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Ioana Stoica
Laurel, MD 20707
ioana.stoica@gmail.com

TESTIMONY IN SUPPORT OF HB750
Office of the Attorney General - Right to Counsel in Immigration Proceedings
Coordinator

My name is Ioana Stoica and I have been a Maryland resident for most of the time since immigrating to the United States at the age of 11. I have resided in District 21 for the past 5 years. I am writing as a core leader of the Bend the Arc - Prince George's County Minyan, as a member of Jews United for Justice, Oseh Shalom Synagogue. This testimony is in support of HB750.

My father defected from the brutal dictatorship of Nicolae Ceausescu in Romania. Aided by a coalition of faith organizations, he escaped while at a conference in East Germany and was smuggled into West Germany. An engineer in our home country of Romania, in West Germany he worked for less than minimum wage in manual labor jobs as an undocumented immigrant. Determined to make it to the United States, he spent all his spare time filling out forms and waiting in line for an appointment at the US Embassy. My father lived in fear every day that he would be rounded up and sent back to face prison or worse. Finally, he received an interview with the embassy; when asked why he wanted to come to the United States, my father replied that he would give anything to live in a place that afforded so many freedoms, including the freedom to not be afraid. As he tells the story, the interviewer then and there stamped his forms and congratulated him on a favorable interview and probable asylum. Months later, he was on a plane to Maryland.

After communism fell, it took my mother, sister, and I a couple of years of filing paperwork and wading through bureaucracy to be allowed to join my father. We had the privileges of being familiar with how to navigate such systems, we had extensive family support, and also my parents were by this time both fluent in English. However, our privileges now do not extend to so many others who are facing just as dire, and in many cases, much worse, situations. People today escaping civil war, drought and other natural hardships, extreme poverty, gang violence, and those simply seeking freedom to pursue happiness and better conditions for their children, deserve the same supports. They deserve counsel to advise them on the intricacies of US immigration law, and they deserve their fair day in court. We know that immigrants who are not represented by counsel are, according to some studies, ten times less likely to be granted asylum or relief from deportation. The situation is even more dire and heartbreaking when considering children immigrants and refugees. Having children fend for themselves in immigration court, an image that's sadly been far too prevalent in the news these past

few years, is a horrifying national disgrace, and I hope that the progressive state of Maryland can stand at the forefront of the battle against this moral outrage.

Please, stand up for the fundamental principle of a just system in which all individuals are granted representation and the opportunity to make their case fully, regardless of the privileges or lack thereof that they were born into, and support this important legislation. I respectfully urge a favorable report on HB750.

Ioana Stoica