

Laura Atwood
Takoma Park Mobilization
Laura_a79@hotmail.com, 301-587-3876

**SB 850 - SUPPORT
CORRECTIONAL SERVICES - IMMIGRATION DETENTION -
PROHIBITION (DIGNITY NOT DETENTION ACT)**

Judicial Proceedings Committee
February 26, 2020

Dear Chair Smith and Members of the Judicial Proceedings Committee:

I am writing on behalf of Takoma Park Mobilization to urge your support of SB 850, Dignity Not Detention Act. Takoma Park Mobilization has 1831 members at last count (rather than getting tired and dwindling, we are growing in number and resolve). As an organization, our mission including working toward a just and equitable society that celebrates diversity; we work in partnership with community organizations who represent the most impacted, while standing with the least powerful among us.

Why do we care? All of us are volunteers (generally with jobs and families), and we have different histories to what motivates us to commit so much time and energy to this work. Yet a common underlying theme is our deep belief in shared humanity. I work in healthcare, as a home health physical therapist for homebound patients. (In a given day or week, I may work with an elderly patient with dementia who's a U.S. citizen but whose primary family caregiver is undocumented; a right-wing political pundit whose marriage relies heavily on shared beliefs; someone who escaped from Sierra Leone years ago and has built his own American dream here but remembers teenage friends who were shot next to him; and an elderly Russian Jewish man who can't remember where he is now but can tell in detail how he helped stop the Germans in WW2.) Each person is my patient; each person is struggling medically and is afraid; each person is a human being I need to connect with so I can do my job and help them. And when I turn on the news and look at someone, I instinctively see a person who could be my patient.

Political hearings and shared humanity: At the last state hearing I went to, I looked around the room at all the very different people with very different roles and views, and I mused about whether we have a single thing in common. I'd venture to say: We each want to be recognized and treated as human beings; we each want to be heard; we each want to make basic choices about how we live; and we each want to be recognized for our contributions (to our loved ones, to our communities however we define them, and to our society however we envision it).

SB 850 would stop immigration detention (public and private) in Maryland. How does this relate to Takoma Park Mobilization's core value of shared humanity? Among the most dehumanizing things you can do to someone is to lock them up. Privacy and basic choices (what to wear, what to eat, who to spend time with) are denied. Medical neglect, violence, and human rights violations are endemic. People who are detained can no longer provide for their families as

breadwinners and/or caregivers, and can no longer contribute to their communities as workers and volunteers (in churches, schools, community sports leagues, and more). And detention is a form of family separation; over 5 million U.S. citizen children live with at least one family member who is undocumented, and after a raid or arrest, the majority of children display multiple behavioral changes as their family is thrown into turmoil.

SB 850 is urgent; Maryland residents—immigrant and non-immigrant—cannot afford to wait for another session. Right now, a private company ICA (which has a terrible record at its Farmville, VA, facility), via consulting firm Keystone Consulting Group, has been negotiating with an economically devastated community on the Eastern shore to build Maryland's first-ever private detention facility, which would hold 600-800 people on civil immigration charges. The population of Sudlersville itself is about 400 people. At a recent town meeting, residents were overwhelmingly opposed to this project, but the town leaders stealthily pushed forward anyway. Opponents of the project are mobilizing, proponents are starting to bring in ugly stereotypes to justify the project, and there's just been expression of violence against an opponent. This is all unfolding these very days.

This town genuinely needs fiscal relief, and its residents have real pain; we as a society need to address rural economic conditions such that struggling communities have promising paths forward. This is not such a path: A huge detention center would fundamentally change the town's character, compete with other economic options (tourist and recreational development), very possibly fail to deliver on economic promise and instead bring fiscal woes (this has happened a number of times around the country), divide the community, endanger immigrants locally and statewide, and create a moral stain on our collective character by essentially trading lives for \$\$\$. Other states have moved to protect all their residents by stopping this, and Maryland needs to step forward as well.

At Takoma Park Mobilization, we see connections between immigration injustice and other types of social and racial injustice—injustice that we as a society should be moving away from, not toward. Maryland already took the ethically appropriate step of banning privately run incarceration in the criminal justice system; yet privately run detention for civil immigration violations is a loophole, and SB 850 would close that loophole. As a nation, we use incarceration far, far more than other countries; our per capita rate is greater than Russia's and China's combined, and we dwarf democracies in Western Europe and elsewhere. We have criminalized poverty in a number of ways. We have criminalized drug addiction (an approach that is finally shifting, as the opioid crisis has hit rural communities especially hard). And we have criminalized race itself, with particularly shameful statistics in Maryland. Migration is a fundamentally natural process; if you study the development of languages and maps of linguistic development—or study any number of ancient history disciplines—you see that as long as people have existed, people have moved around. Yet with confused and hateful rhetoric, and related policies, we as a society criminalize migration as well (not coincidentally, particularly migration by non-white people in poverty). A number of alternatives to detention exist, though each type needs its own examination; immigration detention is not inevitable, not necessary, and not humane. Maryland needs to recognize and reject this destructive trap.

We therefore urge a favorable report on SB 850.

Laura Atwood, Takoma Park Mobilization