

Laura Ferrer
Dominican Republic
Re: **SB 742 - Fair Recruitment and Transparency Act - SUPPORT**

February 18, 2020

Maryland Senate Finance Committee
Hearing - February 27, 2020

Dear Members of the Senate Finance Committee:

My name is Laura Ferrer. I am twenty-one years old, and I'm from the Dominican Republic. During the summer of 2019, I came to work in Maryland under the J-1 Summer Work Travel program. I worked in a variety of jobs -- hostess, playground attendant, and grocery stocker-- in Maryland's Eastern Shore. Today, I share my story today and support **SB 742** because the J-1 cultural exchange program needs to be studied and improved so our rights as workers and people are protected.

In the Dominican Republic, I had to pay recruitment and agency fees to be able to come to the United States under the J-1 program. My agency fees were USD \$1,800 to participate in the program. But I also had to pay a housing fee (\$250), a house deposit (\$250), my visa appointment (\$170), and flight (\$300 approximately). If I add everything, I ended up paying USD \$2,750. This is common for other program participants.

To be able to afford the program, I took out a loan of USD \$2,800, and is the reason why I ended up working a lot in the United States. I worked three jobs because I wasn't full time in any of them. I worked around 96 hours a week to pay off the loan. I worked three days in one job, two nights in another, and six days during the morning. I was paid \$10.10 USD on my six days, \$12 USD in my two days and \$11 USD in my three days job. I was supposed to be an ice cream server, but the position was already taken.

To save money on groceries and food, I went to the local church pantries. In Ocean City, there are several churches providing free food and meals for J-1 workers. They also provide toiletries and other basic necessities.

The housing I received during the 2019 season was my biggest regret. In my house, I lived with at least 40 other people. We had no windows-- the entire building was an old warehouse. I often had humidity in my room, and because of the amount of people, most of the common areas were dirty most of the time.

I also observed discrimination take place in the J-1 program. Men were given more work hours, which allowed them to make more money. Positions that women were capable of doing and paid more were often assigned solely to men. Administrative positions available were more likely to be given to women, even though women are as capable of carrying out those tasks.

I also personally experienced discrimination based on my national origin. They assumed that because of my Dominican nationality, I would be more disorganized or less diligent. The truth is that we were very responsible -- our own necessity [to make a living] forced us to be. I also observed discrimination based on physical appearance, regardless of our capacity to carry out tasks. The program is rife with racism-- most of the host/server jobs were given to those that fit the U.S. standards of beauty--straight blonde hair, blue eyes. I was lucky that I spoke English and was able to get a job as a server, but often that doesn't matter as long as you look a certain way.

I support SB 742 because my story is one of many, and these are issues that are commonly experienced by peers in the program. No one should have to pay such high fees for a cultural experience and then have little time to actually engage in it because we have to work multiple jobs to pay off the debt. We should have safe housing, and importantly, we should be treated with respect.

I ask legislators to vote YES on SB 742 because the J-1 program needs to be studied and improved for all that are being welcomed into the state of Maryland.

Sincerely,

Laura Ferrer