



## Seven Years Empowering the Immigrant Community

# Peer Support: An Emotional Refuge for Those Seeking a New Beginning in the U.S.

Since 2018, Peer Support (PSP), a program by Venezuelans and Immigrants Aid (VIA), has become much more than an emotional support space. It's now a community built on care, listening, and hope for hundreds of people who have migrated to the United States.

On May 30, 2025, at St. Paul & St. Andrew United Methodist Church in Manhattan, VIA celebrated PSP's seventh anniversary by giving voice to the people who know its impact firsthand: the immigrant community. The stories shared during the event reflected loss, challenges, and resilience—but most of all, a strong sense of community.

"I was going through the emotional pain of migration and the group helped me move forward," said Arlen, who arrived in 2019 and now lives in the Bronx. Like her, many attendees spoke about the emotional relief that came from simply talking with others who had experienced the same journey. For many, that connection became a vital source of strength.

### Listening, Sharing, Healing: What the Numbers Say

Over these seven years, PSP has provided emotional support to more than 1,500 migrants. Data gathered from a recent participant survey offers deeper insight into the program's real impact. For example, 23.7% of respondents said that the greatest support they received was emotional comfort during moments of deep loneliness. This was followed by those who were coping with migration grief (10.5%) or anxiety (7.9%), as well as those who simply needed someone to listen (7.9%). These numbers highlight what lies at the heart of PSP: being present and offering a listening ear during times of crisis.

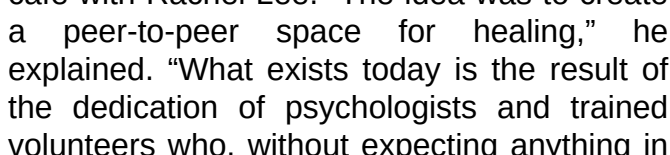
The main challenges facing participants were also clear. Language barriers topped the list (12.5%), followed by the high cost of living and struggles with rent, and the need for affordable or free legal assistance (7.5%). Lack of access to fair employment opportunities (5%) was also a key concern. These numbers paint a picture of the realities many migrants face while trying to adapt and rebuild their lives in the U.S., reinforcing why VIA's work remains essential.

When asked about the most helpful services, 17.5% of respondents said that even though they hadn't formally participated in PSP, they had benefited from VIA's publicly available resources. Others pointed to in-person talks and workshops (10%), virtual support groups

(7.5%), and the WhatsApp support network. This shows that the program's multichannel approach—offering in-person, virtual, and on-demand support—has successfully reached those most in need. Liliana Torella, one of the program's coordinators, explained, "Our goal is for PSP to keep growing, which is why we're actively seeking partnerships and resources from organizations with similar missions."

### Words that Inspire

During the event, Dr Rachel Lee, creator of the program, reflected on PSP's original mission. She said, "I'm so happy to be with you, celebrating seven years of PSP. Thanks to Niurka, Héctor, and Liliana for all the joint work in creating and sustaining this program. This is exactly what we talked about from the beginning: the need to recreate a sense of community here, to offer support, and to build a space where people feel they belong. I'm thrilled to see this family thriving—and it's more important now than ever."



Rachel Lee PhD

Héctor Arguinzones, co-founder and co-director of VIA, also recalled how it all started in 2018 with a conversation at a Manhattan café with Rachel Lee. "The idea was to create a peer-to-peer space for healing," he explained. "What exists today is the result of the dedication of psychologists and trained volunteers who, without expecting anything in return, have provided emotional support to other migrants. That solidarity is the heart of this program."

Niurka Meléndez, also co-founder and co-director of VIA, emphasized the team's consistency, especially since the start of the pandemic. "We haven't stopped," she said. "So far, we've held more than 90 group sessions and 39 workshops on migration grief and resilience. PSP is also available 24/7 through our WhatsApp line."

### A Commitment That Keeps Growing

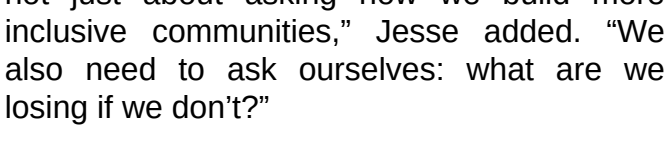
Seven years later, VIA remains committed to everyone who has found comfort and support through this program. Because migration doesn't end upon arrival—and healing hurts less when done in community.

## VIA's Voice Resonates in Detroit at the WES National Convening

The work we do at Venezuelans and Immigrants Aid (VIA) continues to cross borders and gain visibility in decision-making and collaboration spaces at the national level. On Monday, May 19, VIA was invited to participate in the National Convening organized by World Education Services (WES), held in Detroit. The full-day event brought together leaders, researchers, and partner organizations from across the country to discuss economic inclusion, immigrant leadership, and strategies to strengthen immigrant integration into the U.S. workforce.

The invitation was not just a recognition of VIA's ongoing work—it was also an opportunity to bring our community's voice into the national conversation. Representing VIA was Jesse Rylander, our Communications Coordinator, who played an active role throughout the day and was selected as one of the closing plenary speakers, sharing the stage with leaders from national organizations.

