. However, we have seen many youth encounter a new and often overwhelming set of challenges – and we have witnessed the deep and lasting harm that occurs when newcomer youth join communities that are unequipped to provide the educational, legal, social, and mental health supports youth need to fully participate and thrive.

This report was created with one central goal: to lift up the voices of the true experts on newcomer experiences – youth themselves, and the service providers who support them – to deepen understanding of their challenges and highlight their recommendations for change. In 2024, our team conducted ten focus groups with 88 newcomer youth and 32 individual interviews with service providers in the San Francisco Bay Area. Their insights highlight how systemic barriers intersect and continuously reinforce one another, deepening inequities for newcomer youth.

This report provides an overview of existing California state-funded programs serving newcomer youth, outlines our focus group and provider interview processes, and summarizes the key challenges and recommendations identified through those conversations. It also includes findings from the California Newcomer Education & Well-Being (CalNEW) Newcomer Youth Leadership Group regarding educational services for newcomer youth. Together, these insights and recommendations offer a shared vision for building systems that effectively and holistically support newcomer youth.

What this report painfully reveals is that the basic needs of many newcomers in the Bay Area are not being met. Even in a state known for its commitment to immigrants, and in a region known for its strong community organizations, many newcomers in the Bay Area continue to experience significant barriers to safety and stability. Youth face interconnected challenges: legal uncertainty can lead to unstable housing, unstable housing disrupts school, and when youth leave school, they lose support and become more vulnerable to harm.

While the recommendations emerging from this report may not all be fiscally or politically feasible at this time, they are essential to the well-being of newcomer youth and foundational to creating the conditions for them to ultimately thrive. Even in the face of a challenging federal landscape and a constrained state budget, we must act – and we must continue to listen, collaborate, and imagine bold solutions that advance equity and opportunity for all newcomer youth.

“Here in this country, most of all, young [newcomers] take on adult responsibilities... many say that it is the color of roses, but it also has its white and gray colors...not everything comes from mom and dad, you have to earn it yourself. We understand what life is like for an adult and what it feels like to earn it.”

– Newcomer Youth, Santa Clara County

Approach

Newcomer Youth Focus Groups

In the spring of 2024, our team conducted ten focus groups with newcomer youth across the Bay Area to better understand their experiences, challenges, and recommendations for change. In California, the term *newcomer youth* generally refers to youth under 21 years old who were not born in the U.S. and who have not attended school in the U.S. for more than three full academic years.¹ To ensure clarity and consistency with state terminology, we used the same definition for this report.

Focus groups took place in Alameda, San Francisco, Marin, and Santa Clara counties, and were hosted at five high schools, one middle school, and two community-based organizations. Focus groups were organized in partnership with school newcomer coordinators and community-based organizations, who invited youth to participate and generously hosted the sessions in their spaces.

In total, 88 newcomer youth between the ages of 11 and 19 participated in ten focus groups:

- Four groups of mixed-gender high school students
- One group of high school girls
- One group of high school boys
- One group of mixed-gender middle school students
- One group of boys involved in the juvenile justice system
- One group of young mothers
- One group of mixed-gender, Mam-speaking youth

Participants represented seven countries of origin, including Mexico, Colombia, El Salvador, Guatemala, Honduras, Nicaragua, and Peru. Nine focus groups were conducted in Spanish, with one group held in Mam (with in-person interpretation provided by a local Mam interpreter).

We took care to communicate clearly with youth about the focus group process and how their insights would be recorded and used. This information was shared both in writing before each focus group session and verbally at the start of the group discussion. All participants were assured that their personal information would remain confidential, that any quotes or insights used in reports would be de-identified, and that their participation was entirely voluntary. All focus groups were audio recorded and transcribed for thematic analysis to identify key themes and insights across groups. Each youth received financial compensation for their time and was provided a full meal in appreciation of their participation.

Focus group facilitators asked youth open-ended questions about their experiences as newcomers, their access to services, the challenges they face, and their ideas for improving existing systems. At the end of each focus group, youth were asked to complete a short, anonymous survey to capture demographic information and answer a few questions. Notably, through this survey, 88% of youth participants said they would be interested in joining a future focus group – an encouraging reflection of their experience with the focus group.

Limitations

It is important to note that these focus groups did not capture the full range of newcomer youth experiences across the Bay Area. We did not conduct focus groups in Contra Costa, San Mateo, Napa, Solano, or Sonoma counties. Most youth participants (79 of 88) were Spanish-speaking, with the remaining speaking Mam, and we did not include youth who spoke other languages. Additionally, most youth participants (86 of 88) were age 13 or older. Only three youth were working full-time and not in school.

Interviews with Providers Serving Newcomer Youth

In the summer of 2024, our team conducted 32 interviews with service providers supporting newcomer youth across the Bay Area. These conversations aimed to better understand providers' experiences, the systemic and practical challenges they experience, and their recommendations for improving support for newcomer youth.

Interviewed service providers were located in Alameda, Contra Costa, Marin, San Francisco, San Mateo, and Santa Clara counties, and represented a wide range of professions and perspectives, including:

- Seven lawyers, paralegals, or social workers at nonprofit legal services organizations
- Nine educators, newcomer coordinators, or social service staff working in school districts and community-based organizations
- Two staff from organizations serving unhoused youth
- Five attorneys and social service providers working with youth involved in the juvenile justice system
- One medical provider and five mental health providers based at community-based organizations, school districts, or medical institutions
- Three social workers or case managers at community-based organizations and schools

All participants were informed that their personal information would remain confidential and that any quotes or insights included in this report would be de-identified. Interviewers asked open-ended questions tailored to each provider's area of expertise, and all interviews were audio recorded and transcribed for thematic analysis to identify key themes and insights.

Limitations

It is important to note that these interviews did not capture the full range of service provider experiences across the Bay Area. We did not conduct interviews with providers in Napa, Solano, or Sonoma counties. Additionally, after completing our analysis of focus group transcripts and provider interviews, we identified several key groups whose perspectives would have strengthened this work, including child welfare case workers, juvenile justice district attorneys, faith-based organization staff, and newcomer recreational programming staff. Unfortunately, we did not have the ability to incorporate their perspective in this report.

CalNEW Newcomer Youth Leadership Group

This report also includes a summary of findings and recommendations from the California Newcomer Education & Well-Being (CalNEW) Newcomer Youth Leadership Group.

The CalNEW Newcomer Youth Leadership Group is a statewide cohort of newcomer student leaders, convened through the CalNEW program, which is administered and overseen by the California Department of Social Services' Office of Immigrant Youth.

The Leadership Group's goal is to elevate the voices of recently arrived youth and translate their insights into action. Newcomer student leader members design and administer peer surveys and interviews, work together to analyze data about newcomer challenges and insights, and generate recommendations for schools, districts, and policymakers across California. Four newcomer student leaders participated in the first Leadership Group cohort during the 2023–24 academic year, and participation grew to 15 student leaders in 2024–25.

In March 2025, these newcomer student leaders presented their findings and recommendations at the CalNEW Community of Practice Convening. These findings, as summarized by the Leadership Group, are included on page 14. We are deeply grateful to the newcomer youth leaders of the CalNEW Newcomer Youth Leadership Group, the CalNEW program, and the California Department of Social Services' Office of Immigrant Youth for their collaboration and permission to include these valuable insights in this report.



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California Newcomer Programs

In California, the term *newcomer* youth generally refers to students born outside the United States who have recently arrived and are new to the U.S. school system. Under state law, “newcomer pupils” are defined as individuals ages 3 through 21 who were not born in any U.S. state and who have not attended one or more schools in the United States for more than three full academic years.²

This definition encompasses a diverse group of students, including unaccompanied children, refugees, asylees, undocumented youth, and those with interrupted or limited formal education.³ Because each of these categories is tracked through different data systems, updated and comprehensive data on newcomer youth is limited. In 2023, it was estimated that between 150,000 and 200,000 newcomer immigrant students attend California schools each year.⁴

California Support for Newcomer Youth

California is a national leader in developing and funding innovative program models that support newcomer immigrant youth. These initiatives encompass educational supports, legal representation, and case management and social services navigation. Yet even in a state committed to supporting its immigrant communities, many newcomer youth continue to experience significant challenges and hardship. Sustained investment in state newcomer programs is critical to ensuring that California’s efforts lead to long-term success for newcomer youth and their families – and to positioning the state as a model for other states seeking to strengthen supports for these communities.

California Newcomer Education & Well-Being (CalNEW) Program

Launched in 2018, the California Newcomer Education and Well-Being (CalNEW) program provides linguistically and culturally responsive services to newcomer students and their families and is administered and overseen by the California Department of Social Services’ (CDSS) Office of Immigrant Youth. Using school sites as community hubs, CalNEW connects youth and families to essential supports such as food, housing, and health resources, while also offering family engagement and youth-focused enrichment programs such as academic tutoring, civic leadership, and college and career preparation.⁵

Since the inception of the program, it has supported more than 75,000 newcomer youth students statewide. As of 2025, there are 20 school districts and one County Office of Education in the CalNEW network.

Initially launched with a \$5 million annual investment, CalNEW was expanded in 2021 with an additional \$20 million to serve more districts and broaden its reach. Since 2022, CalNEW receives an annual appropriation, with the most recent appropriation set at \$6.9 million. Additional state funding is critical to preserve CalNEW’s innovative programming and expand the reach of its services for newcomer youth and families.

Opportunities for Youth (OFY) Project

Established in 2019 as a response to the rising numbers of unaccompanied children arriving in California, the Opportunities for Youth (OFY) project is administered by the California Department of Social Services' (CDSS) Office of Immigrant Youth. The program is aimed at meeting the unique needs of unaccompanied children through culturally and linguistically-responsive and trauma-informed post-release supportive services. Services include case management, systems navigation, mentorship, and wellness supports to youth as well as, support services to their caregivers.⁶

As of September 2023, 3,617 individuals had participated in OFY; including unaccompanied children, their sponsors, and other household members.⁷ In 2024, the CDSS program funded supportive services provided by seven non-profit organizations and one school district located in the Bay Area, Central Valley, Los Angeles, Central Coast, and Inland Empire regions.⁸

OFY was initially supported through two one-time General Fund appropriations totaling \$9.7 million. In the 2023–24 state budget, California renewed its investment in the initiative with an additional \$5 million over three years, transitioning OFY from a pilot project to a formal state program.⁹ However, the 2025-26 state budget did not include funding for OFY. Without further legislative action, the program is expected to sunset in 2026, representing a significant loss of critical support for unaccompanied children and their families across the state.

Children's Holistic Immigration Representation Project (CHIRP)

The Children's Holistic Immigration Representation Project (CHIRP) was created as a two-year pilot to provide unaccompanied immigrant children in California with coordinated legal and social services.¹⁰ CHIRP was launched in 2022 with funding from the California Department of Social Services (CDSS) and administered by the Acacia Center for Justice, extending promising holistic support models from the child welfare system to immigrant children and youth.

Through a statewide network of providers, CHIRP offers holistic legal advocacy for unaccompanied children with an emphasis on trauma-informed care. Each youth is assigned a fully integrated team that includes an attorney and a social service staff member (either a social worker or a case manager) to assess, understand, and address the client's intersecting needs and ensure their emotional and physical safety and stability. Since its inception, the program has provided legal representation more than a thousand children and case management support in education, mental health, medical, food access, and housing assistance.

The state initially invested approximately \$13.4 million into CHIRP.¹¹ Although early evaluations highlighted CHIRP's innovative model and positive impact, the program's future has faced uncertainty due to the lack of ongoing or permanent state funding commitments.

In early 2025, the California state budget excluded renewed ongoing funding for CHIRP, signaling that the program's continuation was at risk. However, later in the 2025-26 budget cycle, the legislature approved a one-time allocation of \$10 million from the general fund to continue the program for an additional year.¹² Continued state funding is critical to preserving CHIRP and ensuring that unaccompanied children in California obtain the legal counsel and trauma-informed services they need to thrive.

Youth Legal Services (YLS)

Under California state law, the California Department of Social Services (CDSS) provides grants to qualified nonprofit legal service organizations to deliver legal services to eligible unaccompanied children and other immigrant youth. Grantees provide legal representation in immigration proceedings, including preparation for and representation in administrative or judicial hearings for asylum, T- and U-Visa, Special Immigrant Juvenile Status (SIJS), and any other available forms of relief. Funding may also support interpretation services and legal support staff.¹³

The YLS program is funded at \$6.7 million for FY 2025–27, supporting an estimated annual service capacity of 964 cases in FY 2025–26. As of 2025, YLS funds 23 legal service provider grantees across the Northern, Bay Area, Central Valley, Central Coast, Inland Empire, Los Angeles, Orange County, and San Diego regional service areas. The State Fiscal Year (SFY) 2022–27 YLS grant cycle is now in its fourth year of a five-year service term.¹⁴ Sustained state investment is essential to ensuring that unaccompanied children in California continue to receive the legal representation they need.



