



Unitarian Universalist Legislative Ministry of Maryland

Shared Voices for Liberal Religious Values in Maryland

Testimony in Support of SB 317 - Office of the Attorney General - Right to Counsel in Immigration Proceedings Coordinator

To: Senator Will Smith, Chair, and Members of the Judicial Proceedings Committee

From: Steve Eckstrand, Immigration Task Force, Unitarian Universalist Legislative Ministry of Maryland

Date: January 27, 2021

As a Unitarian Universalist my belief in the inherent worth and dignity of every person leads me to support SB 317: Office of the Attorney General - Right to Counsel in Immigration Proceedings Coordinator.

Currently, people in deportation proceedings do not have a right to government funded counsel. Despite the grave consequences of deportation, many people have to represent themselves in immigration court. In Maryland, it is estimated that more than 500 people held in immigration detention are forced to represent themselves in immigration court each year. This denies the fundamental human right to due process and harms both immigrant families and immigrant communities.

This bill would create a program that would provide legal representation to people in immigration detention in Maryland and to Maryland residents in other states. It would also provide support to families of detained Maryland residents who are facing deportation. Most importantly, it would ensure access to counsel for the full length of deportation proceedings.

Such a program is clearly needed, since people without legal representation are several times more likely to be deported than those with legal representation. Both Prince George's County and Baltimore City have developed universal representation programs that have transformed the lives of immigrants facing deportation and their families. Certainly, Maryland can do the same.

Sincerely,

Stephen Eckstrand

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