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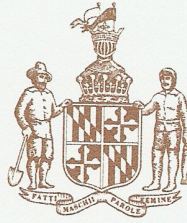
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House Bill 15 – Governor's Office of Immigrant Affairs

Testimony of Delegate Joseline A. Peña-Melnyk (Favorable)

Chairwoman McIntosh, Vice Chairman Chang, and members of the Appropriations Committee, I am pleased to present House Bill (HB) 15, which would create the Governor's Office of Immigrant Affairs.

We have all heard it said that America is a nation of immigrants. Likewise, Maryland is a state of immigrants. There are close to a million immigrants in our state, comprising 15% of our state's total population. The highest densities of immigrant populations are concentrated in Montgomery and Prince George's counties. Significant immigrant populations also are found in Anne Arundel, Howard, Baltimore, Frederick, Somerset, Washington, Charles, Talbot, Wicomico, and St. Mary's counties. Over the past two decades, more than 60% of our total population growth can be attributed to immigrants, which is significantly higher than the national average.

But we are not doing a good job integrating immigrants into Maryland and making them full members of our Maryland team. And that is not good for them or us. HB15 addresses this problem.

Immigrants contribute immensely to our economy. Maryland's immigrants comprise 18.5% of the total civilian labor force and pay billions of dollars in state and federal taxes; \$10.4 billion to be exact, as reported by the American Immigration Council. They are hard workers who value what our country has to offer. They know that here, more so than in other countries, the opportunities are bountiful.

According to the Small Business Administration, the business ownership rate is higher among immigrants than the US-born community. Immigrants also form businesses at a higher rate than non-immigrants. Immigrants bring with them their passions, expertise, cultures, and desire to be accepted in our community. They hunger to belong and contribute.

Unfortunately, immigrants face barriers that make it harder to integrate them into "Team Maryland." They struggle to get a seat at the table and are underrepresented in decision-making and leadership roles. And their access to important services such as education, healthcare and housing makes it more difficult for them to integrate and become fully contributing members of our society.

HB15 addresses these problems by establishing a permanent position in the Governor's Office to address immigrant issues. The Office would be charged with increasing access to English learning, assist and provide guidance in connection with the naturalization process, and connect immigrants to business resources, employment referral programs, and other workforce development programs. In addition, the Office would not be working alone or reinventing the wheel but would instead coordinate a network of neighborhood-based opportunity centers that provide immigration services to immigrants.

We all benefit when new arrivals to our state learn our language and our culture, and rapidly become fully contributing members of our society. That does not happen by accident. It happens with coordinated policies and resources wisely targeted where needs are greatest. We have a duty to all Marylanders to ensure that good policy is adopted, and sufficient resources are directed to the success of Maryland's immigrant community.

It is unjust for immigrants to face barriers and to work in the shadows, alienated from society. By providing culturally appropriate services, we can empower our immigrant population to achieve its potential. A reliable support system from the state, which oversees the well-being of this population, is a good start.

This bill will create a system where immigrants are better connected to employment opportunities and provided with the resources needed to achieve success in our society. Their fulfillment of the American dream starts with us.

Thank you for the opportunity to present House Bill 15. I respectfully request a favorable report.