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Challenges & Recommendations

Findings from focus groups and provider interviews highlighted that newcomer youths' experiences are shaped by overlapping systemic barriers that interact to compound inequities. Legal insecurity can lead to housing instability, unstable housing can make it difficult to stay in school, and when youth disengage from school, they lose access to vital supports and are left vulnerable to exploitation or harm. These challenges are deeply intertwined and the absence of a coordinated system of care for newcomer youth only amplifies their impact.

While this report explores education, legal, work, mental health, housing, and social services challenges and recommendations separately, providers emphasized that only cross-system collaboration can effectively address the overlapping and interdependent needs of newcomer youth.

"There is a deep, deep shame of being stuck in this cycle... Going to sleep in the park because they don't have a place to live. Not going to school because they need to work to support their family. Not being able to get a safe job because they don't have papers. I mean, probably everyone we work with has some shame around feeling like what's happening is a personal failure, and we're always trying to remind them that this is a systemic failure."

– Shelter Service Provider, San Francisco County

"Think of a child's hierarchy of needs. If you don't know where you're sleeping tonight, how do we expect you to focus in class? If you only eat when you're at school because these are the only meals that they get, because your family doesn't have money and they can't pay for food, how do we expect you to be focused in class? The basic needs are in the back of their minds. They are in survival mode."

– Education Provider, San Francisco County

Each topic in this section begins with the youths' articulation of challenges and recommendations, followed by the providers' description of challenges and recommendations.

Education

Youth

Newcomer youth shared that learning English, adjustment stress, complex school requirements, and balancing school and work made it challenging to succeed in school. Many recommended providing newcomer students with more academic and peer programming support. Youth in our focus groups shared the following challenges:

Adjusting to a new school system in a new country can feel overwhelming.

- Youth commented that enrolling in school was usually one of the first things they did after arriving in the U.S. or being released to their caregivers, and that starting school was a big and often challenging adjustment.
- Youth pointed out that the structure and requirements of U.S. schools were very complex, and their caregivers often didn't understand the school system, which made it hard for them to provide support.
- Some youth shared that they felt like they were "under a microscope" in their new school environment, and struggled to integrate at the beginning, leading to stress and anxiety. Other youth found it difficult to make friends, step outside their comfort zones, or feel a sense of belonging.

"When you arrive here, you're stepping out of your comfort zone. Nothing is the same."

– Newcomer Youth, High School, San Francisco County

Learning English is important, but hard.

- Youth described learning English as one of the hardest parts of school. Some youth noted that they struggle more in classes where the teacher does not speak their language and appreciated having bilingual teachers.
- Some youth said that they felt afraid to practice English due to fear of misunderstanding or offending others and felt self-conscious about their language skills.

- Youth stressed that learning English is essential for daily life, school, work, and long-term success in the U.S., and acknowledged that this very importance can make the challenge feel overwhelming.

“When you get here it’s difficult to integrate into school because you’re new, so you don’t have anyone to talk to, you don’t always have someone to support you to see what classes you are going to take, and then you need to learn English. And when you’re just arriving you don’t know what anyone is saying to you.”

– Newcomer Youth, High School, Alameda County

Balancing school and work is very hard.

- Youth found class schedules to be hard to accommodate – many youth said they could not attend a full class schedule because they needed to work.
- Youth also described that work schedules left them tired and unable to concentrate in school, and some mentioned that they had considered leaving school altogether to be able to work more.

Supportive schools and trusted adults make a difference.

- Youth conveyed deep appreciation for schools that offered newcomer programs, coordinators, and supportive staff and teachers – and noted that these people and programs helped them feel cared for and encouraged to succeed.
- Many youth felt that they had a trusted adult at their school that they could ask for help and support if needed. Youth shared that having caring adults at school made a big difference in continuing to pursue their education.

“I like the teachers because they teach you well and if you don’t understand they pay attention to you and explain it to you well until you understand it.”

– Newcomer Youth, High School, Alameda County

“We have quite a few teachers who help us, who are there for us when we really need help. That is greatly appreciated. That is the truth. Also the newcomer program helps us with any doubt or questions we have, they are always there supporting us.”

– Newcomer Youth, High School, Alameda County

Youths' Recommendations

1. Provide teachers with more resources to support newcomer youth.

- Many youth felt that their teachers generally care and want to help them but are often overburdened and need additional support.
- Youth proposed smaller class sizes and adding more bilingual teachers or aides to help newcomer students understand class instruction and learn the material.
- Youth also suggested having extra time outside of class – like office hours or after school classes – to give students more opportunities to meet with teachers or support staff for homework help and academic guidance.

“One thing that I would do in schools is hire bilingual teachers to help young people with learning the language... Some schools have several, but it would be good to hire more to support us Spanish speakers, to learn a new language.”

– Newcomer Youth, High School, Marin County

2. Peer programming: Build community through newcomer classes and programming.

- Many youth observed that they valued being in classes with other newcomers because they felt more comfortable and supported.
- Youth suggested creating more opportunities for peer connection through sports, dance teams, art or theater, or other school activities that make them feel welcome and part of a supportive community.

3. Create flexible academic options for youth that need to work.

- Youth who work proposed that schools create more flexible class schedules to accommodate students' work schedules or allow students to complete some or all of their classes virtually.
- Youth also recommended having more designated time during the school day to complete homework.

CalNEW Newcomer Youth Leadership Group

The CalNEW Newcomer Youth Leadership Group is a statewide cohort of 15 newcomer student leaders, convened through the California Newcomer Education & Well-Being (CalNEW) Program.

In 2024–25, the CalNEW Newcomer Youth Leadership Group conducted surveys and interviews with newcomer peers across California, capturing the voices and experiences of 197 youth statewide. Newcomer student leaders conducted surveys and interviews with peers from 26 countries: Afghanistan, Iran, Turkey, Syria, Iraq, Egypt, Sudan, Senegal, Armenia, China, Cambodia, Laos, South Korea, The Philippines, Ukraine, Russia, Belarus, Guatemala, Mexico, El Salvador, Honduras, Nicaragua, Venezuela, Uruguay, Colombia, and Peru. Most newcomer participants had lived in the United States for one to three years, with the next largest group having arrived within the past year.

Newcomer youth leaders asked their peers about the challenges they have encountered and their ideas for how schools can improve newcomer support in three key areas: 1) orientation (needs and desires to learn more about life, systems, and laws in the U.S.); 2) social integration programs (integrating with new communities through events, clubs, cultural exchange, and mentorship activities), and 3) career pathways (needs, desires, and possibilities for finding a career path in the U.S.). The findings, as synthesized by the newcomer youth leaders, are presented below.

Orientation

Newcomer students identified language barriers, unfamiliarity with school systems, limited understanding of their rights, and cultural adjustment as major challenges, and recommended mentorship programs to help provide guidance, connection, and support in navigating school and community life.

- **Challenges:**
 - Language barriers: English is often the biggest challenge for newcomer students.
 - School system orientation: Systems are different in each school or school district, and students may struggle with different rules, schedules, and grading systems.
 - Understanding rights: Many newcomer students do not know what their rights are as immigrants, such as their education rights or access to health care.
 - American culture: Newcomers often face challenges understanding U.S. cultural norms, holidays, and social practices.
- **Recommendations:**
 - Mentorship programs can provide direct support and guidance to newcomer students. Encouraging experienced individuals to become mentors can help create a welcoming and supportive community for newcomers in schools.

Social Integration Programs

Newcomer students shared that language barriers can make socializing and building relationships difficult, and recommended creating inclusive extracurricular activities, peer support groups, and targeted mental health services to promote connection, belonging, and emotional well-being.

- **Challenges:**
 - Language barriers often make it difficult for newcomer students to socialize, which can affect their ability to build relationships, engage fully in school life, and integrate into their communities.
- **Recommendations:**
 - Extracurricular activities for newcomers: Newcomer students need extracurricular activities that help them feel part of the school community, support their emotional well-being, and encourage social integration.
 - Fostering connection and inclusion: Peer support groups help students connect with their peers, feel supported, and foster a sense of inclusion, which is vital for their mental health and sense of belonging.
 - Mental health and emotional support: Targeted mental health support is crucial to help newcomers adjust to their new environment and navigate the challenges of their transition.

Career Pathways

Newcomer students shared that they face challenges navigating the U.S. secondary and post-secondary educational systems, and they recommend increasing educational mentorship and access to career, financial, and educational information to support their future success.

- **Challenges**

- o Language barriers and academic adjustment: Newcomer students face significant hurdles in American schools, including adapting to a new academic system while learning English. Many struggle to make friends and fit into American society, due to language barriers and differences in mentality.
- o College application process: The unfamiliar college application process can be overwhelming without guidance, making it difficult to plan effective career pathways that align with their skills and aspirations, thus contributing to mental health challenges, as students navigate adolescence, cultural adaptation, and exploration of their academic futures.
- o Transcript and credit evaluation: Newcomer youth face challenges in having prior educational transcripts properly assessed for credit transfer, which can result in inappropriate class placement and lost educational opportunity.

- **Recommendations**

- o Provide youth with more information on diverse career options, educational financing options, and the American educational system.
- o Help youth create personalized educational plans.
- o Create peer/counselor mentoring programs to support newcomer youth.
- o Share success stories of immigrant professionals with newcomer youth.

Statewide Newcomer Leadership Council

Newcomer student leaders also asked their peers whether they would support the creation of a Statewide Newcomer Leadership Council – a space where newcomer youth could share insights and feedback on the programs and initiatives serving them in schools and districts. The newcomer student leaders envisioned a Statewide Council as a platform where student representatives from different regions could collaborate, exchange perspectives, and advocate for newcomer-inclusive policies, ensuring that youth voices help shape district and statewide educational efforts.

Most surveyed and interviewed newcomer students - 74% - supported the creation of a Statewide Newcomer Leadership Council. Students viewed it as a valuable opportunity for newly arrived youth to share their concerns, receive guidance, and strengthen both their own school experiences and those of their newcomer peers.

Students shared that such a council could:

- Improve newcomer support and representation.
 - o Students wanted a space to voice concerns and advocate for needs, particularly regarding language barriers, cultural differences, and school system navigation.
 - o Students felt that a council would provide a representative body to ensure newcomers' perspectives are heard.

- Ease the transition to U.S. schools.
 - Many students believed this would help newcomers adapt to their new school environment and understand the education system.
 - Students shared that peer support and representation would make them feel less isolated and more confident.
- Improve newcomer language and academic support.
 - Students shared that a council could help students learn English faster, improve academic performance, and explain school processes.
 - Some students mentioned existing programs like English Language Development (ELD) but felt more support is needed.
- Build newcomer community and connection.
 - Many students emphasized the importance of meeting other newcomers, building friendships, and sharing experiences.



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Providers

Educators and service providers highlighted that for many newcomer youth, school is the center of their daily lives – the place around which their sense of stability and connection to community revolves. Providers described enrollment difficulties, language and literacy barriers, and lack of bilingual staff and appropriate curriculum as some of the challenges facing youth and schools. Providers noted that newcomer youth thrive when schools serve as welcoming, well-coordinated support hubs — a model that many schools are already striving to achieve. Providers shared the following challenges:

Newcomer youth often experience barriers to enrolling in public school.

- Inconsistent systems: Providers observed that while many newcomer students can enroll in school quickly, some students face weeks or months of delays depending on school processes, paperwork requirements, or lack of district coordination. Providers pointed out that enrollment delays can result in students falling through the cracks and not enrolling in school at all.
- Complex processes: Providers emphasized that the school enrollment process, given its documentation requirements, can be confusing and bureaucratic for newcomer families. Some noted that this challenge is heightened when information isn't available in the family's native language, when family members have limited literacy, and when schools do not have staff who can speak the family's native language.
- Vaccine requirements: Providers reported that vaccine requirements cause enrollment delay in some districts, while other districts have reduced these barriers through partnerships with local health clinics that help students quickly obtain the required vaccinations.

"There's been a couple different times I can think of where getting the child enrolled takes a couple months because we have to have certain information or applications that the child just doesn't have."

– Social Service Provider, Contra Costa County

Newcomer youth need holistic and consistent support to attend school, stay engaged, and succeed.

- Providers underscored that unmet basic needs undermine youths' ability to engage in education, and that connecting youth to social, medical, and legal services at school are critical to students' safety and attendance. Without this baseline support, providers stressed that youth are at a much higher risk of dropping out of school to work.
- Even for schools with more robust services, providers note that these programs face continued funding threats, which makes it difficult to build stable program infrastructure and staff capacity.

