

## Written Testimony in Support of HB 923 – The UNITE Act

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Dear Chair and Members of the Committee:

I am an attorney licensed in Maryland who has handled over thirty Special Immigrant Juvenile Status (SIJS) proceedings since 2014. I respectfully submit this testimony in support of HB 923, the UNITE Act.

For many of the children I represent, SIJS findings issued by Maryland Circuit Courts are the only pathway to stability and protection after experiencing abuse, neglect, or abandonment. These children have often endured profound trauma in their home countries and, upon arrival in Maryland, face a complex legal system that can either protect them or compound their vulnerability.

While Maryland courts have long played a critical role in safeguarding children, there are significant procedural and practical obstacles to obtaining SIJS status. Requiring government issued photo identification is often a significant hurdle, particularly with young children. Requirements such as certified translations of official documents, already made the process lengthy and costly, even with an attorney involved. These requirements are often extremely burdensome – especially for families and children who have experienced extreme abuse and neglect, and those who face language barriers.

HB 923 would promote clarity, equal treatment and uniform procedures within Maryland's courts. The UNITE Act would help ensure that abused, neglected, and abandoned immigrant children are treated consistently and fairly across all jurisdictions in our state. For these reasons, I respectfully urge a favorable report on HB 923. Thank you for your consideration.

Respectfully submitted,

  
Jessica Markham