



**Testimony to the New York City Council City Council
Committee on Consumer and Worker Protection
Intro 408 & Intro 431**

May 6th, 2025

Good afternoon. My name is Nick Aquino, and I am a Staff Attorney with the Microenterprise Project at Volunteers of Legal Service (VOLS). Thank you to Chair Menin and the members of the Committee on Consumer and Worker Protection for the opportunity to testify today in support of Intros 408 and 431.

VOLS is a legal services nonprofit founded in 1984, dedicated to bridging the justice gap through pro bono legal services. Our Microenterprise Project helps entrepreneurs access free, high-quality transactional legal services. We assist clients with entity formation, contracts, and compliance with regulations, including those affecting street vendors. We partner with community-based organizations and City government, particularly Small Business Services (SBS), to connect with clients. Many of our clients are immigrants, veterans, and women entrepreneurs seeking to operate their businesses legally and with long-term success.

The entrepreneurs we support strive to run their businesses lawfully. But for aspiring street vendors, the path to compliance is often impossible, not because they refuse to comply, but because the current permitting system is broken. In nearly every case, we must tell clients that they cannot legally vend, despite their readiness to contribute to the local economy.

One of our clients, a disabled veteran in his 60s, has been on the waiting list for years. Although veterans are supposed to have some preference under the current system, the reality is that even with this benefit, he has been unable to secure a permit to run a food cart. His story is not unique. Over 75% of mobile food vendors and 37% of general vendors operate without a license, not by choice, but because the system provides no viable path to obtaining one.

We urge the Council to pass Intro 431, which addresses this inequity by expanding access to permits and ending arbitrary caps that keep thousands of vendors in legal limbo. This bill would bring order to the system while allowing the City's smallest businesses to thrive. It ensures that vendors are subject to siting and health regulations, just like any other business, while removing barriers to entry that currently exclude so many.

But access alone is not enough. Even when rare opportunities to apply for permits arise, vendors frequently lack the support to successfully complete the process. One of my clients, after years on the waitlist, was finally given the chance to apply. Due to a minor misunderstanding in the application process, he was denied and pushed to the back of the line



again. His dreams of financial independence and serving food to his community are delayed because of the broken regulatory scheme.

That is why Intro 408 is equally critical. It would create an Office of Street Vendor Services within SBS to provide vital education, outreach, and compliance support. While enforcement is currently carried out by five separate agencies, no agency is tasked with helping vendors succeed or comply. That must change. With proper training and resources, vendors can be fully integrated into the city's small business ecosystem.

Passing both Intros 408 and 431 would also advance gender and immigrant justice. Nearly half of street vendors are women, yet only 27% of mobile food vendor permits and 14% of general vendor licenses are held by women. Many vendors are immigrants, and current enforcement-focused approaches, particularly involving the NYPD, expose them to unnecessary risk of detention or deportation. Adopting a supportive regulatory framework would promote equality and safety for women and immigrant vendors, ensuring that the city's policies align with its commitment to fairness and protection for all.

These reforms would also benefit the City financially. Demand for permits is overwhelming, waitlists total nearly 20,000. According to the Independent Budget Office, expanding access to vendor licenses could generate \$59 million in net revenue, while improving compliance and safety on our sidewalks.

Street vendors are not the problem, they are part of the solution. They bring diversity, entrepreneurship, and vitality to our neighborhoods. Our laws should reflect that reality.

Thank you for the opportunity to submit this testimony. On behalf of myself and Volunteers of Legal Service, we urge the Council to pass Intros 408 and 431 to create a fair, supportive, and inclusive system for street vendors across New York City.