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March 8, 2024

Health and Government Operations Committee
Chair: The Honorable Joseline A. Pena-Melnyk
Vice Chair: The Honorable Bonnie Cullison

Director Adriana Lee, Governor's Office of Immigrant Affairs
Favorable Testimony / (HB961) "State Government – Commission on New Americans – Established".

Good afternoon Chair Pena-Melnyk, Vice Chair Cullison, and distinguished members of the Health and Government Operations Committee. My name is Adriana Lee, I am the Director of the Governor's Office of Immigrant Affairs, and I come before you in strong support of HB961, which will establish a commission on new Americans.

As Maryland's Director of Immigrant Affairs, I recognize that this bill will have a profoundly positive impact on the quality of life of our new Americans.

This commission will ensure that the state's efforts are directed correctly and equitably for refugees, asylees, immigrants and second-generation immigrants.

Close to one million immigrants reside in Maryland, this is about 15% of the total population, and more than half have limited English skills.

Immigrant workers are essential to the growth of our state, they contribute greatly to the workforce and productivity. They are found in all areas, in science, technology, health, production, construction, agriculture and more. Immigrant workers are helping to meet the growing demand for health care, childcare and caregivers. Many immigrants are entrepreneurs or business owners.

Lack of proficiency in the English language results in a lack of knowledge, making this population an easy target for abuse, discrimination, fraud, hostility, and crime. Immigrants who are black, Hispanic, or Asian are most likely to report discrimination at work.

It also makes it difficult for them to navigate between state agencies and services. This prevents them from growing as fast as they could if they had more knowledge of existing resources.

As an example, these are Marylanders who needed our help:

- I met a Venezuelan engineer with university and master's studies who works cleaning offices because he doesn't speak English and can't apply for a better job.
- I met a restaurant worker from Guatemala who, when paying taxes for the first time, found out his tax preparer stole his identity, sent false documents, and collected his tax refund.
- I met a widowed Mexican woman with 7 children whose husband was murdered a few months ago for being Hispanic and having a loud party.

These three immigrants didn't know where to go to apply for a job, to make a police report or prepare a funeral.

We need a commission that serves as a means for immigrant voices to be heard and understood.

A commission that supports integration in the social, civic, economic, and cultural engagement and allows these communities to thrive and succeed as Americans while maintaining their own identities.

A commission for New Americans will allow us to have representatives from different areas who will be able to explain to us the needs, the problems, and the challenges these communities experienced every day.

We know that an immigrant community equipped with knowledge, skills, and resources will be able to grow and reach its full potential. This bill will help thousands of families, in all aspects, allowing economic, social, human, and cultural growth.

I ask you to please support HB0961 to establish a New Americans commission.

Sincerely,



Adriana Lee, Director of Immigrant Affairs

Governor's Office of Community Initiatives

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