

Oliver Benzon Martinez
Dominican Republic
Re: **SB 742 - Fair Recruitment and Transparency Act - SUPPORT**

February 10, 2020

Maryland Senate Finance Committee
Hearing - February 27, 2020

Dear Members of the Senate Finance Committee:

My name is Oliver Benzon Martínez and I am from the Dominican Republic. In 2015, I traveled to the United States on a J-1 Summer Work Travel visa to Ocean City, Maryland. Thousands of students go year after year to work in Maryland on J-1 visas seeking to achieve what we call the “American Dream.” I am submitting this testimony in support of SB 742 because I want to protect other J-1 workers like me.

Before coming to Ocean City, I was excited to visit a new place and had high expectations for my summer job as a cook. I wanted to make enough money to send home to my family. To get the job that I wanted, I was required to pay \$1,500 to a recruiter agency here in the Dominican Republic. I understood that they would share that fee with my sponsor agency in Maryland. The recruitment agency advertised both in writing and verbally that they were interested in hiring men only to be cooks in restaurants.

When I arrived in Maryland, I felt deceived. The worksite was nowhere near ready to open. Most of my co-workers and I did not have enough money to pay our expenses. In those first two weeks, I had to ask my aunt for money just to be able to pay for food.

Although my contract was to work as a cook, I instead had to work in the construction and set-up of the restaurant. I cleaned, carried boxes and other heavy materials, moved kitchen equipment and furniture. After two weeks of hard manual labor, I was shocked when my supervisor paid me a very small percentage of the hours that I had worked. He just said that I could take or leave the money he was offering me.

Despite my best efforts, I had no support from my sponsor or the U.S. authorities in charge of the J-1 program. I felt alone and unable to get help. Since that summer, I have had problems with severe depression. It is very hard when you know that you have the proof of injustice in your hands and you cannot find help anywhere.

I know other J-1 workers who have experienced what I have or worse. They do not complain to the authorities because their sponsors or employers threaten to fire or deport them from the country.

I believe that foreigners deserve equal treatment and justice just as Americans do. I hope that recounting my experience will help Maryland senators, as SB 742 propose, to create a

workgroup to study the experiences of others J-1 international workers as I was and better protect them.

Thank you for your leadership on this important issue for guestworkers in Maryland.

Oliver Benzon Martinez