

February 1, 2022

Chioma Azi, Esquire
National Legal Director
African Communities Together
700 Pennsylvania Ave. SE, 2nd Floor,
Washington, DC 20003
www.africans.us

African Communities Together Written Testimony in Support of SB 129

Greetings to you all. My name is Chioma Azi and I am the National Legal Director of African Communities Together (ACT), a membership based 501(c)(3) non-profit organization dedicated to uplifting and empowering African immigrants. ACT has offices New York, Washington D.C. and Northern Virginia. Although we have no physical presence in Maryland, we serve dozens of individuals residing in Maryland, particularly immigrants that reside in Montgomery and Baltimore Counties. I have 13 years of experience as an immigration law practitioner, and as an advocate for the African and Caribbean immigrant community.

For more than a decade I have represented or appeared on behalf of more than 50 immigrants in removal proceedings for both detained and non-detained matters across the east coast, including cases before the Baltimore Immigration Court. My extensive experience in removal defense has given me an in-depth appreciation for challenges immigrants face in immigration proceedings and the opportunities SB129 presents. For immigrants who find themselves in immigration court due to a criminal conviction, they face a special irony as they must navigate between a criminal justice system that guarantees the right to an attorney and an immigration system that guarantees few rights, least of which is the right to an attorney.

Removal defense is a uniquely challenging, often heartbreaking area of the law where more cases are lost than won, due in large part to high legal standards immigrants must establish to have a chance at a favorable decision. Appearing before immigration court without an attorney poses so many unique challenges to an individual's case. Between complicated rules of procedure, the need for extensive experience and language barriers, immigrants without legal representation do not have full access to due process in immigration court. A quick review of government statistics show just how hard it is to win in immigration court. In 2019, only 15% of affirmative and defensive asylum applications were approved.¹ For cases filed by individuals in court (defensive applications), the approval rate is even lower at only 9%.

I have not won every case where I have appeared, but I can confidently state that the cases I have won could not have yielded the same result if my clients were unrepresented. Legal representation matters a great deal and can often be the difference between success and deportation. SB129 can change this. SB129 can ensure that all immigrants in the state of Maryland regardless of their income or access to what are often scarce non-profit resources, can

¹ Please see Department of Homeland Security Office of Immigration Statistics Annual Flow Report, September 2020, accessed at https://www.dhs.gov/sites/default/files/publications/immigration-statistics/yearbook/2019/refugee_and_asylee_2019.pdf

have a fair chance in court. I urge this body to consider all testimony and information carefully and pass this proposed legislation to ensure due process is extended to all individuals within our borders regardless of their immigration status. Ensuring that every immigrant in immigration court in Maryland has access to legal representation is not an attempt to give an advantage to undocumented individuals. On the contrary it is an important step towards strengthening our system and truly guaranteeing due process under the law for everyone in the United States. Please consider a vote in favor of due process by supporting SB129.

Respectfully Submitted,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to be the initials 'C.G.' with a small dot at the end.