"You know, we always have to fight for it. Funding is always threatened. We have a wellness center on campus that has bilingual counselors, and medical services like dental and vision – it's amazing and so helpful for these kids. But the majority of schools do not have these kinds of services, and the vast majority of schools have some newcomers in their district."

– School-based Provider, Contra Costa County

Language and literacy barriers impact every aspect of newcomer youths' school experience.

- Bilingual staff: Providers report that learning English is the biggest academic hurdle for newcomer students, particularly those with limited prior formal education. Providers emphasized the critical role of bilingual staff and educators in supporting students' academic progress and social-emotional well-being and noted the challenge in hiring sufficient bilingual staff.
- Variation in literacy: Providers pointed out that some students arrive with zero formal education, making academic adjustment and graduation timelines very challenging. Educators noted that students with low literacy may feel frustrated, embarrassed, or afraid to ask for help – which can sometimes lead to withdrawal or acting out.
- Non-Spanish speakers: Providers observed that students who speak less common languages, especially rare Indigenous languages, often feel isolated even among other newcomer students.

"If a student has someone that is bilingual and helps them, it's an absolute game changer."

– School-based Provider, Marin County

"We have a lot of newcomer students that speak Spanish, and it can be really isolating for the one kid from Yemen, or Vietnam, or Laos who doesn't speak Spanish."

– Social Service Provider, Contra Costa County

Many schools have limited capacity or specialized programming to meet the needs of newcomer students.

- Limited newcomer-specific training: Providers explained that many educators do not have background knowledge regarding newcomer youth or their possible experiences with trauma, migration, displacement, and/or interrupted education. Some providers shared that their school provided diversity, equity, or even newcomer-specific training to their staff on a regular basis, while others noted that such trainings are not consistent, and staff may not be aware of issues affecting newcomer youth and how to serve them.
- Need for culturally responsive approaches: Providers stressed that students from Indigenous and less formally educated backgrounds often require tailored engagement and support to succeed in school. Some providers reflected that developing appropriate curriculum and supports for these populations is particularly difficult.

Providers' Recommendations

1. Strengthen enrollment support and access for newcomer youth and families.

- Centralized newcomer enrollment: Providers suggested having newcomer staff present at district-level enrollment centers to help identify and support students from the time of their first contact with the school system and noted that staff could make immediate referrals for Medi-Cal enrollment, clinic appointments for vaccinations, legal aid, and other essential services.
- Bilingual first points of contact: Providers felt that having a bilingual staff member present at enrollment is key to building trust and helping families navigate documentation and eligibility requirements. Providers at schools with newcomer-specific supports – such as welcome centers or dedicated liaisons – reported seeing higher enrollment completion rates.
- Partnerships with community clinics: Providers suggested collaborating with local health clinics to expedite vaccination appointments and prevent delays in school enrollment.
- State-level accountability and training: Providers called for a state-level point person and enforcement mechanism to ensure consistent newcomer enrollment practices and intervene with districts that create unnecessary barriers.

“We partner with Stanford, and they have a health clinic that I can refer all my newcomer students to, and they’ll take all my students right away. It’s wonderful because the kids don’t have to wait a long time for our appointments – it’s removed a big obstacle to getting kids enrolled.”

– School-based Provider, San Mateo County

2. Build welcoming, trust-based school environments.

- Hire trauma-informed, culturally responsive staff: Educators emphasized that success depends on who you hire. Providers explained that staff who are empathetic, bilingual, and trained in trauma-informed care make families feel respected rather than judged, and often are the most important factor to keeping youth engaged and attending school.
- Create visibly welcoming spaces: Providers found that a warm, bilingual, and family-friendly front office helps schools make good first impressions on newcomer families.
- Prioritize relationships and trust: Providers emphasized that genuine and empathetic conversations with students and families – acknowledging their challenges and priorities – help build lasting trust. Providers observed that staff who model understanding (for example, helping students adjust work schedules rather than insisting they quit) foster long-term youth engagement and educational success.

“It’s so important for school being a welcoming and supportive place. And it’s all about who you hire. If you hire culturally sensitive, trauma-informed staff, it’s a big difference. It’s all about who you hire and if they’re mentally and emotionally prepared and able to do the job.”

– School-based Provider, Marin County

"I think just maybe the best interventions that I've noticed are just having real, authentic, compassionate conversations with students, trying to understand what their needs are and what their priorities are and like, how do we make that work with school."

– School-based Provider, San Francisco County

3. School hubs: Offer holistic, one-stop school-based services.

- Educators emphasized that newcomer youth need wraparound supports to sustain attendance, and recommended that schools integrate welcome and wellness centers, counseling, medical and dental care, case management, legal referrals, and community partnerships alongside academics.

"He's coming because he's getting food, shelter, clothing, and a backpack and a bike. We even have a bike guy who works on campus, and he'll fix kids' bikes so that they can keep on coming. If a kid can get himself to school then he's more likely to come, right? So, he's coming for all those reasons. He's coming because he can get someone to talk to. He can get someone to help him translate for his doctor's appointments. He can get a jacket when it starts to get cold out."

– School-based Provider, Marin County

4. Integrated supports: Strengthen cross-system service coordination.

- Providers noted that addressing the educational needs of newcomer youth requires coordinated, well-resourced systems that integrate legal, social, emotional, and academic supports. Providers urged stronger collaboration between schools and external service providers to ensure that youth receive consistent, wraparound support.

5. Strengthen supports for newcomer students' well-being and mental health.

- Culturally and linguistically responsive mental health care: Providers recommended investing in bilingual, trauma-informed counselors and mental health staff who understand newcomer experiences.
- Family loss and reunification support: Educators noted that many newcomer students are coping with separation from family, loss of loved ones, or difficulty reuniting with family in the U.S. – and recommended creating individual and group counseling programming to help youth manage grief and anxiety around family loss and reunification.
- Peer support: Providers strongly recommended investing in group-based healing or peer-based interventions to create safe spaces for collective healing, mutual support, and identity affirmation. Educators noted that students often identify peer and group spaces as some of the most helpful supports for their mental health and well-being.

- Peer programming: Providers observed that afterschool programs such as sports, music, dance, art, language support, and tutoring are essential to helping newcomer youth make connections and build community.

"All of them are missing somebody. Right? Whether it's their tío, or abuela, or mom or dad who's still back in Honduras or wherever. Everybody is missing someone."

– School-based Provider, Contra Costa County

6. Invest in newcomer curriculum and staff support.

- Dedicated interpreters and classroom aides: Similar to special education supports, providers proposed that newcomer aides could accompany students to classes and help with interpretation, translation, and classroom participation. This support would benefit both youth and educators.
- Newcomer-specific curriculum and materials: Educators requested instructional tools tailored to English learners and students with interrupted or zero formal education.
- Professional development and staff well-being: Providers called for ongoing training and education for school staff to understand the specific needs of the newcomer population, as well as ongoing mental health support to sustain their work with higher-need students.
- Bilingual staffing: Providers proposed that school districts offer pay incentives for bilingual staff so that schools can attract and retain qualified personnel.

7. Expand flexible academic pathways to support newcomer student engagement.

- Reduced credit and flexible-hour programs: Providers proposed creating alternative school class schedules for working students to make graduation attainable for youth balancing employment and school.
- Provide Career Technical Education (CTE) options: Providers recommended linking students to vocational programs that provide practical skills and training.

8. Invest in post-graduation guidance for newcomer students.

- Transition support for graduating newcomers: Providers called for schools and community organizations to provide clearer guidance and support for undocumented youth navigating legal rights, college access, and workforce opportunities after graduation.
- Partnerships with community-based organizations: Providers urged schools to build partnerships with legal aid, financial literacy, and job readiness programs to support newcomer graduates.

Legal

Youth

Newcomer youth described finding an affordable and trustworthy immigration attorney as one of their biggest challenges – citing long waitlists, high costs, language barriers, and the risk of scams. Many shared that not having legal representation caused them intense stress and uncertainty, and their recommendations included expanding available legal support for youth, growing partnerships between schools and legal offices, and making legal information more easily accessible to youth. Youth in our focus groups shared the following challenges:

Finding an available, affordable, and trustworthy immigration attorney is very difficult.

- Many youth described long waitlists to speak with legal aid organizations, difficulty reaching offices by phone, and slow or absent follow-up after leaving messages. Other youth shared that they were told by attorneys to wait until their first court hearing before seeking help, which felt extremely stressful.
- Youth emphasized that affordable legal representation is very scarce, and that private attorneys are often expensive, leading some youth to work specifically to pay legal fees.
- Many youth voiced concern about the risk of being scammed by notarios or fake attorneys, and shared stories of paying for legal help that never materialized.

“It’s hard to get a lawyer here. They say it’s hard because there are none available. I’ve been here two and a half years now and still haven’t found one. I need to start working and a lot of the jobs ask for work permits, but I don’t have one because I don’t have a lawyer. I’m going to start looking for work two or three times a week at night so I can start paying a lawyer.”

– Newcomer Youth, High School, Alameda County

“I had an experience where I was scammed by someone who said they were a lawyer, but they weren’t.”

– Newcomer Youth, High School, Alameda County

Language and age can make it even harder to find attorneys.

- Youth who do not speak English or Spanish shared challenges finding bilingual attorneys or legal information in their language, especially for those who speak Indigenous languages. Youth described coordinating interpretation themselves, which added cost to their legal fees – and stressed that if they could not find appropriate interpretation, that could lead to misunderstanding their own legal case.
- Several youth described losing access to local nonprofit legal support when they turned 18, with organizations unable to take their cases once they “aged out” of eligibility criteria. Youth shared stories of being left without guidance during critical moments in their immigration proceedings and feeling very stressed and overwhelmed.

“For those of us who don’t speak Spanish, it’s very hard to find a lawyer. Some lawyers speak English and Spanish, but we speak Mam. So we need to have an interpreter that speaks two languages, both Spanish and Mam. It’s hard to find interpreters that speak Mam... But if we don’t have an interpreter that speaks Mam, we have to try to talk to the lawyer in Spanish and sometimes our Spanish is bad and it makes it hard for us to understand the papers. Sometimes the lawyer will ask us what happened, why did we leave, and a lot of questions. For some of us that don’t speak Spanish well, we don’t understand what the lawyer is saying and don’t know how to respond and just stay quiet.”

– Newcomer Youth, High School, Alameda County

Not having an attorney is very stressful.

- Youth without attorneys said they feel deep anxiety about going to immigration court unrepresented. The fear of having to navigate complex legal systems alone, without understanding their rights or what to expect, was described as one of the most stressful parts of their experience in the U.S.

“We are desperate because we have been told by the places we call, to wait shortly before your case reaches the first court appointment... I’m nervous if I have court one day and I don’t have a lawyer, I have to defend myself alone.”

– Newcomer Youth, High School, Alameda County

Youths' Recommendations

1. Make more attorneys and legal support available.

- Youth wanted more available immigration attorneys to handle their cases and provide legal guidance.
- Youth with attorneys shared that attorneys not only support their immigration cases, but also assist with non-legal needs, such as applying for Medi-Cal and connecting to community resources. Youth suggested that attorneys receive more staff social worker support in connecting clients to services, allowing them to focus more fully on their legal representation.

2. Create more partnerships between schools and immigration attorneys.

- Youth highlighted the immense value of schools helping connect them with attorneys or hosting on-site legal clinics or screenings. Youth felt that these direct connections made it much easier for them and their families to access trusted legal help.

3. Provide youth with legal information guides.

- Some youth requested accessible, bilingual guides to help them understand their legal rights and what to expect in immigration court.

"It's not easy because even immigration gave us papers where we can contact lawyers who can help us for free. But when you called their numbers, that is, literally no one answers. "

– Newcomer Youth, High School, San Francisco County



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Providers

Providers across sectors emphasized that obtaining legal status is the foundation for youth and families to achieve stability in the U.S. Legal service providers described eligibility constraints, funding instability, staff shortages, and burnout undermining their service capacity, with a lack of case management leaving lawyers to fill social service gaps they are not trained or resourced to handle. Providers recommended sustained and expanded investment in legal representation, coordination, and integrated social services support. Providers shared the following challenges:

Legal service providers have insufficient funding and capacity.

- Providers explained how federal and state funding streams restrict the types of cases that can be taken by legal service providers, preventing them from representing youth that do not meet specific eligibility criteria.
- Providers described persistent understaffing and an overwhelming need for representation that makes it impossible to meet demand.
- Providers revealed that burnout and vicarious trauma contribute to high turnover in the field, disrupting continuity of services and diverting supervisory capacity to constant retraining of new staff. Some providers mentioned that low nonprofit salaries deter skilled advocates from entering or remaining in the field, exacerbating retention challenges.

