

SB 317 – SUPPORT
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Office of the Attorney General – Right to Counsel in Immigration Proceedings Coordinator
Senate Judicial Proceedings Committee
January 27, 2021

Dear Chair Smith and Members of the Senate Judicial Proceedings Committee:

My name is Cristobal Gomez Villafranca and I am a resident of Baltimore, Maryland. As a former client of Capital Area Immigrants' Rights (CAIR) Coalition. I am writing to express my support for SB 317: Office of the Attorney General – Right to Counsel in Immigration Proceedings Coordinator.

I am the father of and primary provider for four children ages 19, 17, 13, and 12. I adopted the older two when I married my wife. All four children are U.S. citizens and so is my wife. We are part of a Pentecostal church. I have been going to that church for seven years. I help them with a lot of maintenance and with their events. I work in construction.

I have lived in the U.S. for 17 years. I came from Honduras. I left Honduras after Hurricane Mitch. My town was destroyed by the hurricane. I was left without a house and lost all of my money. It left our community vulnerable and gangs began to threaten us. The gang was taking advantage of my family. They tried to kill my grandmother and threatened to kill me.

I was detained by ICE in November 2019. I was detained for two months. It was a terrible experience. They were just waiting for me outside of my house. They had gotten my information from the DMV. My wife and daughters were there and they were crying as I was forced to the ground and taken away. Being detained took a terrible toll on my family. My daughters were struggling in school, my wife was depressed. It hurt my heart when they would come to visit me and see me locked up. They would cry the whole time.

My family was searching for a lawyer and our community in our church was helping us. A lawyer we found on our own turned us away and told us that our case was not worth pursuing. But the lawyers in CAIR Coalition did not turn me away, the lawyer took on my case. I felt like I could breathe again because I knew that someone was there to help me. I do not know what would have happened to me and my family if I did not have a lawyer. ICE kept pushing me to sign my deportation documents but I told them that I could not abandon my family.

When you are locked up, they do not tell you anything about what is happening with your case. I did not even know what a U visa was. I had been working with another organization that was supposed to be handling my immigration case. They never responded to me and never did anything with my case for five years. I lost thousands of dollars to them. There was no more hope for me, until I found my lawyer. There was now someone who knew the laws and knew how to argue my case in court. People in my community do not have the experience, we do not even know how to talk to the judge.

I ask you to consider how important this bill is. Our community struggles with employment. We are mistreated all the time. We struggle to make ends meet. We cannot afford to pay the huge fees. But having a lawyer is so important because you feel supported because there is someone in the court on your

side. I have many friends who went through their cases and didn't have lawyers who were separated from their families and deported.

I ask you to support this bill to help us, to keep our community and families together. I urge a favorable report on SB 317.