

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 Judiciary Committee:

My name is a Rafael and I am a resident of Prince George’s County. 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 came here in 2005 from El Salvador. I have worked construction ever since. I have three brothers and about ten cousins that all live in Maryland. It is nice to have family nearby. Before I was detained, I played on a soccer team.

I came to the US in 2005 because I was fleeing for my life. Gangs almost killed me because I did not want to join them. To get revenge on me for fleeing, they killed my father.

Being in ICE detention was a frustrating experience because there is no access to information. I went alone to court for the first time. The judge gave me more time to find a lawyer and gave me a list of organizations, but this list is in English and these places do not help detained people. It is hard and expensive to make phone calls from inside the detention centers. A lot of organizations do not answer calls when they hear the automated message that it’s coming inside the jail. The only option at first seems like a private lawyer. I saw other immigrants like me who gave their money to private lawyers that did not even show up to court. I saw men crying because they had lost all of their time and money to these private lawyers. For a while, I also thought about paying a lawyer. Thankfully, guys who had been in there longer than me told me about CAIR Coalition. Because I am a PG County Resident, CAIR Coalition offered me free representation.

Having a CAIR Coalition lawyer was amazing. I wanted to fight my case because I was terrified to go back, but I did not know how. My lawyer explained the law to me. She helped me collect the evidence. She helped me remember the things that had happened to me, which my brain tried to forget. She helped me tell my story. I ended up winning my case in court and being released from detention. I know that I would have been deported if I had not had a lawyer. I heard ICE officers tell people, “If you do not have a lawyer, give up on your case because you are going to lose.” They would pressure people to sign their deport orders if they did not have a lawyer.

I support the Maryland Universal Representation bill because there are so many people like me that need help. The people in ICE detention are human beings. They deserve the same consideration and respect as anyone else. I urge a favorable report on HB 114.

Sincerely,

Rafael O. A.