

SB 129 – SUPPORT
Melvin Juarez
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HB 114– SUPPORT
"Access to Counsel in Immigration Proceedings Program"
House Judicial Proceedings Committee
February 2, 2022

Dear Chair Clippinger and Members of the House Judicial Proceedings Committee:

My name is Melvin and I was a resident of Prince George's County for 21 years before moving to Hyattsville, Maryland where I now resident. As a former client of Capital Area Immigrants' Rights (CAIR) Coalition. I am writing to express my support for HB 114: **"Access to Counsel in Immigration Proceedings Program."**

I have a partner of 25 years who is a legal status holder, two children, and two U.S. Citizen grandchildren. My family is everything to me. I have built a career for myself in construction for the last two decades and built a community. I have several nieces and nephews for whom I provide financial and emotional support. I was born in El Salvador and fled in the 90's as a result of the Civil War and Hurricane Mitch. Life was no longer feasible for us in my country and I wanted to do what I could to protect my family.

When I was detained last year I thought my only option was deportation. I was terrified because of the problems in my home country. My life for the last 21 years had been in the U.S. Everyone I loved was here. I was frustrated. Being incarcerated is a terrible experience. You start to lose your mind and I felt frustrated that I could not be there for my family. I have severe asthma and was terrified every day that I would get COVID and die. I was always thinking about signing my deportation when I couldn't find an attorney.

Thanks to God, I was contacted by CAIR Coalition and they told me that I qualified for free representation through the Prince George Safe Cities Program. They told me that there were laws to protect me and this gave me hope. I don't speak much English and did not have the opportunity to get an education. But my legal team always made sure that I knew what was happening in my case and in court. The attorney knew what to do and fought for me in a way I could not have done in my own. It made me feel like my case and life mattered. I am so thankful. And thanks to God, everything turned out well and I was able to return to my family.

In this country, you need an attorney, because you need someone to represent you and explain all the complicated laws. One does not know the words or the options you have. I think this bill is so important because everyone deserves the help that I had. For those of us who have cases, it is so important for someone to support us. It would be so hard for people to do this on their own. Without an attorney, you are almost guaranteed to be deported. I saw this happen with so many people when I was detained and I wished that they had had an attorney like me. I would encourage people to hold on, but people would give up and sign their deportation even if they had strong cases because being incarcerated was so terrible. When you have representation and someone to advise you, you at least know what your options are. When you are not familiar with the laws, it is so easy to be manipulated to give up.

I urge a favorable report on HB 114.

