

**SB 317 – SUPPORT**

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**Right to Counsel in Immigration Proceedings – Universal Representation**

Senate Judicial Proceedings Committee

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Dear Chair Smith and Members of the Judicial Proceedings Committee:

I write to you as a lifelong Maryland resident in support of SB 317 Right to Counsel on Immigration Proceedings – Universal Representation and urge this committee to support this legislation. As an environmental and human rights campaigner, issues of fairness, dignity, and human rights are part of my daily work. Due process is a fundamental pillar of democracy and the rule law. However, under our country’s prevailing immigration laws, people in deportation proceedings do not have the right to government-funded legal counsel. In Maryland it is estimated that over 500 people are forced to represent themselves in deportation proceedings. This means our neighbors here in Maryland are being denied due process while our local communities and economies suffer.

SB 317 Right to Counsel on Immigration Proceedings – Universal Representation would address this existing gap in our system by organizing and directing a universal representation program, an important step in strengthening our democratic principles and practices. Notably, such universal representation programs already exist in Maryland in PG County and Baltimore. The bill would also ensure that immigrants in detention receive state funded representation in deportation proceedings and provide both legal and community support for those under threat of detention and deportation.

If we have learned anything over the past several years, it is that the cruelty in our immigration policies is often the arbitrary nature in which they are applied. We have seen horrific scenes of families separated, raids terrorizing immigrant communities, and fear abound under the threat of detention and deportation. Any Maryland resident facing these realities should at least be provided with basic right of legal counsel. The realities of our criminal legal system are such that without access to legal counsel, there is very little chance in presenting a comprehensive case, let alone winning one. Protecting Maryland residents must be a priority as matter of fundamental human rights.

Every Maryland resident deserves due process and dignity. I hope the Judicial Proceedings Committee upholds Maryland values and returns a favorable report on SB 317.

Sincerely,

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