**A Space for Building Alliances: The Global Talent Leadership Network (GLTN) Meeting** The day began with a dedicated working session for members of the Global Talent Leadership Network (GLTN), a select group of organizations across different states leading initiatives for immigrant inclusion—VIA among them.



Members of the GLTN

Another workshop focused on how to respond to the challenges of today's political and economic climate, highlighting the need for messaging that resonates not just within our communities but also with business leaders and policymakers. Conversations centered on employer partnerships, public awareness campaigns, and strategies to measure the real impact of inclusion efforts.

### VIA's Voice at the Closing Plenary

The most meaningful moment of the day came during the closing plenary session, where Jesse represented VIA as one of three invited panelists. Speaking before dozens of national leaders, Jesse shared reflections and takeaways from the event.

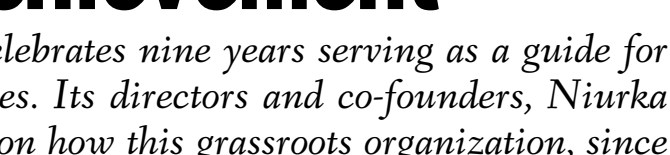
"One of the biggest things I'm taking home is that we're not alone in facing the challenges of migration," Jesse said during the discussion. "Seeing so many organizations working toward the same goal gives us hope and motivates us to keep going."

When asked how VIA plans to apply these insights, Jesse was clear: "We're going to look for new strategies to better serve our community, adapting to the changes ahead and seeing every challenge as an opportunity. We also want to strengthen our partnerships and learn from what others are already doing well."

### A Milestone Moment for VIA

VIA's participation in this national convening is another sign that our work is resonating beyond New York. Being in spaces like the WES Convening gives us a chance not only to learn and build networks, but also to raise visibility for the needs of our community and the solutions we're building together.

We'll continue raising our voice—and the voices of those we serve—because when our community moves forward, we all move forward.

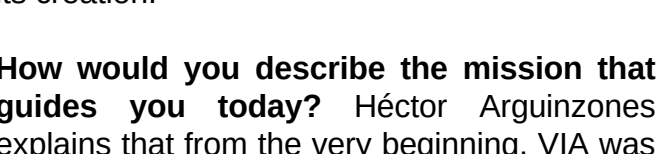


Several key ideas emerged from this event session

"The morning exercise was incredibly powerful," Jesse said. "We were asked to draw two hands. On one hand, we captured the history of our organization, and on the other, how we've connected with WES. It made us reflect on the impact we've had, but also on how much work lies ahead."

Several key ideas emerged from this session, including the importance of adapting leadership models to fit the realities of each community, strengthening local coalitions, and reshaping the narrative around migration. "It's not just about asking how we build more inclusive communities," Jesse added. "We also need to ask ourselves: what are we losing if we don't?"

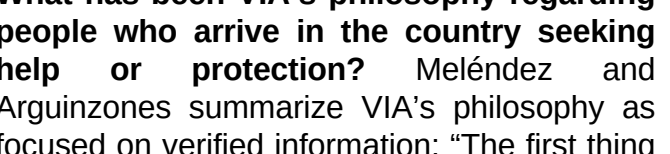
**Proven Models and Strategies for the Future** Throughout the day, participants attended workshops showcasing successful programs from other states—such as fast-track certification pathways for immigrant professionals and initiatives that link English language learning directly to job opportunities. "One thing that stood out to me was that we don't need to reinvent the wheel," Jesse noted. "There are solutions already working that we can adapt to our reality in New York."



The group made powerful exercises

"Your human rights travel with you. Because of your dignity and simply because you are a person, they must be recognized." With these words, Cristina Córdia, Advocacy Coordinator at Centro de Justicia y Paz (Cepaz), opened one of the most powerful moments of the recent virtual conversation titled "Your Identity, Your Strength: Rediscovering Ourselves Along the Migrant Journey," organized by Venezuelans and Immigrants Aid (VIA) as part of its Peer Support Program (PSP).

The event, streamed live on YouTube and Instagram, was moderated by Niurka Meléndez, VIA's Co-Executive Director, alongside psychologist Liliana Torella, coordinator of the PSP. Special guests Beatriz Borges, Executive Director of Cepaz, and Cristina Córdia shared key insights on the connection between identity, human rights, and the emotional wellbeing of migrants.



