

via electronic submission

March 4, 2025

Senate Judiciary Proceedings Committee

Re: Testimony in SUPPORT of SB 828, the Protecting Sensitive Locations Act

Dear Honorable Chair Smith, Vice Chair Waldstreicher, and Members of the Committee,

The Young Center for Immigrant Children's Rights is pleased to offer **a favorable testimony in strong support of SB 828 - Immigration Enforcement - Sensitive Locations - Guidelines and Policies (Protecting Sensitive Locations Act).**

The Young Center serves as the federally appointed independent Child Advocate, akin to *best interests* guardian ad litem, for trafficking victims and other vulnerable unaccompanied children in government custody, as authorized by the Trafficking Victims Protection Reauthorization Act (TVPRA).¹ Since 2004, the Office of Refugee Resettlement (ORR) has appointed Young Center Child Advocates for thousands of unaccompanied children in ORR custody.

The role of the Child Advocate is to advocate for the best interests of the child. A child's best interests are determined by considering the child's safety, expressed wishes, right to family integrity, liberty, developmental needs, and identity. Our Child Advocate Program accompanies children held in ORR facilities, including facilities in Maryland, listens to them and their families, and advocates for their release to their families and communities, with the supports and services they need to thrive. The Young Center Policy Program complements the direct accompaniment work of its Child Advocate Program by advocating for policies that support and protect unaccompanied youth and their families. We are driven by the belief that all children should be safe and protected, regardless of immigration status.

In Fiscal Year 2024, 3,652 unaccompanied children were released from ORR custody to families and communities in Maryland. The year before that, Maryland received 4,950 unaccompanied children. These children and young people, including those whom the Young Center works with directly in Maryland communities, thrive when they can be active, fully integrated members of the community, and access education, health care, religious services, and legal representation.

[Since 1993](#), federal policy has limited immigration enforcement activities in sensitive locations—such as childcare centers, schools, hospitals, and places of worship—to prevent intimidation and ensure access to essential services. The federal government's [revocation of](#)

¹ William Wilberforce Trafficking Victims Protection Reauthorization Act, 8 U.S.C. § 1232(c)(6)(A) (hereafter TVPRA). The TVPRA defines unaccompanied child as, 'a person who is under 18 years of age; has no lawful immigration status in the United States; and has no parent or legal guardian in the United States, or no parent or legal guardian available to provide care and physical custody.'

[these protections](#) has left immigrant families vulnerable to enforcement actions in spaces where they should feel safe. States must step up to protect their residents.

In our work at the Young Center, we see firsthand how the changes to the federal protected areas policy have already created an environment of fear and uncertainty, discouraging individuals and families with children from seeking medical care and nutrition assistance, attending childcare and school, or attending court dates. This experience is backed up by [numerous studies which](#) demonstrate the connection of both the threat of immigration enforcement as well as the detention and deportation of a family member to adverse mental health, behavioral problems, and health issues for immigrant children and families. Moreover, when immigrant families are too afraid to access community programs and services, [the entire community suffers](#). As a result of increased immigration enforcement in areas previously considered protected areas, the well-being of our children and communities are at risk.

This bill is an opportunity for Maryland legislators to proactively safeguard the well-being of all children residing in the state. The Young Center stands with immigrant children and families and supports the Protecting Sensitive Locations Act because it will:

1. **Protect Access to Essential Services:** No one should have to choose between life-saving medical care and the risk of family separation. Families and individuals must be able to obtain food to nourish their families, drop off their children to school or childcare, and worship without the threat of detention.
2. **Strengthen Community Trust:** By establishing clear boundaries for immigration enforcement, we foster trust between immigrant families and the institutions meant to serve them. This trust is essential for maintaining a healthy, vibrant, and cohesive society.
3. **Safeguard Children's Well-Being:** Immigration enforcement conducted in places that are meant to provide children with a sense of safety and security can traumatize children. Children deserve to attend childcare programs and school and receive timely, high-quality health care without fear that they will be separated from their loved ones.

We thank you for considering SB 828 and urge the committee to provide a favorable report.

Sincerely,

Young Center for Immigrant Children's Rights



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