



# Annapolis Immigration Justice Network

*Walking Alongside Our Immigrant Neighbors*

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TESTIMONY IN SUPPORT OF SB317

Office of the Attorney General - Right to Counsel in Immigration Proceedings  
Coordinator

TO: Chair Smith, Vice Chair Waldstreicher, and members of the the Judicial  
Proceedings Committee

FROM: Honorable Maria C. Matiella

My name is Maria Matiella and I am on the board of the Annapolis Immigration Justice Network, a grass roots, all volunteer organization serving residents of Anne Arundel County. Previously, I served as the Chief Financial Officer for the U.S. Department of Agriculture, Forest Service; the Assistant Chief Financial Officer for Accounting, U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development; and Senate-confirmed Assistant Secretary of the Army. I have also been a community organizer and Candidate for Congressional District 2, Arizona. I hold a B.A and an M.B.A. from the University of Arizona, and I was named the university of Arizona, College of Education Alum of the year in 2013. I, also, hold a Doctorate from George Washington University.

My husband was born in Mexico, of an U.S. Citizen father and Mexican mother. His family moved to the U.S.A. when he was nine years old and eventually, he became an officer in the United States Air Force. He served in Vietnam and retired as a Major. Fortunately, his mother was not deported, although it took her 30 years to become a citizen. Further, many of his Mexican-born relatives became productive, law-abiding citizens of the U.S. because they received amnesty by President Ronald Regan. In those times, immigration laws were designed to keep families together.



More recently, a friend of mine was born and raised in the U.S. by his U.S. Citizen father, but his mother was deported for illegally entering the U.S. My friend's mother was deported when my friend and his siblings were very young. Although heartsick because he was separated from his mother, my friend worked hard to earn scholarships, most recently for a PhD at the University of Oxford. Now, immigration laws have become heartless, resulting in breaking up families.

The immigrants I know, my relatives and my friends, have contributed so much to our Country. For this reason, I help immigrants stay in the U.S. I know immigrants are here to work hard, contribute, and help make this Country more productive. I also know it takes time and money to navigate our current complex, heartless immigration system. Simply stated, it takes a lawyer to successfully seek asylum.

Many, many immigrants are not allowed to stay in the U.S. even after fleeing life-threatening circumstances in their native country. Many immigrants with heart-wrenching stories of the brutality they suffered in their native countries are deported and not granted asylum. Sadly, in the process of deportation, immigrant families are ripped apart and immigrant workers are unfairly treated while awaiting court hearings. The immigration systems in the U.S. structurally prevents us from providing a safe haven to those who have suffered so much. The structure of immigration laws and courts in the U.S. ultimately denies immigrants a fair chance of successful asylum--it takes too long and it is too expensive to navigate the immigration system.

With time and money, many immigrants who were deported could have successfully navigated the U.S. immigration system and received asylum. But structural obstacles, embedded in the immigration system, and our racist culture deny immigrants access to time and money. The immigrants I've helped earn an average of \$10 hr, so it takes years to save for a lawyer. The structural obstacles immigrants face are complex immigration laws, tight time frames specified in the laws, and inability to earn fair wages.

Basically, a lawyer is needed to navigate our immigration system. Time and time again, in the Baltimore Immigration Courts, I've heard judges admonish immigrants for not having a lawyer. The Judge's first question is, "do you have a lawyer?" The immigrant, in poverty, mostly says "no". Even Judges know that those with the best lawyers get the most care and justice. National studies show that people with lawyers are 10.5 times more likely to win their immigration cases. However, the vast majority of immigrants from Central and South America cannot afford lawyers. Without lawyers, immigrants cannot navigate the immigration system, so they lose, and they get deported.



I strongly believe that immigrants should have a pathway to citizenship in the U.S. This pathway to citizenship must give immigrants the time and money to navigate the immigration system--it is the only humane, logical and economic solution.

SB 317 will provide immigrants the time, funds, and support needed to navigate the immigration system. If this country is sincere in its intent to grant asylum, it must break down the obstacles to citizenship, therefore, it must pass laws like SB 317.

Any pathway to citizenship must consider the economic reality of obtaining citizenship. SB 317 addresses the economic realities of establishing humane processes. SB 317 will give our immigrants a chance to get asylum, a chance to live.

Honorable Maria C. Matiella  
Former Assistant Secretary of the Army  
Financial Management and Comptroller