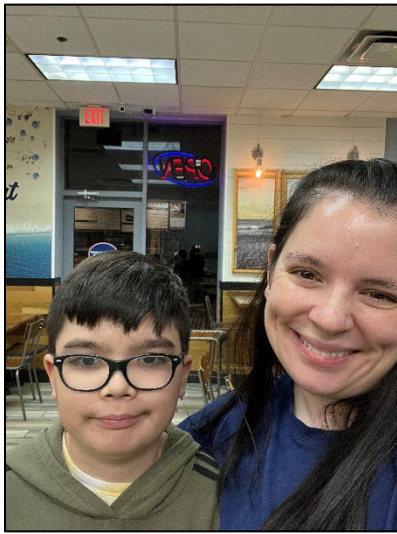


Thank you for the opportunity to speak with you today. My name is Coni Nepomuceno, I work at The Arc Maryland, and I am the Director of Family Resources and Outreach.



*Photo of Kyan & Coni Nepomuceno*

I strongly support SB0797, not only as a non-attorney special education advocate but also as a proud Hispanic parent of a child with a disability, who currently has an IEP.

Unfortunately, when my son was first diagnosed, I didn't understand my rights, I didn't understand my options, and I felt completely intimidated by school professionals who I thought knew what was best for my son at the time. My son never received a Maryland IFSP, and he didn't receive services until a year later when his IEP was implemented. If I had had legal representation, my child could have received early intervention services. During the pandemic, I tried to get legal representation for compensatory services for our child, but I did not have the chance to gain legal representation that would help me make a concise decision, and help me prove to the school the long-term impact of my son not receiving what

was indicated in his IEP. Hiring a special education attorney has never been an option for our family, I have been quoted fees that seemed astronomical to the average family.

Supporting SB0797 is critical for parents just like me, who face income disparity in access to attorneys, advocates, and consultants. It is not uncommon for cost to appear to be the behind-the-scenes driver of decisions regarding a child's educational plan. I often see how parents with legal counsel are more successful than parents without counsel! How is that fair to the students?

I ask that parent voices be meaningfully included in the process of SB0797. Providing funding for resources and services to eligible students with IDD and their families, who need legal representation, advocacy, and consultant services, will help the families have a better understanding of their benefits, requirements, and options, and empower them to make well-informed choices.

Once again, thank you for allowing me to provide my testimony.

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