

SB 129– FAVORABLE
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"Access to Counsel in Immigration Proceedings Program"
Senate Judicial Proceedings Committee
February 3, 2022

Dear Chair Smith and Members of the Senate Judicial Proceedings Committee:

My name is Lorena and I am a resident of Baltimore, Maryland. As a paralegal for Capital Area Immigrants' Rights (CAIR) Coalition. I am writing to express my support for SB 129: **"Access to Counsel in Immigration Proceedings Program."**

I am a part of the team providing Universal Representation to residents of Prince George's County. I help clients and their families tell their stories and assist lawyers as we prepare their cases. Every day I hear horrifying stories of past persecution and the pain clients and families feel as they are being separated by detention. They share with me their confusion towards those laws and systems that are defining their lives and the relief they feel knowing that they do not have to face it alone. This does not surprise me. I watch even our most experienced attorneys struggle at times to make sense of our complicated immigration laws and procedures. Yet, we expect individuals in detention to navigate these laws and systems on their own, often in a language they do not understand, while experiencing one of the most difficult moments of their lives.

I approach my work with a personal understanding of how trying these experiences can be. Both of my parents were placed in deportation proceedings when I was sixteen. My family had no idea what we could do nor what options we had because we thought we only had one: deportation. And no one at DHS was telling us otherwise. I thought that, any day, I would have to choose between living thousands of miles away from my parents or leaving the only life I'd had ever known in the U.S. A decision that too many children in Maryland often have to ponder. Thankfully, my family found an attorney who charged us only what we could afford and helped us build our case. My parents are now on their path to citizenship, and I am speaking to you here today, fully aware that this would not be the case had we not found an attorney. We were one of the lucky ones.

Too often, individuals are deported and separated from their families, not because their cases lack merit, but because they could not afford an attorney to advocate for them. Too often, I hear stories from clients who have put their families in suffocating debt paying for attorneys who only took advantage of them. The difference between life and death, between a family united and a family torn apart, should not be a person's ability to pay.

With the Prince George's County project, we work every day to help detained individuals exercise their rights. But I often think about the many other Marylanders who are left out of this program. We cannot abandon them and their families. Thank you.

I urge a favorable report on SB 129.