

**Testimony for the Senate Education, Health, and Environmental Affairs Committee**  
**February 9, 2021**  
**SB 0085– Creating Governor's Office of Immigrant Affairs**

**FAVORABLE**

To Chair Pinsky, Vice Chair Kagan, and Committee members,

My name is Onyinye Alheri and I live in Baltimore, Maryland, in the 40th Legislative district. I am writing to urge the House Appropriations Committee to issue a favorable report on HB0015 and establish a Governor's Office of Immigrant Affairs

In order to lead healthy lives with dignity, freedom and respect, US migrants benefit best from holistic community-based resources that provide guidance on a path to naturalization and sufficiency. Immigrants comprise nearly 15% of Maryland's population and 10% of Baltimore's population (both numbers that are growing steadily each year. These populations are disproportionately uninsured and less likely to access social services to which they are entitled, often for fear of retaliation and persecution from government agencies.

Undocumented migrants do not qualify for many social services including Medicaid, SSI and SNAP, while documented migrants qualify but often face significant barriers to access. Although migrants can obtain coverage via their employers, many are low-income and tend to be employed in industries that do not offer employee-sponsored coverage. Without access to a living wage and healthcare coverage, immigrant communities face significant barriers in obtaining the healthcare that they need. Further, the effects of deportation have a lasting impact on migrants and our families, inducing trauma and further displacement.

Maryland can better address the needs of its migrant communities by establishing a Governor's Office of Immigrant Affairs, which can create a network of trusted community-based centers that provide migrant services while reducing interaction and collaboration with persecutive agencies like ICE. The services provided at this office can increase access to language programs, assist migrants with the naturalization process, connect migrants to workforce development programs, and reduce the exploitation of migrants. I support this effort because it will increase access to essential healthcare services and reduce health disparities for immigrant communities. Thank you for your time and consideration.

Sincerely,  
Onyinye Alheri  
Intern - Lutheran Immigration & Refugee Service

