



THE PRINCE GEORGE'S COUNTY GOVERNMENT

OFFICE OF THE COUNTY EXECUTIVE

BILL: Senate Bill 129 – Access to Counsel in Immigration Proceedings Program

SPONSOR: Senators Hettleman and Waldstreicher

HEARING DATE: February 3, 2022

COMMITTEE: Judicial Proceedings

CONTACT: Intergovernmental Affairs Office, 301-780-8411

POSITION: SUPPORT

The Office of the Prince George's County Executive **SUPPORTS Senate Bill 129 – Access to Counsel in Immigration Proceedings Program** which establishes the Access to Counsel in Immigration Proceedings Program to provide legal counsel to specified Maryland residents who lack counsel and are facing possible deportation from the United States.

As local leaders we have a duty to keep our communities safe, and our communities are safest when residents trust that institutions and officials serve them and know they will be treated fairly. This constitutional guarantee of due process and legal representation which applies to everyone residing in the United States does not apply to immigrants when facing immigration courts. Providing fair representation in deportation proceedings is the single most effective way to ensure an individual's right to due process is protected and that families are not needlessly separated without receiving basic protections. In Prince George's County, 22.7% of residents are foreign-born and 27.3% speak a language other than English in the home. Over 75,000 residents are estimated to be unauthorized immigrants, with many living in the United States an average of 12 years.

In 2017, Prince George's County spearheaded the Immigrant Services and Language Access initiative ("ISLA"), an innovative public-private partnership and collaboration among Prince George's County agencies, the Prince George's County Office of Human Rights, Prince George's County Council, legal offices, and non-profit organizations to work to ensure dedicated funds to the coordination of enhanced language access services, social services, and pro bono legal representation to improve the protection of undocumented adults and unaccompanied immigrant and refugee children.

Through the Prince George's County Office of Human Rights and with the support from various non-profits and government partners, Prince George's County successfully applied to the Vera Institute of Justice for a matching grant to fund ISLA legal services. The Vera Institute of Justice has also provided Prince George's County technical assistance and support, including assistance in identifying and training legal service providers, providing

opportunities to share best practices with other jurisdictions, and providing data collection and research support. In September 2020 the Immigrant Justice Corps (IJC), the country's first fellowship program dedicated to meeting immigrants' needs for high-quality legal counsel, launched a two-year Access to Counsel Initiative in partnership the Capital Area Immigrants' Rights (CAIR) Coalition that expanded and ensured representation to all Prince George's County residents detained in immigration custody.

Since the inception of the ISLA initiative in December 2017, it has led to many successful outcomes for Prince George's County residents. Thus far, CAIR Coalition has conducted legal consults with over 350 detained residents of Prince George's County in four detention centers across Maryland. For each of these detained intakes, the CAIR Coalition followed up with family members to help provide critical information as families navigated the detention and deportation system and conducted additional phone intakes with residents of Prince George's who have contacted CAIR through their intake line. Additionally, CAIR Coalition has litigated approximately 138 cases for Prince George's County residents, which includes a complex process that involves litigating multiple different cases before the Immigration Court, the Board of Immigration Appeals, Department of Homeland Security (DHS), and Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE). Countries of origin have included Prince George's County residents from Liberia, Nigeria, Mexico, Jamaica, Guatemala, Honduras, El Salvador, Uganda, Cameroon, Panama, Belize, Togo, Ivory Coast, and Ghana.

Prince George's County is proud to have pioneered and implemented services for immigrants within our community who are at risk of deportation, particularly those who are detained while facing deportation. Our immigrant communities contribute to the cultural tapestry and local economy to Prince George's County and the State of Maryland. The creation of a statewide Access to Counsel in Immigration Proceedings Program will provide counties an all-inclusive and centralized infrastructure to protect our most vulnerable residents and stand united for racial equity.

For the reasons stated above, the Office of the Prince George's County Executive **SUPPORTS Senate Bill 129** and asks for a **FAVORABLE** report.