

SB 523 SUPPORT

Occupations and Professions – Licenses, Certificates, and Registration - Immigrants

Education, Health, and Environmental Affairs Committee

February 15th, 2022

Dear Chair Pinsky, and Members of the EHE Affairs Committee:

On behalf of CASA, and its more than 100,000 members residing in the state of Maryland, we would like to express our full **support for SB 523** as it seeks to prohibit restrictions that may bar any trained, qualified or otherwise eligible professional from obtaining a State issued occupational or professional license solely due to their current immigration status.

CASA is the Mid-Atlantic region's foremost immigrant advocacy and services organization, annually providing over 20,000 Maryland residents with a variety of services in employment, education, legal, health and social services case management and navigation. It is through our education and workforce development work in particular that we are made acutely aware of the inequities and barriers experienced by certain classes of immigrants in their journeys to better their educational and professional opportunities and outcomes. Thousands of CASA members who have graduated from our English for Speakers of Other Languages (ESOL) instruction courses, participated in our employment program or graduated from our vocational training courses have come to realize that despite holding certifications and/or licenses from their home country, improving their English proficiency, and even after graduating from any specialized or certified training in the US, they are not still not able to obtain a professional license in Maryland for which they would otherwise be qualified, due to their immigration status.

Certainly this is not an issue unique to Maryland. A 2019 study revealed that despite the fact that over 45% of recently arrived immigrants hold a bachelor's degree, over 2 million immigrants and refugees nationwide with degrees and professional work experience from their home countries are underemployed, largely working low wage jobs. This at a time when nationally, approximately 11 million jobs sit vacant. This is why 17 states have already passed legislation to allow non-citizens access to at least some number of professional licenses. While 5 states, including California, Illinois and New Jersey provide full access to undocumented immigrants to professional licenses, other states as varied as Utah, Arkansas, Nebraska and South Dakota have passed laws to allow access for non-citizens to certain professional

licenses. Such is the need for qualified workers to fill critical vacancies in industries such as finance, construction and especially healthcare. In Maryland in particular, the shortage of nurses has reached alarming levels due to COVID related burnout. Beyond nursing specifically, a cursory review of State Occupational Employment and Wage Estimates published by the US Bureau of Labor Statistics reveals that nearly 40% of all occupations listed in Maryland require some sort of professional license. This all points to a systemic barrier that artificially impedes the advancement of a critical part of our trained workforce, while simultaneously stunting the potential of a growing tax base.

Immigrant households in Maryland already contribute approximately \$12.2 Billion in taxes annually according to the New American Economy Research Fund, which also reports that more than 20% of Maryland's Foreign Born population holds a bachelor's degree and more than 21% of its Foreign-Born population holds a graduate degree, a rate that is higher than that found in the US Born population.

There is no doubt Maryland should be lauded for such efforts as making college more accessible for undocumented immigrants, beginning in 2011 through the Maryland DREAM ACT, through subsequent initiatives that this body has taken to improve upon on that initiative as well as the steps taken just last legislative session to allow undocumented tax payers access to the Earned Income and Child Tax Credits. Now, we ask this body to take the next logical step – unleash the earning and tax paying potential of all Maryland residents by allowing access to professional licenses for all trained and qualified individuals regardless of immigration status. Doing so would not only contribute to boosting the economy, but it would promote economic self-sufficiency within immigrant communities, reducing the need for tax credits and allow the state a greater return on the investment made in the education of immigrant youth.

We urge a favorable report on SB 523.

Respectfully,



George Escobar

Chief of Programs and Services