

SENATE JUDICIAL PROCEEDINGS COMMITTEE  
SENATE BILL 129  
ACCESS TO COUNSEL IN IMMIGRATION PROCEEDINGS PROGRAM

February 3, 2022

**Support**

Catholic Charities of Baltimore strongly supports SB 129 which would create an access to counsel program for immigration proceedings.

Inspired by the Gospel mandates to love, serve and teach, Catholic Charities provides care and services to improve the lives of Marylanders in need. As the largest human service provider in Maryland working with tens of thousands of youth, individuals, and families each year, we recognize the injustices that occur when Marylanders cannot access proper legal representation.

The Esperanza Center, a program of Catholic Charities, is a comprehensive immigrant resource center located in Fells Point. Our staff and volunteers provide services and referrals, ESL education, healthcare and low-cost immigration legal services to thousands of immigrants each year. All too common today, our clients and their families are forced to appear unrepresented before immigration courts and venues within the ambit of immigration law.

SB 129 provides a right to legal representation for Marylanders who wish to have representation in certain immigration proceedings. This representation is a right that should not have eluded us a century<sup>1</sup>. The U.S. Supreme Court recognized in a 1922 decision that deportation may result in the loss of “all that makes life worth living.” To this day, deportation remains a constant threat in the psyche of our immigrant community. SB 129 provides necessary protections so that immigrants facing deportation can avail themselves of the protections and defenses that exist in our judicial system.

This bill plugs the hole in our legal system where Marylanders facing immigration proceedings have a right to counsel but not means to access counsel. Further, the law is designed to allow for community outreach and community education about immigration.

Every day, the Esperanza Center serves clients who fear that any contact with immigration in particular and law enforcement in general will lead to certain deportation, and even persecution or torture in their countries of origin. Individuals must have legal representation so that when a final legal disposition is rendered, that disposition is deemed proper and proportional as a matter of law.

**We urge you to provide individuals access to legal representation in certain immigration proceedings throughout Maryland by giving a favorable report for SB 129.** Thank you for your consideration of our views.

Submitted by: Regan Vaughan, Director of Advocacy

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<sup>1</sup> Ng Fung Ho v. White, 259 U.S. 276, 284 (1922)