

HB114/SB129 – Access to Counsel in Immigration Proceedings

POSITION: SUPPORT

Maria Rivas, Prince George's County

My name is Maria Rivas. I live in PG County for the past 20 years of my life. I own a house and pay taxes and have kids in school. I consider myself and family to be a part of the PG/Maryland community. We always respect the law and try to do our best not only for us but for our kids to be good citizens. And I truly believe that we deserve the same respect and human rights that any other community member deserves. Reality shows different because back in May 2019 ICE presented themselves at our home before 6 AM threatening to arrest my husband in front of my kids and threatening to take my stepson if I don't give information about one of my brothers who, by the way, has never committed a crime. They did not have any reason to show such force. A month after the incident ICE arrested not only one but two of my brothers!

One of them had an order of removal but the other one was arrested simply as a result of racial profiling. There is no other explanation for his arrest. The whole episode has been heartbreaking for my entire family because it is very hard to understand why they are in jail with no one committing any fault. My brothers are two young adults who together with me are obedient to the law. Having a loved one in detention is truly a nightmare. During their procedures, I learned that as an immigrant my human rights don't count. That ICE doesn't need to have a valid reason or have to be accountable for those people they detain, incarcerate and deport.

Once in the detention center you need money in order to have access to the outside world and it is very hard to navigate the system with the lack of English. Without money, you cannot get a lawyer. And without a lawyer, it is almost impossible to win your case. I understand the need of law enforcement if it is done with justice and the purpose of keeping our communities safe. I don't agree to feel afraid and persecuted and to be profiled just because I have a different skin color. After our ordeal, I cannot promise my kids that they will not be treated as criminals because they look like me and my siblings.

We need to take steps in order to have a better system of laws for immigrants. Detention is inhumane, and it tears families apart. When someone is detained, it is so important that they can have a lawyer to help them fight their case. It is almost impossible to afford an immigration lawyer for someone who is detained or for their family members. But the stakes are so high, that it could not be more important to have access to representation. That is why we need to ensure that every Marylander who is detained, can be represented by a lawyer, no matter how much money they have or don't have. That is why we need to pass Access to Counsel in Immigration Proceedings.