

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.

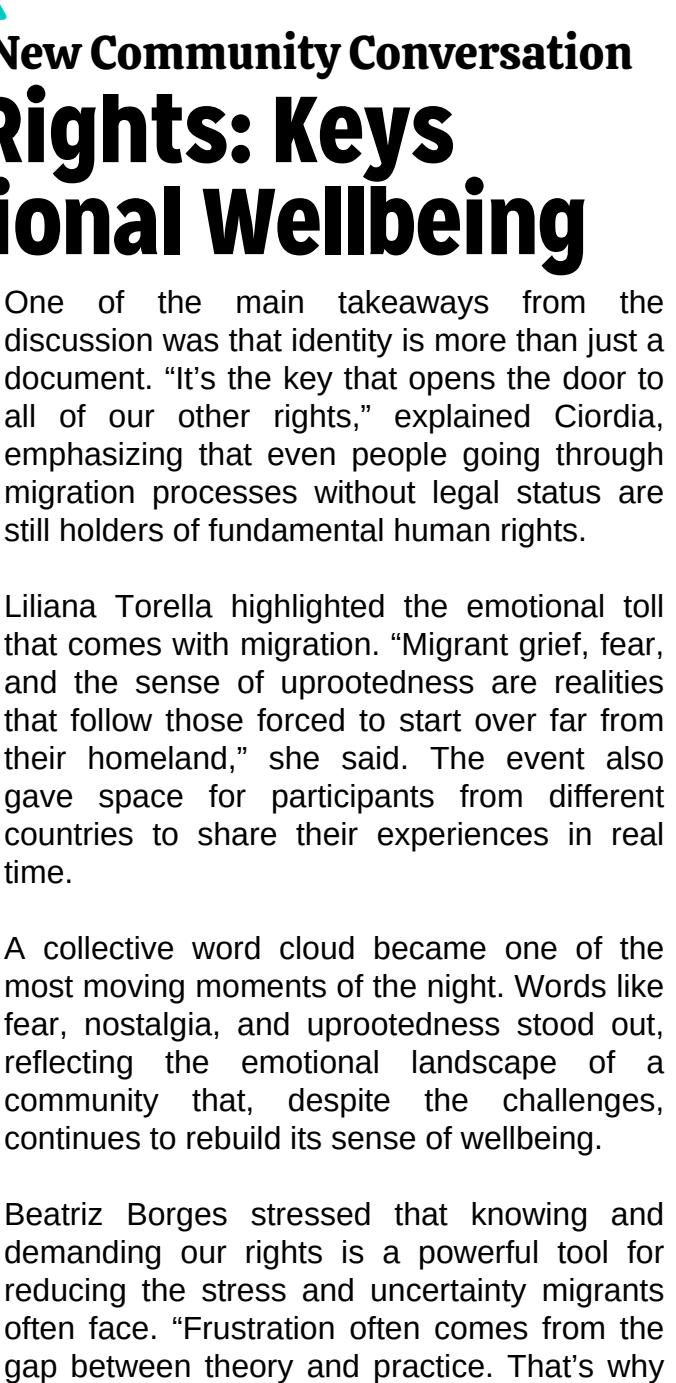
When asked about the most helpful services, 17.5% of respondents said that even though they hadn't formally participated in PSP, they had benefited from VIA's publicly available resources. Others pointed to in-person talks and workshops (10%), virtual support groups

(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

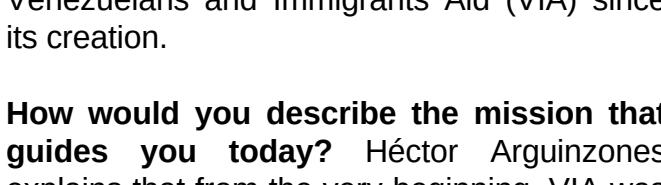
During the event, Dr. Rachel Lee, creator of the program, reflected on PSP's original mission. She said, "I'm so happy to be with you, celebrating seven years of PSP. Thanks to Niurka, Héctor, and Liliana for all the joint work in creating and sustaining this program. This is exactly what we talked about 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."

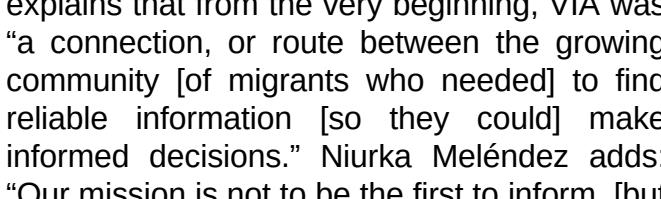

Rachel Lee, PhD
Hector Arguinones, co-founder and codirector of VIA, also recalled how it all started in 2018 with a conversation at a Manhattan café with Rachel Lee. "The idea was to create a peer-to-peer space for healing," he explained. "What exists today is the result of the dedication of psychologists 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 codirector 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.


Attendees participated in dynamics


The group made powerful exercises

"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, certification pathways for immigrant professionals, and initiatives to link English-language learners directly to job opportunities.

"One thing that stood out to me was that we're not reinventing the wheel," Jesse noted. "We can adapt to our reality in New York."

The organization reminded that Venezuela is currently facing the second largest humanitarian crisis in the world, after Syria.

"This is a complex humanitarian emergency," Jesse said. "The organization has been forced to flee, not because of a conventional war, but to destruction."

VIA and Cepaz Join Forces for a New Community Conversation

Identity and Rights: Keys to Migrant Emotional Wellbeing

The organization's Humanitarian Crisis Behind the Migration Flow report fully recognizes the right of every country to establish its own immigration and security policies. However, the organization stated in its official release, "VIA warned that these new restrictions will disproportionately affect those who were forced to flee, not because of a conventional war, but to destruction."

Concerns About Program Cancellations

VIA also expressed deep concern about the potential elimination of legal pathways like the Temporary Protected Status (TPS) program.

Both the safe organization emphasized that this should be strengthened, not canceled.

The organization also pointed to the growing number of small minority that are in the majority, is hard-working, law-abiding, and

purse education, or start business ventures. The word via is a Latin term meaning principle, according to its directors, defines the work of Venezuela and Immigrants Aid (VIA) since its creation.

How would you describe the mission that 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 to inform responsibly with truthfulness?

Niurka Meléndez, co-founder and codirector of VIA, said, "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."

What challenges do you face working with migrant communities? Niurka identifies the main challenge: "Combating misinformation has been our biggest challenge since day one. Nowadays, a challenge that affects everything."

Héctor agrees: "Today we fight against collective bias, that's why we're fighting for truth, for guidance, and for truth in information."

What message would you like to send to the community, your allies, and those who have supported you over the years? Niurka learned the importance of sharing what she learned: "Today is also being VIA. To allies and donors, that's also being VIA. For your trust, every bit of help is important."

What has been VIA's greatest achievement so far? Niurka put it plainly: "VIA's credibility is our greatest achievement."

Héctor adds that VIA has created a foundation of credibility over the years: "We have built [over] nine years."

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