“Capacity is one of the biggest challenges. I’ve met the most incredible immigration advocates and no one’s immune from burnout, whether it’s vicarious trauma or direct triggering of your own trauma. And that’s hard because it affects capacity - people might need to leave the field or take a break, as they should do. They should care for themselves. But then it’s less people who are experienced and know how to do these cases. And then nonprofits need to take the time to train new attorneys. And the cycle keeps going.”

– Legal Service Provider, Alameda County

Newcomer youths’ cases are complex and require extra support.

- Providers emphasized that unmet basic needs undermine youths’ and legal service providers’ ability to pursue legal relief, and that youth often require stabilization through non-legal services – housing, health care, school enrollment – before legal work can move forward. Providers observed that calling agencies, understanding paperwork, and communicating in a new language is overwhelming for youth, and nearly impossible without guidance. For legal service providers without dedicated social service staff, they noted that attorneys are often forced to fill social service gaps, reducing their legal capacity.
- Providers expressed that a shortage of bilingual and culturally competent staff limit legal providers’ ability to build rapport and provide culturally responsive advocacy, especially around differing cultural understandings of family, work, education, and neglect.

- Providers noted that providing trauma-informed representation is key for this population, but also very time-intensive, and that cases often remain open for longer to allow clients to process trauma and build readiness to go through the steps of their legal case.
- Providers described watching youth clients cope with trauma, post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), anxiety, and depression due to migration, family separation, and ongoing instability – and feeling undertrained to meet these behavioral health needs or find appropriate supports for their clients.
- Providers reported that limited access to qualified interpreters – especially for Indigenous languages – can lead to misunderstandings and extend case timelines.

“It’s much harder to provide representation to folks who do not have support, like from a case manager or social services perspective. Because we end up having to do it ourselves and that takes up a lot of our energy and our capacity – and the case sometimes doesn’t go forward because the kid needs so much more support than we [lawyers] can provide. We’ve had funding that provided case management before and we see that it makes a huge difference in the life of the case.”

– Legal Service Provider, Marin County

In-person meetings with clients can be difficult to arrange.

- Providers observed that transportation barriers make it difficult for youth to reach legal offices, particularly in areas with limited public transit. Attorneys mentioned spending significant time traveling to meet clients, reducing capacity and time for other cases.
- Some legal service providers shared that fear of encountering immigration enforcement near offices or courts discourages some youth and families from attending meetings or hearings with their attorney, which can hinder case progress.

“Public transportation in Marin County is horrible. If you don’t have a car, it’s a nightmare. So that’s a barrier right there. Most of these kids will have to travel to San Francisco or the East Bay to receive services. It’s possible to get there, but it’s not easy.”

– Legal Service Provider, Marin County

Providers' Recommendations

1. Funding: Expand access to legal representation for all immigrant children.

- Providers overwhelmingly recommended funding universal legal representation for immigrant children, noting that many youth with viable relief claims lose their cases simply because they lack representation.
- Providers emphasized that expanding legal representation requires not only funding more attorneys but also investing in essential support staff – such as paralegals, legal assistants, and supervisors – to ensure legal services remain effective and high-quality.

“I would say like above and beyond, what would alleviate so much anxiety and trauma, and alleviate some of the scarcity, would be universal legal representation.”

– School-based Provider, San Francisco County

2. Funding: Invest in holistic representation models that integrate legal and social services.

- Providers called for shifting federal and state funding priorities toward integrated legal and social service teams that offer both legal and case management support.
- Providers recommended providing every child with a social worker to assist with education, health, and social service access – areas where attorneys lack time and expertise. Providers felt that programs that have integrated bilingual case management showed significantly improved client outcomes and follow-through.
- Providers emphasize that trauma-informed practice is essential but time- and labor-intensive and should be recognized in caseload and funding models.

3. Integrated supports: Strengthen cross-system coordination and education.

- Providers proposed funding coordination between schools and legal service providers to ensure newcomer youths' legal needs are identified and addressed quickly, and developing coordinated referral networks and communication systems that link schools and legal aid organizations.
- Providers called for stronger cross-sector partnerships between education, social services, legal aid, and community-based organizations.
- Providers proposed training school staff and case managers on immigration relief options and referral processes, as limited understanding among non-legal professionals may result in missed opportunities for youth support.

Spotlight: Immigrant Legal Defense

Immigrant Legal Defense (ILD) is a nonprofit agency that provides free legal representation to underserved immigrant communities in California, and represents clients in all forms of detained and non-detained removal defense and affirmative immigration relief before immigration agencies, immigration and state courts, the Board of Immigration Appeals, district courts, and federal courts of appeal.

ILD staff formed an innovative partnership with Oakland Unified School District to provide free, high-quality immigration legal services to students and families. ILD has utilized this model as a base to build other TK-12 legal-education partnerships in California. Many of ILD's TK-12 clients are unaccompanied children seeking humanitarian relief like Special Immigrant Juvenile Status, U and T visas, and asylum. ILD also partners with higher education institutions to provide free immigration legal services to students, their families, faculty and staff; and provides training and technical assistance through different statewide programs, including training and mentorship around representing unaccompanied children.¹⁵

4. Funding: Expand federal, state, and local-level financial support for newcomer youth.

- Providers recommended expanding federal refugee benefits eligibility to immigrant youth awaiting legal status.
- Providers proposed funding state and local financial assistance programs that can fill the gap while youth and families await work authorization.

5. Federal reforms: Improve immigration policies and practices.

- Expand pathways to status and citizenship: Providers recommended creating new visa categories that allow eligible youth to obtain lawful status more quickly.
- Address immigration court backlogs: Legal providers advocated for streamlined court procedures, expanded dockets, and hiring more immigration judges to reduce processing times.
- Make immigration processes more trauma-informed: Providers urged for reforms to immigration relief applications that would reduce the requirements for youth to retell traumatic experiences across multiple applications and hearings.

Work

Youth

Across focus groups, newcomer youth consistently described a range of factors, including financial necessity, familial responsibility, personal independence, and cultural norms, that force them to choose between learning and work. Youths' recommendations focused on developing pathways to safe and legal employment and obtaining job training. Youth in our focus groups shared the following challenges:

Newcomer youth are trying to study and economically survive at the same time.

- Youth overwhelmingly shared the difficulty of balancing school with the need to work. Youth described working long or late work hours, leading to fatigue and exhaustion, difficulty focusing in class, missed classes, and declining academic performance.
- Financial pressure: Many youth noted the high cost of living in the Bay Area – and the expectation to help pay for rent, food, utilities, and family debts – as driving their need to earn income. They pointed out that they often are responsible for supporting both their family in the United States as well as abroad.
- Cultural expectations: Several youth explained that working as teenagers is a cultural norm and a source of pride as well as being a heavy responsibility. They stressed being very aware of the sacrifices that their families had made for them to be in the United States, and feeling significant pressure to take advantage of every opportunity – both financial and educational – to make those sacrifices worthwhile.
- Independence: Some youth stated that they work because they wanted to be able to pay for things that their families could not otherwise afford, such as new clothing, entertainment, or electronics.

"Yes, I would like to study, but I have to work. That's my obligation to work here. It's just that I'm alone so I have to work to eat and to pay rent."

– Newcomer Youth, High School, Marin County

"Working and studying is so hard, because if you work nights... you sleep very late and we get tired. At least for me that's how it is."

– Newcomer Youth, High School, Alameda County

Limited employment opportunities force youth into working unsafe jobs.

- Lack of work authorization: Youth without work permits (or who were not eligible to apply for a work permit) shared that they are limited to “under-the-table” jobs, which are unstable and expose them to exploitation and getting taken advantage of. Because safer, “legal” jobs are often unavailable to those without documentation, some youth revealed they feel trapped in physically taxing or unsafe work they do not want to do, with little ability to advocate for themselves.
- Unsafe conditions: Youth shared experiences of being yelled or cursed at by employers or other employees, forced to work overtime without compensation, or forced to work in hazardous environments. Some described personal injuries, such as cuts and falls, and not being compensated for their labor.
- Transportation: Youth shared that reaching job sites can be very difficult, especially for youth who work late shifts, whose workplaces are far from home or school, or whose workplaces are not accessible by public transit. Youth reflected that long work commutes increase their fatigue and take away time from school or sleep.

“It’s very tiring and it’s very stressful because sometimes I have a hard time with finding transportation. It’s an hour long ride to work. ”

– Newcomer Youth, High School, Alameda County

“I worked in roofing, and I worked like three days without getting paid. In another restaurant job they would curse and yell at us all the time too. They never respected us.”

– Newcomer Youth, Santa Clara County



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Youths' Recommendations

1. Develop targeted job training programs for newcomer youth.

- Youth shared that they want the skills to work – they want to learn how to perform jobs safely and effectively, gain practical skills, and build confidence in new work environments.
- Youth said that proper training would reduce workplace accidents and help them grow both personally and professionally. Many expressed pride in learning new skills and a strong interest in structured opportunities to expand their knowledge.

“We need knowledge... if someone is young and they want to work... one of the things that I think would be good is if they teach him how to do it. How are you going to put someone that doesn't know how to do it and have them do a job? I think it would be better to get him used to the environment, increase his knowledge, teach him what to do.”

– Newcomer Youth, High School, Alameda County

2. Expand access to work authorization for newcomer youth.

- Youth recommended expanding work permit eligibility so every young person has the chance to work legally and safely. Youth said that legal work authorization would allow them to access safer, higher-quality jobs and avoid the exploitation that often comes with informal or “under-the-table” employment.
- Youth requested clear guidance and assistance navigating the process to secure work authorization and avoid the risks of working without valid documentation.

3. Ensure youth understand and can exercise their employment rights.

- Youth called for more education about their labor rights and workplace protections. Many youth described feeling invisible or dismissed by employers and felt that understanding their rights would empower them to advocate for fairer treatment and safer conditions.

Providers

Providers across sectors shared that newcomer youth face profound and overlapping pressures that pull them between education and economic survival. Providers highlighted that without work authorization or legal status, many are forced into unsafe or exploitative labor conditions, and current systems provide inadequate interventions to support these youth. Nearly every service provider we interviewed observed that newcomer youth often work while attending school – or in place of it. Providers' recommendations included investing in social support services, expanding legal pathways to work, and restructuring state system responses to forced labor. Providers shared the following challenges:

Newcomer youth are often forced to choose between work and school.

- Providers observed that newcomer youth often face an impossible choice between pursuing their education and needing to work to meet financial needs and familial expectations. Providers pointed out that youth may feel a moral obligation to make the most of their educational opportunities, while also recognizing the significant sacrifices their families made to support their journey to the U.S. – highlighting a broader tension between personal advancement and collective family responsibility.
- Providers noted that this tension may be exacerbated for youth living with extended family or non-relatives. Providers shared stories of youth feeling indebted to their sponsors and pressured to prove their worth by contributing financially to the household.

“Adolescence is both a privilege and a social construct. Like a lot of our young people were not children in their countries necessarily. They were working. They were heads of household. And to come here and be treated like a little kid, you lose your cultural purpose. They come from more communal cultures versus our individualistic culture where they have people telling them like, ‘Just go to school, focus on yourself, let yourself go to college. Then you’ll be able to help your family later.’ But for these kids, there is cultural value around ‘I need to help them today because they need medicine today. I can’t go to school. I have to go to work. I have to help out.’”

– School-based Provider, San Francisco County

A range of economic pressures contribute to newcomer youth feeling compelled to work.

- Debt repayment: Providers commented that many youth owe money to people who financed their migration journey to the United States.
- Household support: Providers reported that many youth work to help pay rent or cover other costs of living (food, clothing, phone, etc.). Providers mentioned that many of the youths' caregivers work long hours in unsafe, unstable, or exploitative jobs, and youth can sometime internalize these hardships, feeling a sense of responsibility to help by working themselves.

- Providers stressed that many youth feel compelled to send money to support their families abroad. Providers noted that for some youth, providing this financial support is a significant source of pride, while for other youth, it can be a heavy emotional and mental weight.

"Some kids are forced to work. And some kids are on the fence as to whether or not they want to be in school at all. Some say - I came from my country to provide for my family back home. School takes a long time to get through, but my family over there is expecting me to give them money now. So there's this kind of dilemma of between working and going to school..."

– School-based Provider, San Francisco County

Newcomer youth face numerous barriers to legal and safe employment.

