

February 3, 2022

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TESTIMONY ON SB0129 - POSITION: FAVORABLE
Access to Counsel in Immigration Proceedings Program

TO: Chair Smith, Vice Chair Waldstreicher, and members of the Judicial Proceedings Committee

FROM: Ioana Stoica

My name is Ioana Stoica. I am a resident of District 21. I am submitting this testimony in support of SB0129, Access to Counsel in Immigration Proceedings Program.

I write to you as a constituent, as an immigrant, and as a member of Oseh Shalom, a reconstructionist synagogue in Laurel, MD. My faith and my background both form the foundation for my beliefs that not only must we welcome those fleeing injustice, but we must stand for the principles we profess as a nation: our country is one that supposedly affords equal access and freedom for all. However, in practice, too many groups, including immigrants, are in fact not afforded the same rights as others.

A fair hearing and determination of whether someone can indeed be allowed to remain here in the face of extreme hardship or even danger to their life back home should not depend on someone's income or knowledge of how to navigate complex bureaucracy. My personal experience is that my father defected from communist Romania, and was granted asylum in the US; after communism fell, it took my mother, sister, and I a couple of years of filing paperwork and wading through bureaucracy to be allowed to join my father. We had the privileges of being familiar with how to navigate such systems, we had extensive family support, and also my parents were by this time both fluent in English.

However, our privileges now do not extend to so many others who are facing just as dire, and in many cases, much worse, situations. People today escaping civil war, drought and other natural hardships, extreme poverty, gang violence, and those simply seeking freedom to pursue happiness and better conditions for their children, deserve the same supports. They deserve counsel to advise them on the intricacies of US immigration law, and they deserve their fair day in court. We know that immigrants who are not represented by counsel are, according to some studies, ten times less likely to be granted asylum or relief from deportation. The situation is even more dire and heartbreaking when considering children immigrants and refugees. Having children fend for themselves in immigration court, an image that's sadly been far too prevalent in the news these past few years, is a horrifying national disgrace, and I hope that the progressive state of Maryland can stand at the forefront of the battle against this moral outrage.

Please, stand up for the fundamental principle of a just system in which all individuals are granted representation and the opportunity to make their case fully, regardless of the privileges or lack thereof that they were born into, and support this important legislation. **I respectfully urge this committee to return a favorable report on SB0129.**

Ioana Stoica