A tree to think about the journey as a migrant

**Copa** lo que estoy construyendo

**Tronco** lo que he construido desde que migré

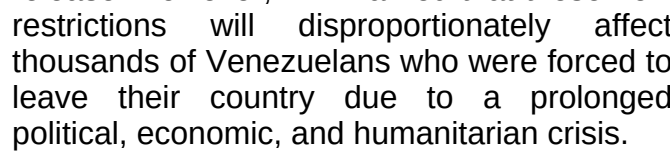
**Raíces** lo que traje conmigo al migrar

**DERECHOS** lo que sostiene todo

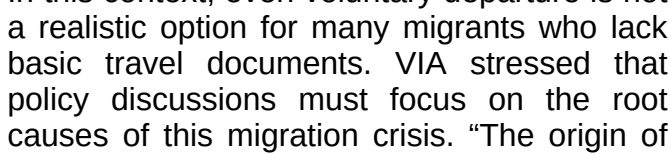
## VIA and Cepaz Join Forces for a New Community Conversation

# Identity and Rights: Keys to Migrant Emotional Wellbeing

*Venezuelans and Immigrants Aid (VIA) celebrates nine years serving as a guide for the migrant community in the United States. Its directors and co-founders, Niurka Meléndez and Héctor Arguinzones, reflect on how this grassroots organization, since its founding in 2016, has maintained its commitment as a guiding and responsible entity for those seeking a better future in this country.*



Niurka Meléndez



Héctor Arguinzones

The word *vía* is a Latin term meaning path, route, or method. That guiding principle, according to its directors, defines the work of Venezuelans and Immigrants Aid (VIA) since its creation.

**How would you describe the mission that guides you today?** Héctor Arguinzones explains that from the very beginning, VIA was "a connection, or route between the growing community [of migrants who needed] to find reliable information [so they could] make informed decisions." Niurka Meléndez adds: "Our mission is not to be the first to inform, [but rather] to inform responsibly with [content that is] truthful and, above all, verified [always relying] on official sources, all this without forgetting that human touch we consider in everything we do: the mental health of those who have been forced to flee."

**How have you sustained your operations over these 9 years?** Meléndez recalls that at the beginning, VIA was sustained by "the time of volunteers who, since 2016, have believed in us." She also highlights self-financing: "[At the start, Héctor and I] financed [the activities] to the extent of our economic possibilities. Many people and institutions contributed with in-kind donations so that our activities could take place." The directors point out that starting in 2020, VIA began receiving contributions from private entities such as World Education Services, Mariam Assefa Foundation, Robin Hood, New York City Community Trust, and through the International Rescue Committee (IRC).

**What has been VIA's philosophy regarding people who arrive in the country seeking help or protection?** Meléndez and Arguinzones summarize VIA's philosophy as focused on verified information: "The first thing here is how [to help the person or refer them to where they can] seek that help. In fact, migrants are referred to trustworthy, accredited, and responsible institutions and individuals." They emphasize that VIA operates based on values like honesty and transparency and that they do not serve large numbers of people just to inflate statistics but rather do so "in a dedicated and truth-based manner, [adapting] to circumstances, but always without losing focus: guiding without crossing the line of [providing] legal advice."

**How do you ensure that VIA's activities stay within the legal framework, especially on sensitive issues like migration?** Niurka clarifies: "We know our limitations. We are not

lawyers, and we repeat that at every event." She explains that VIA only provides "legal orientation [maintaining a] limit [and clarifying that this is not] a legal consultation, [or offering] legal advice, [but rather] guidance." She also highlights: "We do not mix any political-party issues within our organization."

Héctor adds that VIA also avoids religious or ideological discussions: "We don't allow there to be within the organization, or in any of our activities, controversies that have to do with religion or with [other] ideologies or ways of thinking."

**What do you think sets VIA apart from other organizations in this field?** Héctor states: "Our perspective as asylum seekers allows us to understand firsthand the needs of the community." Niurka emphasizes: "We are street-level action, not desk-based. We are a small organization, but with a big heart, very big in the desire to do things right. We understood the importance of speaking the language, knowing the immigration processes, integrating into communities, but above all, raising awareness about the need for an empathetic and resilient space that understands what it means to flee your country of origin."

**What challenges do you face working with migrant communities in the current climate?** Niurka identifies the main challenge: "Combating misinformation has been our biggest challenge since day one. Nowadays, fear, plus misinformation, is undoubtedly a challenge that affects everything." Héctor agrees: "Today we fight against collective panic, but we remain focused on providing timely guidance and truthful information."

**What has been VIA's greatest achievement so far?** Niurka puts it plainly: "VIA's credibility is our greatest achievement." She adds that VIA has created "a foundation of credibility that we have built [over] nine years." Héctor reinforces: "We've grown from [just] two people to over 20 regular volunteers."

**What message would you like to send to the community, your allies, and those who have supported you over the years?** Niurka invites the community to share what they've learned: "That is also being VIA." To allies and donors, Héctor says: "Thank you for your support, thank you for your trust. Every bit of help is truly important." And as the directors of this nonprofit organization, soon to celebrate its 9th anniversary, reflect: VIA does not walk alone, it walks with all of you.

**A Call for More Humane and Contextualized Responses**

VIA called on governments in receiving countries to adopt a more humane and context-driven approach when addressing Venezuelan migration. The organization also reaffirmed its commitment to the community. "To our Venezuelan brothers and sisters, both inside and outside the country, we reaffirm that VIA will always be a voice that defends you, a hand that supports you, and an organization that firmly believes in your dignity, your resilience, and your right to a safe, legal, and just life," the statement concluded. [Read the complete statement here.](#)

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