- Providers explained that without legal documentation or a work permit, newcomer youth are excluded from legal employment opportunities and local job training programs.
- Providers noted that obtaining a work permit usually requires legal assistance, which can cost several thousand dollars, and lengthy bureaucratic delays, often lasting one to two years, further complicate the process. As a result, providers shared that many youth work under the table in high-risk, low-wage sectors such as construction, landscaping, or auto repair, where they are vulnerable to exploitation by employers that take advantage of their undocumented status to pay below minimum wage or withhold wages entirely.
- Many providers expressed deep frustration over the lack of safe and legal work pathways for newcomer youth, who urgently need to earn income. They noted that there are very few to no options for connecting these youth with safe employment opportunities or job training programs.

"Kids want to work but they don't have a work permit. And a lot of job training programs won't even consider them because they don't have social security numbers. So that means they end up in jobs that are unsafe."

– Shelter Service Provider, San Francisco County

"These businesses take advantage of these kids and pay them way below minimum wage for jobs that should pay more."

– Legal Service Provider, San Francisco County

Some newcomer youth are forced into criminalized behavior to survive.

- Providers shared that with few safe or legal options to support themselves, economic desperation pushes some youth toward criminalized forms of income generation, such as drug sales or petty theft, in order to survive. Providers underscored that these youth are trapped in a “catch-22” – unable to work legally, punished when they work illegally, and in desperate need of income.

“These kids are engaging in delinquent behavior in order to make money, to support themselves or their families, to survive. It’s not like crimes of violence - it’s like a way to hustle, to pay for things. And if they had other ways to pay for things, if they got money from other sources or supports from other places, then the pressure would be less and maybe they wouldn’t have to resort to illegal ways.”

– Legal Service Provider, San Francisco County

There are currently no adequate interventions for youth experiencing forced labor.

- Providers expressed frustration at the lack of targeted interventions and/or services for newcomer youth in forced or survival labor situations. They noted that neither the state child welfare, nor the juvenile justice system (for children pushed into criminalized behavior), had adequate programming or services for how to support this population of youth.
- Some providers shared instances where county child welfare agencies declined referrals for newcomer youth. In cases where newcomer youth were accepted into the child welfare system, providers shared stories of youth running away or reporting that their placements were culturally or linguistically inappropriate.
- Providers voiced an unwillingness to involve law enforcement, given concerns about deportation and the juvenile justice system’s approach of criminalizing rather than supporting youth whose “offenses” stem from economic survival.

“If the child welfare system had good placements or services for these kids... my recommendation would be to take the kids out of the juvenile delinquency system ... and have the kids go into the foster care system and then they can get foster benefits. These kids shouldn’t be criminalized, they’re trying to survive... I think if the child welfare system were a functioning system, they would be good candidates for that kind of care and would be better served. But there is a big, you know, concern about getting involved in the child welfare system and having more eyes on them because, you know, there it’s like this risk increase there too.”

– Legal Service Provider, San Francisco County

Providers' Recommendations

1. Funding: Expand federal, state, and local-level financial support for newcomer youth.

- Providers emphasized that reducing newcomer youths' financial instability would help alleviate the economic pressures forcing them to leave school for work.
- Providers advocated for the extension of federal refugee benefits to newcomer youth, such as temporary cash assistance and resettlement agency services, as well as the creation of more state and local financial assistance programs.

"A lot of our students say the biggest barrier to coming to school is housing and finances. And the reason they need to work is because they need to pay for rent. They need to pay their bills. They need to pay for their lawyer. They need to pay for all of these things."

– School-based Provider, San Francisco County

2. Expand pathways to safe and legal work opportunities.

- Providers called for funding free legal navigation assistance to newcomer youth eligible to apply for work permits.
- Providers proposed shortening processing times for work permit applications, and introducing temporary work permits for undocumented youth and caregivers that enable them to more quickly access safe employment.
- Providers recommended expanding access to vocational and job training programs to undocumented youth, and creating training opportunities tailored for newcomer youth.
- Providers urged local employers and community colleges to create pathways from training to employment for newcomer youth.

3. School hubs: Offer comprehensive school-based services.

- Providers stressed that school-based services are essential to supporting newcomer youth's long-term academic engagement – and that services such as food access, clothing, school and technology materials, transportation support, medical care, insurance enrollment assistance, counseling, social services navigation, and peer mentoring ensure that youths' basic needs are met and that youth stay enrolled and engaged with their education.

4. Peer programming: Invest in peer mentorship and recreation programs.

- Providers recommended establishing and sustaining peer mentoring programs where newcomer youth connect with youth with experience navigating similar work and education pressures. Providers noted that even informal peer mentors can act as trusted guides for newcomer youth, helping to normalize challenges and reduce feelings of isolation and overwhelm.

- Providers suggested developing and sustaining activity-based programming that fosters a sense of belonging and healthy community connections (for example, soccer, art, or cultural groups).

5. Restructure state system responses and services for newcomer youth.

- Providers recommended developing culturally informed services and community-based supports for newcomer youth forced to work.
- Providers suggested redirecting youth from the juvenile justice system – where survival-driven behaviors are criminalized – to supports and benefits that address youths’ economic and safety needs, thus reducing the financial pressures driving youth to engage in unsafe or criminalized work.

6. Integrated supports: Strengthen cross-system service coordination.

- Providers suggested funding coordination between schools and legal, housing, and social service providers to ensure newcomer youth receive consistent and comprehensive support.
- Providers called for cross-sector partnerships to share resources, identify at-risk youth early, prevent duplication of services, and build coordinated referral systems so that youth can be easily connected to educational, employment, and wellness supports.



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Mental Health

Youth

Newcomer youth described experiencing significant mental health challenges, including loneliness, anxiety, depression, and stress. Youth identified schools – particularly through newcomer resource centers, counselors, and recreation programming – as key spaces for understanding the concept of mental health, overcoming stigma, and accessing support. Youth described school counselors and peer groups as a valuable source of support, particularly when they felt unable to talk about mental health within their families. Youth in our focus groups shared the following challenges:

Providers reported that newcomers often experience complex and cumulative trauma linked to pre- and post-migration stressors, and that it often takes time to build a trusting relationship with a youth that lends itself to meaningful mental health support.

Many newcomer youth face significant mental health challenges.

- Many youth reported feelings of loneliness, anxiety, depression, and chronic stress.
- Youth shared that their mental health challenges had impacted them physically, including symptoms such as hair loss, fatigue, headaches, and stomachaches.

“Well, not that long ago, I suffered from anxiety. Because of the stress from school, learning English, learning everything, understanding what it’s like here, the procedures and things because my parents didn’t know anything... I had lots of problems. Headaches, anxiety, sometimes even wanting to cry and all I did was disconnect or stop sleeping.”

– Newcomer Youth, High School, Alameda County

Stigma surrounding mental health impacts access to mental health care.

- Youth mentioned that talking about mental health was stigmatized within some communities, leading them to avoid seeking help or sharing how they feel with their family or caregivers.

Limited availability of bilingual counselors impacts access to mental health care.

- Youth voiced that they feel more comfortable speaking with mental health counselors in their native language, and that it was harder to open up to counselors who do not speak their language or understand their culture.

“I always felt really bad. I didn’t have anyone to talk to, but then I asked for a counselor. It’s hard to find because here at the school there are lots of kids that need one and there are not a lot of counselors here. Well, they found me a counselor but I have to go a bit far. It is a hard resource to find.”

– Newcomer Youth, High School, Alameda County

Youths' Recommendations

1. Recognize the activities that improve your mood and make time for them when you're feeling down.

- Youth recommended engaging in physical activity such as soccer, running, walking, boxing, or basketball to help relieve stress.
- Youth found that spending time outdoors helped them feel grounded and connected to nature.
- Youth described creative and relaxing activities – like listening to music, watching movies, reading, or drawing – as helpful for emotional well-being.
- Youth reflected that watching videos or content in their native language from their home countries provided them with some comfort.

"Moving to another country is very difficult. It feels good being outside and playing soccer, because that's what we did in our country."

– Newcomer Youth, High School, Alameda County

"Well when I'm sad or when I am at home, I start to watch videos of my village... It helps with the stress and to be calm, because if you're thinking about such sad things sometimes you feel pain."

– Newcomer Youth, High School, Alameda County

"Talk to a counselor, talk to someone, let off some steam or exercise, go for a run, walk, bike, or maybe work with land, remember something from your country so you don't feel so far away from that place."

– Newcomer Youth, High School, Alameda County

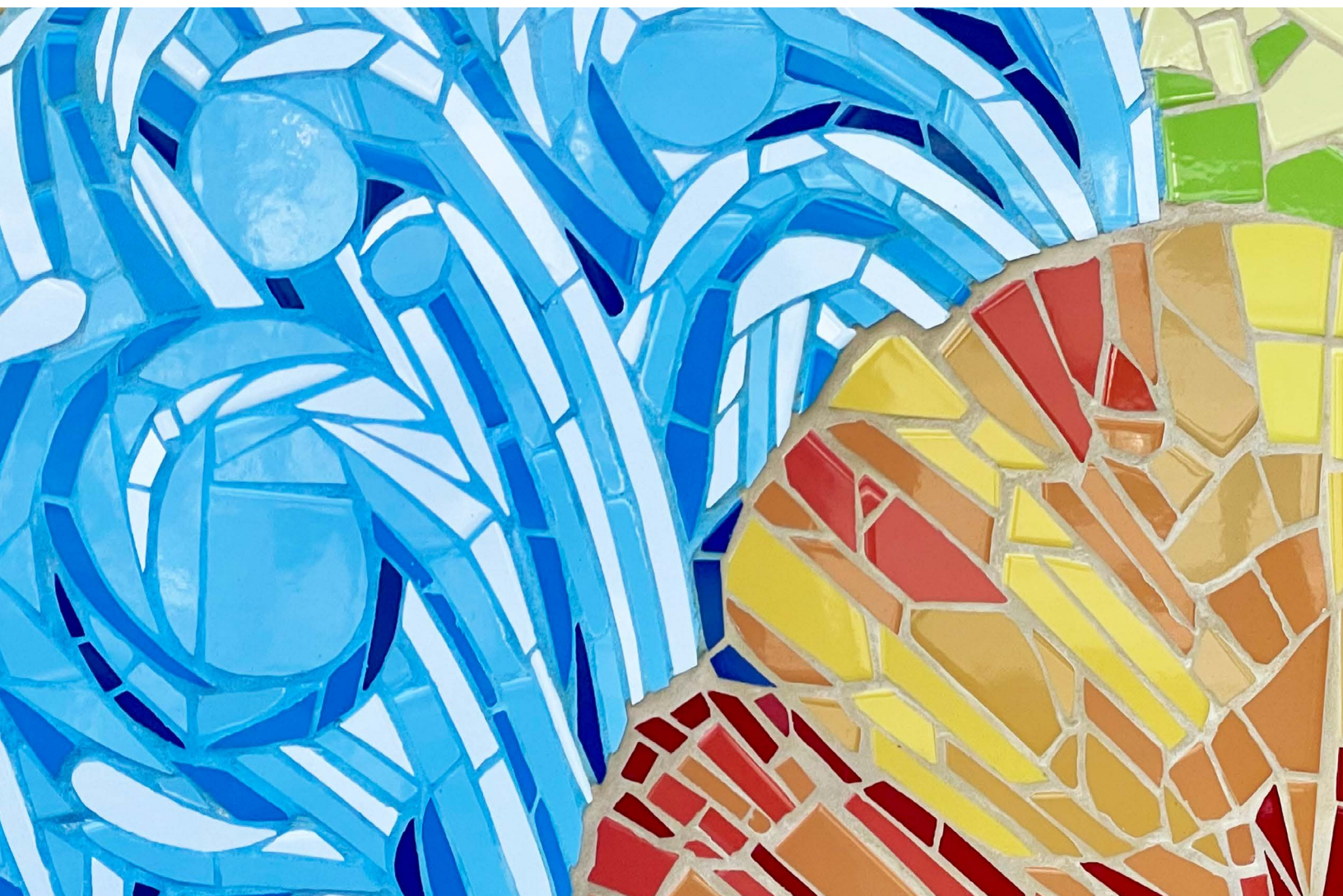
2. Find community supports.

- Youth recognized that schools and community-based organizations were critical in helping them connect to mental health support. Talking with counselors or other trusted adults offered opportunities for youth to process emotions and receive guidance.
- Youth observed that spending time with family and connecting with others in their community helped reduce isolation and increase feelings of belonging.

- Peer programming: Youth highlighted that building friendships and meeting other youth at recreational activities such as sports, music, art, or dance programs created a strong sense of inclusion and support.

“When I arrived here last year, classes had ended and the school year was over, and I spent two months at home practically alone. I fell into depression, anxiety.... I was going through the hardest phase of my life. Through this program I was recommended a psychologist, and I was going to therapy and I realized that confinement is not the best option for oneself. You have to look for other activities, like going out for a walk or listen to music or get out of the routine you’re in. I think that if there were more projects like this one we’re doing now at Canal Alliance, having activities, I think it would be good for us.”

