



**Chair Pinsky, Vice Chair Kagan, Members of the Education, Health, and Environmental Affairs Committee:**

Last week, I visited the Career Readiness Education Academy (CREA) evening program at Thomas Edison High School of Technology in Silver Spring, MD. The program serves students over the age of 18, who are unlikely to complete their academic requirements by the age of 21. Students in CREA receive GED preparation classes and specialize in a career pathway; with options ranging from HVAC contractor to cosmetology. Students in this program are predominantly Latino immigrants to the United States, some are undocumented.

The students who are part of this program spend their days working in restaurants, painting houses, or repairing cars. After a full day of work, they take the bus to Thomas Edison High School where they sit through hours of classes and training. The passion in those classrooms is palpable. It is their own drive, and the encouragement of their inspiring educators, that brings them back to the school every single day. This program is their ticket to good jobs, a fulfilling career, and economic prosperity. I met with a student in the nail tech program, who showed me with great pride how much she had learned over the course of her time in the class.

Students in the CREA program work diligently to complete their GED, and receive a professional certification for their selected industry. It is heartbreaking to know that because of discriminatory practices in our occupation licensure process, that some of these dedicated students will be ineligible to receive the authorization necessary to practice their desired profession. The same challenges apply to DACA recipients who dream of being teachers, those with temporary protected status who aspire to be attorneys, and the many highly-educated and dedicated Marylanders who remain undocumented yet want to serve their communities.

66% of DREAM scholars are pursuing a career that requires a license, including doctors, nurses, and lawyers. Over 130 professions in Maryland, including some of the professions CREA students aspire to, require a license. Without this license they are unable to advance in their careers, despite having diligently studied and spent years preparing. This is unfair and harmful to the state of our economy – especially as we face a drastic labor shortage.

Our hospitals are critically understaffed. Passage of this bill could create a pipeline for new dedicated and educated professionals to fully enter the labor force. We could ease the strain on hospitals as we continue to battle this pandemic and increase the mental health providers to address the mental health crisis in our state.

I urge the committee to report favorably on Senate Bill 523.

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