

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 Jose and I am a resident of Gaithersburg, Maryland. 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 lived in the Maryland community since 2006. I came here from Guatemala to be able to provide a better life for my children. I've been fortunate to have a successful career in construction, and my wife and I are in the process of bringing my daughter here through a family visa. Two of my brothers recently came to the US last year to escape death threats. Vigilantes killed two of my other brothers in Guatemala and my family is at great risk. When ICE put me into immigration detention last year, I knew that I could not return to Guatemala or else I would face being murdered as well.

Being in ICE detention was a very difficult experience. I was scared and stressed that I would contract COVID-19. I didn't know which sick individuals had the virus or did not. I was also frustrated because I did not understand my immigration case. I wrongly believed that my immigration proceedings were going to affect my daughter's application for a visa. Because I was scared and confused about the system, I thought it would be best for everyone if I signed my deportation order, even knowing that I would likely die in Guatemala. Thankfully, I received a free CAIR Coalition lawyer who explained my rights to me and helped me understand that I had options to fight my case. She helped me to prepare my application and all my evidence. Then, I won my case in court. Now I am here safe with my brothers, hoping the rest of our family can join us soon. Without a lawyer, I would have accepted my deportation and lost my opportunity to live here safely.

I support SB 129 because no one should have to go back to their country to face death or economic hardship when they qualify for legal protection here in the US. I want everyone to have the opportunity that I did. Having a lawyer changed everything for me. For those reasons, I urge a favorable report on HB 114.

Sincerely,

Jose C. O.