

SB 129– FAVORABLE  
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"Access to Counsel in Immigration Proceedings Program"  
Senate Judicial Proceedings Committee  
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Dear Chair Smith and Members of the Senate Judicial Proceedings Committee:

My name is Barbara Myers and I am a volunteer with the Capital Area Immigrants' Rights (CAIR) Coalition. I am also a lifelong Maryland resident, currently living in Montgomery County. As a community member working with Maryland residents in immigration detention, I am writing to express my support for SB 129: **"Access to Counsel in Immigration Proceedings Program."**

I have been volunteering with the CAIR Coalition in various capacities for the past 5 years. I have provided Spanish/English translations of case related documents, and served as an interpreter to enable detainees to understand statements to be presented to the court on their behalf. I also regularly staff the telephone hotline, which enables detainees to speak with CAIR Coalition legal staff and outside attorneys. Before the current pandemic, I participated with CAIR staff in numerous visits to ICE detention centers, conducting intake interviews with newly detained persons, and delivering written materials about legal steps and procedures relevant to their cases.

During one such visit I remember meeting Josue, an older man from El Salvador, who had been living in Maryland and working as an auto mechanic since 2001. He was married, had 2 children born in the U.S., and was an active member of his church. As I wrote down his information, I realized that, as a long term resident with established ties to the community, he had a strong case for relief from deportation. But he had neither the knowledge of the system nor the resources to acquire legal representation. Without a lawyer, he would probably be deported, and his family would be emotionally and financially devastated. Fortunately, CAIR was able to assist him and he is now reunited with his family.

In my interaction with detainees through the hotline I have consistently heard the fear and powerlessness they experience in the face of a system that they neither understand nor feel they can defend themselves against. "How do I tell the judge that my life is in danger if I am sent back?" "How can I ask for bond?" are all too common questions. At the same time, detainees express profound relief and gratitude when they have legal counsel and are able to learn about the immigration system and steps, they can take to uphold their rights.

All detainees should have access to legal representation in order for our immigration system to be administered in a just and equitable manner. Our society is weakened, not protected, when families and communities are dismantled, and the rights of all individuals must be upheld to the fullest extent permitted by law.

Coordination and provision of financial resources for legal representation during all stages of the hearing process is an important step towards prioritizing equity and harm reduction in our immigration system. I urge a favorable report from the committee on Maryland Senate Bill 129.