NEW YORK (AP) — New York City has created what advocates say is the nation's first system of public defenders for poor immigrants facing deportation.

The New York Immigrant Family Unity Project will cover all eligible immigrant city residents detained in the system and appearing in immigration courts in New York City or the New Jersey cities of Elizabeth and Newark.

Lawmakers approved $4.9 million for the initiative as part of the $75 billion budget passed early Thursday for the fiscal year which starts July 1.

Immigration law is incredibly complex, and it is exceedingly difficult for immigrants to succeed in making a case for themselves — even if they have legal grounds for one — if they don't have an attorney, said Oren Root, of the Vera Institute of Justice, which is coordinating and overseeing the project. He said data showed immigrants without attorneys won their cases about 3 percent of the time, while those with attorneys were much more likely to be successful.

"The thought that they can go up against trained government lawyers and have any chance to win their cases is just a pipe dream," said Root, director of the institute's Center on Immigration and Justice.

The point is fairness, he said, and "you can't have fair proceedings without persons being represented."

That the program is starting in New York City, with its strong immigrant history and large immigrant population, along with a liberal mayor and City Council, isn't particularly surprising.

"This is a municipality taking charge of what it believes justice looks like in these courts for these residents," said City Councilmember Carlos Menchaca.

Root said organizations in cities like Boston, Chicago, Los Angeles and San Francisco were also looking into similar initiatives.

But ultimately, he said, the hope was that the federal government would start paying for counsel.

"Ultimately this cannot be solved nationwide jurisdiction by jurisdiction," he said.

While the criminal justice system has a guaranteed right to representation, that is not the case in civil proceedings like immigration cases.

The initiative started last year as a pilot. The pilot program had enough funds to take on 190 clients, some whose cases are still pending. Root said that by the end of May, 10 cases had been concluded with the immigrant being determined to have the right to stay in the United States.

Other cases have ended with immigrants being deported because they didn't have the legal grounds to stay, but even they benefited from the presence of an attorney, said Andrea Saenz of the Immigration Justice Clinic at Benjamin Cardozo School of Law.

Attorneys help immigrants "navigate even that part with dignity," she said.

The new funds are expected to cover at least 1,300 new clients, Saenz said. The attorneys come from public defender organizations that already work in the city.