– Newcomer Youth, High School, Marin County



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Providers

Providers working with newcomer immigrant youth described constant challenges in connecting or providing youth with consistent, high-quality, culturally responsive mental health care. Providers described funding instability, workforce shortages, eligibility constraints, and limited coordination between schools and healthcare institutions as contributing challenges. Providers noted that addressing these challenges will require sustained investment in bilingual and bicultural staff, structural funding for long-term programming, and cross-sector collaboration to bridge the divide between basic needs and mental health care. Providers shared the following challenges:

“The biggest barriers to accessing mental health services for newcomers that I’ve seen are basic needs not being met. More and more, I think our field is thinking of access to basic resources as a mental health intervention. You can’t learn in school if you’re in crisis mode, if you don’t know what you’re going to eat next, if you think that your home is not safe, if you’re going to get evicted. If you’re continually experiencing the effects of traumatic stress, your brain can’t learn new things. So there is a very real tension around their basic needs and mental health. We have to make sure that kids are safe enough that they can actually benefit from mental health services - because you can’t do that healing work if you’re still in crisis and survival mode.”

– Mental Health Provider, San Francisco County

Many newcomer youth have complex trauma histories and experience significant adjustment stress as they acclimate to a new environment and culture in the United States.

- Providers reported that most newcomer youth in their clinical practices have experienced complex trauma related to violence, loss, and other migration-related adversity occurring before and during their journey to the U.S. Providers noted that these experiences often resurface upon arrival and as youth begin to integrate into their communities.
- Many providers described youth experiencing shock and overwhelm upon their arrival in the U.S., as the reality of their living situations is far more difficult than what they had imagined or expected. Providers observed that the stress of adjusting to life in the U.S. – trying to learn English, balancing work and school, experiencing discrimination and isolation – can manifest for youth as anxiety, withdrawal, or depression.

Available and accessible mental health care services are limited and under-resourced.

- Providers pointed out that accessible mental health services for newcomer youth are often time-limited, under-resourced, and may not allow sufficient time to build trusting relationships – and without long-term therapeutic care and follow-up, newcomer youth are left without sustained support.
- Providers highlighted that short-term programs, such as school-based workshops, are powerful spaces for youth to connect, but reach only a small portion of students across the Bay Area.

- Providers underscored that even when mental health services are available, newcomer youth face insurance limitations and bureaucratic hurdles that can block access if they do not have dedicated navigation support.

Spotlight: The Fuerte Program

The Fuerte program is a school-based prevention program in the San Francisco Unified School District (SFUSD) designed specifically for newcomer Latinx immigrant youth at risk for experiencing immigration-related stress. Operating in partnership with the San Francisco Department of Public Health and the University of California San Francisco, the Fuerte program offers eligible students an eight-week program in small-group sessions structured around a culturally informed curriculum that focuses on increasing youth's mental health literacy, improving their social functioning, and identifying and connecting at-risk youth to specialty mental health services. By embedding the intervention within schools, the program aims to decrease mental health access barriers and create early pathways into care, thereby promoting emotional resilience, reducing stigma, and supporting students' overall academic and social success. The Fuerte program has been implemented across 20 elementary, middle, and high schools in SFUSD over the past five years and has served more than 500 students.¹⁶

There is a scarcity of bilingual and bicultural mental health providers.

- Providers emphasized that having a therapist or navigator who speaks a youth's native language is essential to building trust and creating a safe space for discussing trauma – however, it is particularly difficult to find bilingual mental health therapists, especially for Indigenous languages speakers.
- Providers stressed that bilingual and bicultural therapists play a critical role in helping newcomer youth and families understand and feel comfortable with mental health care. Providers noted that strong cultural stigmas around therapy – viewed as a sign of weakness or “craziness” in some immigrant communities – can discourage participation. Providers shared that when therapists can communicate in the family's language and relate to their cultural background, youth and caregivers are more likely to engage in counseling and view it as a supportive resource.

“Even though some of our Mam-speaking clients are able to converse a little bit in Spanish, oftentimes they just feel more secure and safe speaking about whatever trauma they endured in their native language.”

– Social Service Provider, Alameda County

Newcomer caregivers often face significant barriers to supporting youths' well-being.

- Providers recognized that newcomer parents and caregivers often face barriers – such as limited English proficiency, limited education, and demanding work schedules – that limit their access to information and resources. Providers noted that many caregivers are managing their own trauma, legal stress, or economic hardship, which can reduce their ability to provide consistent emotional support to the children in their care.
- Providers identified a need for family-centered interventions that engage caregivers as active partners in children's well-being.

Newcomer youth may experience unexpected difficulty in their familial relationships.

- Providers observed that newcomer youth often struggle to adjust to living with parents or relatives they have been separated from for years, often under unfamiliar household structures.
- Providers noted that family reunification can be emotionally complex – youth may expect joyful reunions after difficult migration and detention experiences – but instead face disappointment and relational strain due to the stresses of daily survival and disrupted attachment bonds. Providers identified disruptions stemming from “stepwise” migration patterns, where parents and children migrate at different times, as leading to long-term relational and emotional stress.
- Providers also identified challenges faced by youth living with family members who were not their prior primary caregivers, including differing expectations regarding the caregiver's responsibilities in meeting the youth's needs, and the youth's contributions to the household.



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Providers' Recommendations

1. School hubs: Build welcoming, trust-based school environments and offer comprehensive school-based services.

- Providers recommended making schools safe, welcoming spaces where newcomer youth feel seen, heard, and able to contribute, and hiring caring, bilingual, culturally sensitive, and well-trained staff who can build trust and connection with newcomer students.
- Providers advocated for newcomer coordinators to be installed in every school district – similar to foster and homeless youth liaisons – to systematically identify, track, and support newcomer students' needs.
- Providers recommended training for educators, clinicians, and social workers on immigration-related trauma and the unique challenges newcomer youth face.
- Some providers proposed giving basic mental health training to teachers so that they can support students when clinicians are not available.

"They're dealing with the loss of losing their country, losing their family, losing everything they've ever known. Can we make the schools be a safe place for them or where they feel seen? Where they feel heard or feel like they can contribute? That's important. School might be their only safe space. Because when they're already having difficulty trusting people because of everything that they've been through, having support once in a while is not going to be enough. They need consistency. They need adults that really care. They need adults that have the space and time to care."

– Mental Health Provider, Marin County

2. Peer programming: Invest in peer mentorship and community programming.

- Providers suggested broadening the shared concept of "mental health support" beyond individual or group counseling to include preventive, community-based, and expressive activities – for example, "non-therapeutic" activities (sports, art, dance, outdoor trips, community events) that allow youth to connect and strengthen their peer and community networks.
- Providers noted that peers are trusted cultural brokers and community leaders, who can model resilience, reduce stigma around seeking help, and help other youth understand that "failures" often stem not from individual flaws but systemic barriers.
- Providers suggested integrating peer mentorship models into school and community programs to build belonging, normalize adjustment challenges, and promote leadership among newcomer youth.

- Providers recommended increasing funding for existing community organizations already working with newcomers, instead of funding new programs. For example, providers noted that faith-based organizations are often a critical source of informal mental health support for newcomer youth and families.

“I think a lot of times people think of mental health services as 1:1 therapy – and for so many reasons – capacity, clinician availability, infrastructure – we can’t provide that for every kid. But there’s so much more we could do to broaden our mindset about what it means to have mental health services or support children’s mental health. Programs like Soccer Without Borders, or school sports teams, or art or music programs, are so deeply healing for these kids and have a huge impact on their mental health. We should focus on these different kinds of interventions too.”

– Mental Health Provider, San Francisco County

Spotlight: Soccer Without Borders

The Soccer Without Borders program offers newcomer refugee and immigrant youth in Alameda and San Francisco counties free, year-round access to in-school, weekend, and summer programming. The SWB program model combines soccer practices and games with educational support and community-building activities focused on whole person youth development. In 2024, the SWB program served about 1,181 newcomer youth in Alameda and San Francisco counties.¹⁷

3. Funding: Invest in long-term, bilingual mental health and case management services.

- Providers called for funding case management services for all newcomer youth, noting the strong connection between basic stability and mental health.
- Providers advocated for funding long-term mental health services and reducing barriers to access (for example, simplifying eligibility requirements and complex referral systems).
- Providers recommended funding more interpreters and translators in education, healthcare, and social services, noting significant disparities in access for youth and families that speak less common languages, particularly Indigenous languages.

4. Integrated supports: Strengthen cross-system service coordination.

- Providers recommended building interdisciplinary collaborations and simplifying navigation between schools, medical and mental health providers, social services, and legal systems.
- Providers proposed creating coordinated referral networks and communication systems that link schools, shelters, community clinics, and hospitals.

- Noting the complex needs of newcomer families, providers urged that systems compensate staff for the additional time and advocacy work required to support newcomer families effectively.

“We need to fund intersectional work. Right now it’s essentially done by people who care on a pro bono basis, but that is not sustainable or a realistic solution for the problem if it’s not part of someone’s professional role.”

– Mental Health Provider, Santa Clara County

5. Develop and sustain effective supports for newcomer caregivers.

- Providers recommended funding newcomer caregiver support groups and strengthening newcomer family-based interventions and navigation supports to help families build community and mutual support networks.

6. Federal reforms: Improve immigration policies and practices.

- Providers called for simplifying and accelerating work permit processes to allow youth and families to integrate economically and contribute to local communities.
- Based on the shared experiences of their clients and students, providers advocated for federal policy and legislative changes to ensure youth receive child welfare-informed and trauma-responsive care in federal immigration detention facilities.



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Social Supports: Housing

Youth

Newcomer youth described a range of housing challenges including high costs, limited availability, and unstable living arrangements. In our focus group exit survey, 42% of youth said that they help pay rent. Many shared that frequent moves and uncertainty about where they would live next caused emotional stress and disrupted their education, work, and sense of stability. Youth in our focus groups shared the following challenges:

The cost of living in the Bay Area is very high and finding safe and affordable housing is difficult.

- Youth reported that Bay Area rent prices are extremely high, and figuring out how to pay for rent alongside other costs, such as utilities, water, heat, internet, phone, and electricity, is hard.
- Youth shared that it was difficult for large families to find affordable housing that meets space and occupancy requirements, and some landlords refuse to rent to large families or those with young children due to noise concerns.
- Some youth felt that affordable housing options are often located in areas that are not as safe, and that newcomers unfamiliar with the Bay Area struggle to identify safe neighborhoods or those located near schools or public transportation.
- Some youth shared that limited English or knowledge of how to read maps or use technology to search for housing further complicates the process.



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Newcomers encounter documentation barriers that limit their ability to rent housing.

- Youth pointed out that lack of a U.S. credit score can prevent newcomers from meeting rental eligibility requirements, and landlords sometimes require paystubs or employment verification, which may not be available for families who work in jobs where they are paid in cash.

Housing instability undermines youths' well-being.

- Some newcomer youth lacked a consistent caregiver or adult support and described frequent moves between housing placements. Some youth reported sponsors abandoning them after arrival, or caregivers no longer being able to provide housing due to changing financial circumstances. Youth living alone found it especially difficult to afford rent.
- Youth described how constant movement and housing uncertainty caused emotional distress and feelings of instability, which in turn disrupted their school attendance and employment.

"Not everyone has the privilege to come and live with a family. For a family, everyone shares the costs like rent, your food, your phone, your transport, your clothes. A little bit of everything isn't it? But those who are here alone, we have to pay for those things alone."

– Newcomer Youth, Santa Clara County

"Having to pay rent. That's something that sometimes we don't talk about, but the reality, well for my part, I have to pay rent. And sometimes with my friends we talk, and they tell me they also have to pay rent. And sometimes we just stay quiet, we never say that, but in reality we do pay."

– Newcomer Youth, High School, Marin County

Youths' Recommendations

1. Rely on community support.

- Youth shared that relying on family members or community connections – particularly within cultural or national origin groups – helped them find available housing.
- Youth noted that word-of-mouth referrals, such as finding housing “through a friend of a friend,” were also successful in identifying safe and affordable options.

2. Ask school or homeless shelter staff for help.

- Youth who connected with school or homeless shelter staff found them to be valuable sources of information and assistance in locating housing.



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Providers

Providers identified housing instability as the most significant safety risk facing newcomer youth in the Bay Area. Providers consistently described housing as the necessary foundation for all other forms of support: without it, they said, no other interventions can succeed. Providers recommended funding financial support for housing, as well as designing high-quality emergency housing programs for newcomer families. Providers shared the following challenges:

The Bay Area's housing market is unaffordable and inaccessible for newcomer youth.

