

**HEALTH CARE FOR THE HOMELESS TESTIMONY
IN SUPPORT OF
SB 129 – Access to Counsel in Immigration Proceedings Program**

**Senate Judicial Proceedings Committee
February 3, 2022**



Health Care for the Homeless strongly supports SB 129, which would establish a program to provide income-eligible individuals with legal representation in immigration proceedings in Maryland. As a Federally Qualified Health Center (FQHC), Health Care for the Homeless sees thousands of clients every year who are undocumented immigrants or facing various legal issues with regard to their immigration status. Providing access to legal representation in immigration proceedings would be exponentially helpful to our clients. Right now, it is more of a privilege to receive counsel as the majority of our clients are not able to access this support due to the mountain of barriers, competing priorities, and financial burdens. Legal barriers with regard to immigration affects every facet of many of our clients' lives.

Access to counsel is an issue of racial justice and basic fairness. In 2021, Health Care for the Homeless conducted extensive research and analysis with regard to Racial Equity and Inclusion (REI) at our agency and immigrants' rights and immigrant justice emerged as a top priority of the among our staff and clients.

Dr. Iris Leviner, our Director of Pediatric and Family Medicine, stated, "I hear so many of my patients seeking help with immigration proceedings as their number one priority among many other needs. Our families are excluded and marginalized in so many ways. This is one small but extremely helpful way to address that." Dr. Leviner went on to share a specific client story: "I remember one father and son who came in to establish care. They had been through some harrowing experiences including the loss of loved ones via a presumably intentionally set fire in their home in their home country. I was trying to collect a social and medical history and help facilitate school enrollment and the father just kept coming back to a plea for help with their immigration situation. It was his number one priority for which I had very limited resources to offer."

Our Coordinator of Community Health & Outreach, Lilian Amaya, expressed how important this bill would be for the clients she serves: "we have clients who make sure that they make their immigration proceedings priority by neglecting their health, work, housing, and general well-being. We've had clients with terminal cancer, children, and experiencing homelessness worried about not having legal representation and this fear of deportation forces them to skip treatment/appointments/work/kid's school/etc. My community [referring to her own immigrant community] is vulnerable and in fear of deportation every day that they are in this country without legal status. I can't imagine what that feels like. Honestly, having legal representation would help reduce some of the anxiety/fear around having to show up in court, not knowing the language or how to read, and being in a new world without any support. I see this being a miniature step in the direction of justice."

Legal issues arising from immigration status impact the health and well-being of entire families. As such, it is imperative the legislature take this step in helping ease the burdens of immigration proceedings and provide basic fairness and due process to these families. We strongly urge a favorable report on SB 129.

Health Care for the Homeless is Maryland's leading provider of integrated health services and supportive housing for individuals and families experiencing homelessness. We work to prevent and end homelessness for vulnerable individuals and families by providing quality, integrated health care and promoting access to affordable housing and sustainable incomes through direct service, advocacy, and community engagement. We deliver integrated medical care, mental health services, state-certified addiction treatment, dental care, social services, and housing support services for over 10,000 Marylanders annually at sites in Baltimore City and Baltimore County. For more information, visit www.hchmd.org.