

HB 0750 – SUPPORT
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Office of the Attorney General – Right to Counsel in Immigration Proceedings Coordinator
House Judiciary Committee
March 3, 2021

Dear Chair Clippinger and members of the House Judiciary Committee:

My name is James Bell and I volunteer with Capital Area Immigrants' Rights (CAIR) Coalition. I have been a resident of Bethesda, Maryland, Montgomery County since 1983. As a community member working with Maryland residents in immigration detention, I am writing to express my support for HB 0750: Office of the Attorney General – Right to Counsel in Immigration Proceedings Coordinator.

Before retiring some years ago, I spent approximately 35 years working on international economic and community development projects in over 40 countries. I first served as a Peace Corps Volunteer in Chad, Africa from 1970 to 1972 and later in Honduras in 1999 to repair the damage caused by Hurricane Mitch. Consequently, I am familiar with many of the countries and communities where most immigrants come from.

I have been a volunteer with CAIR Coalition and the DC Detention Visitation Network (DCDVN) for approximately four years. This work has allowed me to visit the Maryland detention Centers in Snow Hill and Jessup on a weekly basis to talk with the detained population on a one-to-one basis to give them support and encouragement, and to let them know that somebody cares about their plight. I assist CAIR Coalition in their work with providing legal representation. Unfortunately, these visits were stopped approximately one year ago due to the pandemic.

In the years that I visited detainees, I learned that many had full time jobs and families with their children being born in the US. They were contributing to the US economy. These persons fled their countries due to rampant violence often directed at themselves or their families because of natural disasters such as Hurricane Mitch in Central America or the recurring droughts, religious persecution, or plagues in Africa. The detainees pay taxes, are decent, hardworking, and religious persons who have essentially lost everything due to being detained. They face deportation without knowing how to navigate the complicated and confusing US legal system.

“Without counsel, detained individuals are 10.5 more likely to be deported than their represented counterparts.” (Reference: [National Study of Access to Counsel in Immigration Court](https://scholarship.upenn.edu) from 2016: <https://scholarship.upenn.edu>) According to the CAIR Coalition: “In the Baltimore Immigration Court we have found that individuals are 4 times more likely to win their case if they are represented.” Most of the detainees cannot afford to hire a private lawyer; yet they deserve legal counsel. Their lives depend on it.

Chair Clippinger and members of the House Judiciary Committee, please pass HB 0750. It is fair and needed. Thank you for your attention to my request.