- Providers stressed that the Bay Area is one of the most expensive and competitive housing markets in the United States, with average rents for a single room often exceeding \$1,000 and limited housing availability that makes even shared rooms difficult to find.
- Providers noted that housing access is even more limited for undocumented newcomer youth, who are excluded from federal housing programs and vouchers due to their lack of immigration status, and that the high cost of rent places significant financial strain on newcomer families – often pushing youth to work to help pay rent or support their caregivers.

“The biggest challenge for youth is housing... just not being able to find stable spaces to stay that are affordable. We don't have enough family shelter beds and those shelters are always at capacity. And, you know, that's a problem for everybody, but especially for newcomers who don't have access to any other type of support through public benefits or other networks.”

– Social Service Provider, Alameda County

Newcomer youth without navigation support or community networks struggle to find housing.

- Providers noted that navigation assistance for housing is largely unavailable – there are no dedicated supports to help newcomer youth find or apply for safe housing options.
- Providers observed that community ties are essential for finding safe and stable housing, and newcomer youth without these networks face a much higher risk of homelessness. Providers warned that without these connections, newcomer youth are more likely to rely on informal or unsafe arrangements, such as living with unfamiliar adults, in overcrowded apartments, or in cars or shelters.

Housing instability affects every aspect of newcomer youths' well-being.

- Providers observed that the lack of stable housing undermines youths' school attendance, academic progress, access to medical or mental health care, and overall well-being – and frequent moves and living in overcrowded housing situations disrupt youths' development, stability, and sense of belonging. Providers shared that housing insecurity compounds prior and existing trauma for youth, leaving them more vulnerable to exploitation and academic disengagement.

- Many providers expressed deep frustration with the lack of available housing referrals or resources to support students in crisis.

“The number one issue is housing and security for a lot of our students. Definitely the most urgent need for the recent newcomers because the housing in San Francisco is terrible right now.... In this first month of school starting, our team has looked at our unhoused students report list - and it’s a little less than a quarter of our students, which is a lot. I have to say that’s been my biggest battle, trying to support students with housing because there just aren’t a lot of options.”

– School-based Provider, San Francisco County

Existing supportive housing programs do not meet newcomer youths’ needs.

- Providers noted that most supportive housing programs are short-term or transitional and cannot provide the longer-term stability that newcomer youth and families need.
- Providers explained that the very few youth housing programs that do exist are often full, inaccessible due to eligibility restrictions, or not a good fit for newcomer youth. Providers noted that youth shelters often enforce strict rules and curfews, which can be challenging for newcomer youth who are used to managing adult responsibilities and greater independence. Some youth shelters are designed to serve young people with substance use challenges, which can make them a poor cultural fit for newcomer youth. Providers noted that newcomer youth typically experience homelessness for different reasons than domestic or foster youth, meaning that programs designed for those populations often do not meet the unique needs of newcomers.
- Providers noted that shelter staff are often not trained or equipped to understand the experiences and needs of newcomer youth – or provide services and information in different languages – which can discourage youth from engaging and accessing services.

There is a lack of safety nets for newcomer youth in crisis.

- Providers expressed deep frustration at the limited options available when newcomer youths’ housing or guardian arrangements collapse.
- Some providers shared hesitancy to involve child welfare agencies in cases without abuse or neglect, citing fears that doing so could trigger deportation.
- Providers described a “missing safety net” for youth who fall between systems – those who are neither in state foster care nor eligible for certain federal supports.

“They don’t have access to Section Eight or affordable housing because of their status, so they’re just left with youth shelters or emergency youth shelters. And those aren’t set up with newcomer kids in mind.”

– Legal Service Provider, San Francisco County

Providers' Recommendations

1. Funding: Expand federal, state, and local-level financial support to ensure housing access for newcomer youth.

- Many providers advocated for the redirection of state and local funds toward programs that effectively meet the needs of undocumented and newcomer youth, such as: creating state-funded housing programs or vouchers that are not tied to federal eligibility restrictions, funding universal basic income or direct financial support to newcomer families, and/or encouraging school districts to play an active role in connecting families to housing resources, and where possible, directly supporting housing solutions.
- Providers also advocated for the extension of federal benefits to newcomer youth, such as federal waivers that close the housing program eligibility gap for mixed-status and undocumented families or extending refugee housing benefits to undocumented newcomer youth.

2. Design and sustain high-quality emergency housing for newcomer youth.

- Providers stressed the importance of developing high-quality emergency housing for newcomer youth and families, prioritizing the creation of long-term housing options in safe areas that foster stability and access to schools, transportation, and supportive services rather than focusing solely on the quantity of units.
- Acknowledging that establishing trust and creating community networks is central to long-term housing stability, providers suggested that housing programs should prioritize hiring committed bilingual, bicultural, and trauma-informed staff, including dedicated housing and social service navigators. Providers also recommended that staff should have access to ongoing training and education to understand the specific needs of this population.

"It's about quality over quantity. There is a supportive housing available in San Francisco, but the quality of it is horrific. Our state and local governments get really into numbers and focus on how many units have been added. But are those units in dilapidated hotels and neighborhoods? People don't feel safe living in squalor."

– Shelter Service Provider, San Francisco County

3. Integrated supports: Strengthen cross-system service coordination.

- Providers recommended funding housing organizations to partner with schools and community-based organizations that serve newcomer youth to create coordinated referral systems, case management opportunities, and cross-sector training. Providers felt that these partnerships would help reduce service fragmentation and prevent newcomer youth from falling through service gaps.

Spotlight: Stay Over Program

One innovative local model is the “Stay Over Program” (SOP) at Buena Vista Horace Mann K–8 Community School in San Francisco, an overnight shelter located in the school’s gymnasium and open to San Francisco United School District students and families experiencing homelessness and attending SFUSD K-12 schools. The SOP is a partnership between the San Francisco Department of Homelessness and Supportive Housing, SFUSD, and local nonprofit Mission Action. Temporarily located at Downtown High School in Potrero Hill while Buena Vista Horace Mann undergoes renovations, the SOP has capacity to serve up to 80 people from 7:00 p.m. to 7:00 a.m. on school days and 24 hours on weekends and school holidays.¹⁸

“Paying for housing is a challenge, the Bay is so expensive. I love the fact that we have a school that turns into shelter at night. I think it’s so beautiful.”

– School-based Provider, San Francisco County

4. Reframe the narrative on housing and resource allocation.

- Providers suggested shifting public and policy narratives away from simply describing the Bay Area as “too expensive,” and instead highlighting systemic funding priorities that overlook unhoused and immigrant youth, emphasizing that these budget priorities – and not just economics and the market – drive inequitable access to housing resources.



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Social Supports: Services

Youth

Newcomer youth who attended schools with dedicated newcomer resource centers and staff expressed how valuable these supports were and emphasized the importance of having individualized guidance to help them navigate and access existing services. Newcomer youth without access to these supports described significant barriers to accessing basic resources and social services. Youth in our focus groups shared the following challenges:

Without guidance, it is difficult to find and access supportive services.

- Youth without school-based supports said that it was difficult to figure out what services existed or where to find them (for example, urgent care clinics or food banks). Without this knowledge, youth said that they relied on informal networks or community spaces, such as churches, neighbors, or family friends, to learn about available supports.
- Youth noted that they had sometimes tried to find services on their own but had been denied enrollment due to lack of documentation or not meeting the eligibility criteria.



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Youths' Recommendations

1. Increase access to community navigators.

- Youth suggested expanding the availability of caseworkers, school counselors, and social workers who can guide newcomer youth through systems, explain documents, and connect them to appropriate services. Some youth shared that having a person available to explain things to them individually was critical to being able to access services.

"It's difficult because you don't know where the hospital is, or where and how to communicate with a lawyer, or if you need food if there is somewhere you could get food. You have to be able to communicate with people who know because it's not easy, this city is big. But the people at school help with all of that."

– Newcomer Youth, High School, San Francisco County

2. Strengthen community-based connections.

- Youth recommended that schools connect with local organizations and churches, since they are places that newcomer youth and families already trust.



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Providers

Providers across sectors described the critical importance of connecting newcomer youth to existing basic services. Providers without integrated case managers or navigators found it difficult to connect youth and families with available programs, given changing eligibility limitations, staffing shortages, or lack of inter-agency coordination. Providers shared frustrations that these challenges often lead to service gaps, inefficiencies, and lost opportunities for meaningful support for newcomer youth and families – and recommended strengthening cross-system coordination and investment in long-term case management supports. Providers shared the following challenges:

Existing social services programs are too limited to provide lasting stability.

- Providers explained that many programs operate under restrictive funding models that limit service duration for each youth or family. For example, a social service provider might be limited to a certain number of months or sessions per client.
- Providers reported that short-term interventions fail to address the ongoing and complex needs of newcomer youth, especially given some youths' prior history of trauma and instability. Providers expressed frustration that current program models do not align with social service best practices or allow sufficient time to build trusting, effective relationships with clients.

"Based on our funding model, we're supposed to see young people for eight sessions and then close the case management case. The reality is that it takes like two years to accompany people through to where they're in a stable space and they're connected and trust the network around them. Trust takes time."

– Social Service Provider, Alameda County

The absence of centralized information makes it challenging for providers to connect youth with appropriate referrals and services.

- Providers noted widespread challenges with connecting youth and families with existing services.
- Eligibility: Some programs exclude individuals without immigration status, while others have unclear or frequently changing eligibility criteria, making it difficult for external providers to determine whether a referral is appropriate.
- Mapping: Providers mentioned that they spend a significant amount of time mapping local resources to identify reliable organizations that are accepting clients – and noted that long waitlists and prior negative experiences often discourage youth and families from engaging with service organizations. Providers noted that these mapping efforts are often duplicated across organizations, each maintaining its own informal referral list. Providers commented that these lists are often difficult and time-intensive to maintain due to constant staff turnover and shifting program capacity, eligibility criteria, and waitlists.

Providers' Recommendations

1. Funding: Establish long-term, bilingual case management support.

- Providers recommended increasing funding for case management roles focused on long-term navigation – allowing case management support to continue beyond initial intake or crisis response and permitting relationships and trust to develop over time.

Spotlight: Canal Alliance Opportunities for Youth Project

Canal Alliance's Opportunities for Youth (OFY) project supports a cohort of unaccompanied immigrant youth and focuses on providing the direct services that youth need to build networks of support. The OFY team provides programming in four key areas: individual and family case management, family reunification, mentorship, and community building. Canal Alliance also facilitates reunification groups that focus on the relationship between newly arrived youth and their families.¹⁹

2. Funding: Invest in bilingual staff and cross-cultural training across all service sectors.

- Providers recommended increasing the number of bilingual and bicultural staff across all systems that serve newcomer youth – schools, health care, social services, and community organizations – and creating incentives to retain bilingual staff.
- Providers urged systems to invest in culturally specific outreach that can reach youth and families who may not access traditional systems, and to prioritize hiring individuals who can communicate in Indigenous languages to address major accessibility gaps.

3. Integrated supports: Strengthen cross-system service coordination.

- Providers proposed building a centralized database or resource directory that is regularly updated to help social workers and case managers make accurate referrals.
- Providers recommended funding regular coordination and collaboration between schools, community organizations, and social service providers to ensure newcomer youth receive consistent and comprehensive support.
- Providers suggested creating coordinated referral systems so that youth can be easily

"One of the big things we try and do here is do our best to promote peer groups as a best practice intervention. Mutual aid is so important with this population. When kids get here and they're having a hard time – they're like, fuck, this is me. I'm the one who's messed up and can't do this. But then when they're in a group, and they hear like - everybody's having a hard time reunifying with their mom or their siblings, or finding an attorney, or learning English, or making rent ... they realize they're not alone. It's just so powerful for them to talk to each other."

– School-based Provider, San Francisco County

Building Belonging, Honoring Strength, Imagining Futures

Newcomer youths' stories highlight not only the barriers they face but also the resilience, hope, and strong sense of identity that carry them forward. In our focus groups, youth described finding community in the U.S. – drawing strength from peers, family, and supportive adults – and feeling motivated to pursue their personal, educational, and professional dreams.

“We have to remember that these kids got here without us, which means they are full of resources, abilities, capacities, dreams, hopes. We have to partner with that space of their lives. Yes, they have trauma. But also - how do we elevate all of their strengths, all of their abilities? How do we partner with their dreams? And treat them with that type of dignity that they should have?”

