

Dear Members of the Senate Judicial Proceedings Committee,

This testimony is being submitted by Showing Up for Racial Justice Baltimore, a group of individuals working to move white folks as part of a multi-racial movement for equity and racial justice in Baltimore City and Baltimore County. We are also working in collaboration with CASA de Maryland. I am a resident of MD District 40. **I am testifying in support of Senate Bill 129: Access to Counsel in Immigration Proceedings Program.**



Legal representation is the difference between winning and losing in immigration court. In Baltimore Immigration Court, those with legal representation were four times more likely to win their case. Currently, low-income people in immigration courts are not provided lawyers, even though they face detention, deportation, permanent family separation, and persecution in their country of origin. In fact, 81% of detained immigrants in Maryland have no representation at any point in their case. Furthermore, affected families and communities are left to grapple on their own with the devastating impact of current policies.

Immigration laws are complex and difficult to understand, especially if English is not your first language. Justice in these cases should not be determined by financial ability to hire a lawyer. This is why we need guaranteed access to counsel — so that, regardless of background, income, or language of origin, ALL people receive due process under the law. In addition to guaranteeing due process, this bill ensures that affected individuals, families, and communities understand their rights and receive holistic support by designating community groups to conduct outreach, provide education and assign referrals to services.

When members of our immigrant community are deported without representation, they often leave behind spouses, children, and jobs. Take for example Eddy, a member of our immigrant community who was pulled over for a driving violation, then detained in the Howard County Detention Center. Eddy was subsequently transferred to detention centers in Jessup, Maryland, Pennsylvania, Louisiana, and finally deported, leaving behind his wife and three-year-old daughter.

During this entire process, Eddy had no legal representation. Not only is this unjust, it is also incredibly disruptive to families and communities who are already vulnerable. This bill would not only guarantee that people like Eddy receive a fair trial, but it would also directly address the needs of those vulnerable families and communities. This Access to Counsel Proceedings Program would thus increase the likelihood of families and communities remaining intact.

SB 129 ensures that the over 500 Maryland resident immigrants in detention are connected to counsel in deportation hearings in cases heard in Maryland. Programs like these are already in place in Prince George's County and Baltimore City and they make a difference.

It is for these reasons that I am encouraging you to **vote in support of SB 129.**

Thank you for your time, service, and consideration.

Sincerely,
Jonathan Smeton
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Showing Up for Racial Justice Baltimore