– Social Service Provider, Alameda County

Community

Newcomer youth found community through people, places, and shared experiences. Many described finding community “with their people” – family members, friends, and others from their country of origin – who share their collective struggle and help each other survive and succeed. Youth also found comfort in physical spaces that felt welcoming, such as schools, churches, and restaurants or stores run by people from their home countries. Beyond places and people, youth described community as a shared feeling – of strength, unity, humility, perseverance, and mutual trust – that sustained them through their own individual challenges.

Strengths

Youth identified their strengths as resilience, adaptability, and work ethic. Many highlighted the significant challenges they had overcome – including learning English, balancing school with work responsibilities, and emotional difficulty of adapting to a new culture – as evidence of their resilience. Some youth expressed pride in working from a young age and in their ability to persevere despite systemic and social barriers. Youth wanted people to understand that they must work harder than peers born in the U.S. to achieve the same opportunities, and that they face the dual challenge of adapting to a new culture and navigating systems not designed for them, all while maintaining deep roots in their countries of origin.

Dreams

Youth shared dreams centered around education, work, and family. Many aspired to finish high school, attend college, and pursue a profession. For some, dreams of education and work were closely tied to family responsibilities such as financially supporting parents and children, reuniting with loved ones, or making their families proud. Youth also expressed a longing for stability and safety – voicing dreams of owning a home and living a peaceful life.

"I want to be a great architect."

"I want to be a soldier to save lives."

"I want to be a psychologist and have a family one day."

"I'd like to be an engineer of plants."

"I want to be an English teacher for children that have learning disabilities."

"I want to be a flight attendant."

"I want to be a doctor."

– Newcomer Youth, Middle School, Marin County



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Conclusion

Across focus groups and interviews, newcomer youth and providers shared overlapping priorities for strengthening supports in the Bay Area. Even in a region with strong schools, community-based organizations, and deeply committed individuals, many newcomer youth continue to experience significant challenges. Youth and providers' primary recommendations recognize that these challenges are interconnected – spanning education, legal status, work, housing, and mental health – and require coordinated solutions, including the following:

1. Strengthen integrated, cross-system service coordination.

Newcomer youth and service providers alike stressed that fragmented systems often fail to meet the interconnected needs of youth navigating school, work, housing, and immigration challenges.

Youth consistently described the difficulty of managing different agencies and supports without guidance or coordination – and how having a newcomer center at school or a case manager makes a significant difference in their ability to actually access services.

Providers across all sectors called for “integrated supports” – coordinated approaches that bring together education, legal, health, and social service systems – to reduce duplication of efforts, close service gaps, and make it easier for youth to access comprehensive services.

Providers also noted that this recommendation requires sustained investment into structural solutions, such as data-sharing systems, interagency partnerships, and funding streams that promote collaboration rather than siloed service delivery.

2. Expand and fund legal representation and social case management supports.

Youth and providers stressed the critical importance of increasing access to attorneys and legal services, and to fund holistic legal models that connect youth to social and educational supports.

Across focus groups, legal access emerged as the primary and foundational need for newcomer youth. Youth described how uncertainty about their immigration status affected every aspect of their lives – from their ability to work and attend school to their sense of safety and belonging. Youth called for more available immigration attorneys in general, as well as more partnerships between schools and immigration lawyers so that youth could find trusted legal representation.

Providers echoed and expanded upon these recommendations, emphasizing the importance of funding holistic legal representation models, such as the Children's Holistic Immigration Representation Project (CHIRP), as well as social supportive services models, like the Opportunities for Youth (OFY) program. Providers noted that sustaining and scaling these supports would not only help youth secure stability in their immigration cases but also improve their safety, well-being, and ability to fully participate in school and community life.

3. Increase investment in peer programming and community-building.

Both youth and providers highlighted the power of peer programming as a means of building connection, belonging, and healing – and countering the isolation and cultural dislocation that many youth experience upon their arrival to the U.S.

Youth described peer counseling groups, shared newcomer classes, and community-based activities as vital spaces where they could form friendships, share experiences, improve their mental health, and regain a sense of confidence and normalcy.

Providers likewise emphasized the importance of investing in peer mentorship, recreation programs, and community-building initiatives within schools and youth-serving organizations, highlighting their role in fostering youth empowerment and leadership. Providers noted that expanding such programs statewide – and ensuring that programs are linguistically and culturally responsive – would require stable funding and integration into schools and community-based organizations.

4. Position schools as hubs of comprehensive services for newcomer youth.

Schools are often the first and most consistent point of community contact for newcomer youth and their families after their arrival to the U.S., making them a natural site for support. Both youth and providers emphasized that when schools can serve as “one-stop shops” – supplementing academic instruction with legal, mental health, medical, housing, and social services navigation – students are better able to learn and thrive.

Youth expressed deep appreciation for the navigation and service support offered by newcomer centers and school coordinators, especially since many of their caregivers were unfamiliar with U.S. systems and unable to provide that guidance. Some shared that having access to these supports within their schools made it far more likely they would connect with and benefit from needed services.

Providers likewise explained that establishing schools as service hubs helps ensure that newcomer families can access critical resources in a trusted environment, reducing transportation, language, and system barriers that often prevent engagement. Providers described the vital support from different strands of funding, including the CalNEW program and the Community Schools Partnership Program, in building these multi-disciplinary models of support. Providers noted that these models require sustained investment in newcomer-specific support, bilingual staff, and cross-sector partnerships between school districts, counties, and community-based organizations to succeed.

5. Create flexible educational pathways to support newcomer student engagement.

Work was a consistent theme across youth and provider discussions, reflecting both the financial responsibilities newcomer youth shoulder and their desire to contribute to their families and futures. Many youth suggested more flexible academic options – such as adjusted class schedules, virtual learning opportunities, and dedicated time during the school day to complete assignments – could help them stay in school while working.

Providers echoed these recommendations, noting that schools could establish reduced-credit and flexible-hour programs that make graduation attainable for students who must work. Providers also emphasized the importance of connecting youth to Career Technical Education (CTE) and vocational pathways that provide practical skills and safe, supervised work experiences.

Taken together, these recommendations from newcomer youth and providers reveal the urgent need for long-term, coordinated investments in newcomer youth and the systems that serve them in the Bay Area.

Expanding legal and social supports, strengthening schools as service hubs, investing in peer and community programming, and creating flexible educational and employment pathways should not be isolated strategies but interconnected pieces of a comprehensive approach to supporting newcomer youths' ability to thrive and succeed.



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Endnotes

¹See Cal. Educ. Code §§51225.1, 51225.2, 60811.8.

²See Cal. Educ. Code §§51225.1, 51225.2, 60811.8.

³See, e.g. California Department of Education, *Newcomer Students*, <https://www.cde.ca.gov/sp/ml/newcomerstudnts.asp>.

⁴Sam Finn, *Newcomer Education in California*, Policy Analysis for California Education, May 2023, <https://edpolicyinca.org/publications/newcomer-education-california>.

⁵See California Department of Social Services, *California Newcomer Education and Well-Being*, <https://www.cdss.ca.gov/inforesources/refugees/programs-and-info/youth-initiatives/calnew>.

⁶ See California Department of Social Services, *Opportunities for Youth*, <https://www.cdss.ca.gov/inforesources/cdss-programs/refugees/youth-initiatives/opportunities-for-youth>.

⁷Kids in Need of Defense, *Opportunities for Youth*, December 2023, https://supportkind.org/wp-content/uploads/2023/12/23_OFY-Convening-Summary-v2.pdf.

⁸ See California Department of Social Services, *Opportunities for Youth*, <https://www.cdss.ca.gov/inforesources/cdss-programs/refugees/youth-initiatives/opportunities-for-youth>.

⁹See John Burton Advocates for Youth, *2022-2023 California State Budget: Key Child Welfare and Youth Homelessness Investments*, <https://jbay.org/wp-content/uploads/2022/07/2022-23-Budget-Table-.pdf>.

¹⁰See Acacia Center for Justice, *Children's Holistic Immigration Representation Project (CHIRP) Summary*, <https://acaciajustice.org/chirp/>.

¹¹California State Budget and Fiscal Review Committee, Subcommittee No. 3 on Health and Human Services, *Agenda*, March 2025, <https://sbud.senate.ca.gov/system/files/2025-03/03.20.2025-cdss-housing-immigration-adult-programs-licensing-agenda.pdf>.

¹²The Children's Partnership, *Some Wins, Many Losses in State Budget for Youngest Californians*, July 2025, <https://childrenspartnership.org/news/some-wins-many-losses-in-state-budget-for-youngest-californians/>.

¹³ See California Department of Social Services, *Youth Legal Services*, <https://cdss.ca.gov/inforesources/immigration/unaccompanied-undocumented-minors>.

¹⁴*Id.*

¹⁵Immigrant Legal Defense, <https://www.ild.org/>.

¹⁶See University of California San Francisco, Latino Mental Health Research Program, *Fuerte Program*, <https://latinomentalhealth.ucsf.edu/fuerte-program-0>; University of California San Francisco, Clinical Trials, *Fuerte Program for Newcomer Immigrant Youth*, <https://clinicaltrials.ucsf.edu/trial/NCT04156373>.

¹⁷Soccer Without Borders: Bay Area, <https://www.soccerwithoutborders.org/bay-area>.

¹⁸See Mission Action, *Stay Over Program*, <https://www.missionaction.org/our-work/housing-shelter/>; Potrero View, *Homeless Families to be Sheltered at Downtown High School*, June 2025, <https://www.potreroview.net/homeless-families-to-be-sheltered-at-downtown-high-school/>.

¹⁹See Canal Alliance, 2024 Annual Report, <https://www.canalalliance.org/2024-annual-report/>; Marin Health & Human Services, *Championing Newcomer Success: Best Practices & Approaches*, https://prevention.marinbhhs.org/sites/default/files/2021-12/Championing_Newcomer_Success.pdf.

Appendix: Summary of Recommendations

	Youth	Providers
Education	Focus Groups • Provide teachers with more resources to support newcomer youth. • Peer programming: Build community through newcomer classes and programming. • Create flexible academic options for youth that need to work. CalNEW Newcomer Youth Leadership Group • Develop mentorship programs to help provide guidance, connection, and support in navigating school and community life. • Create inclusive extracurricular activities, peer support groups, and targeted mental health services to promote connection, belonging, and emotional well-being. • Increase educational mentorship and access to career, financial, and educational information to support future success. • Create a Statewide Newcomer Leadership Council.	• Strengthen enrollment support and access for newcomer youth and families. • Build welcoming, trust-based school environments. • School hubs: Offer holistic, one-stop school-based services. • Integrated supports: Strengthen cross-system service coordination. • Strengthen supports for newcomer students' well-being and mental health. • Invest in newcomer curriculum and staff support. • Expand flexible academic pathways to support newcomer student engagement. • Invest in post-graduation guidance for newcomer students.
Legal	Focus Groups • Make more attorneys and legal support available. • Create more partnerships between schools and immigration attorneys. • Provide youth with legal information guides.	• Funding: Expand access to legal representation for all immigrant children. • Funding: Invest in holistic representation models that integrate legal and social services. • Integrated supports: Strengthen cross-system coordination and education. • Funding: Expand federal, state, and local-level financial support for newcomer youth. • Federal reforms: Improve immigration policies and practices. • Integrated supports: Strengthen cross-system service coordination.

	Youth	Providers
Work	Focus Groups - Develop targeted job training programs for newcomer youth. - Expand access to work authorization for newcomer youth. - Ensure youth understand and can exercise their employment rights.	- Funding: Expand federal, state, and local-level financial support for newcomer youth. - Expand pathways to safe and legal work opportunities. - School hubs: Offer comprehensive school-based services. - Peer programming: Invest in peer mentorship and recreation programs. - Restructure state system responses and services for newcomer youth.
Mental Health	Focus Groups - Recognize the activities that improve your mood and make time for them when you're feeling down. - Find community supports.	- School hubs: Build welcoming, trust-based school environments and offer comprehensive school-based services. - Peer programming: Invest in peer mentorship and community programming. - Funding: Invest in long-term, bilingual mental health and case management services. - Integrated supports: Strengthen cross-system service coordination. - Develop and sustain effective supports for newcomer caregivers. - Federal reforms: Improve immigration policies and practices.
Housing	Focus Groups - Rely on community support. - Ask school or homeless shelter staff for help.	- Funding: Expand federal, state, and local-level financial support to ensure housing access for newcomer youth. - Design and sustain high-quality housing for newcomer youth. - Integrated supports: Strengthen cross-system service coordination. - Reframe the narrative on housing and resource allocation.
Social Services	Focus Groups - Increase access to community navigators. - Strengthen community-based connections.	- Funding: Establish long-term, bilingual case management support. - Funding: Invest in bilingual staff and cross-cultural training across all service sectors. - Integrated supports: Strengthen cross-system service coordination.



[YOUTHLAW.ORG](https://youthlaw.org)