

HB923 – the UNITE Act

Written Testimony in Favor of HB923 – The UNITE Act

To:

The Honorable Members of the Maryland Judiciary Committee

From:

Liset Collazo-Dingle on behalf of the Maryland Hispanic Bar Association

February 26, 2026

SUBJECT: Testimony in Support of HB923 – The UNITE Act

Dear Chair and Members of the Committee,

My name is Liset Collazo-Dingle, I am a member of the Maryland Hispanic Bar Association (MHBA), and I am an immigration attorney who represents children seeking humanitarian protection under the Special Immigrant Juvenile (SIJ) provisions of the federal Immigration and Nationality Act.

I write in support of HB923 – the UNITE Act (Uniform Nondiscrimination in Treatment and Evidence).

In my practice, I represent immigrant children who have been abused, neglected, or abandoned by one or both parents. Before these children may seek federal immigration protection, they must first obtain findings from a state court regarding custody or guardianship and whether reunification with one or both parents is not viable due to abuse, neglect, or abandonment, or similar basis under the law. These findings are required under 8 U.S.C. § 1101(a)(27)(J) and are adjudicated by the United States Citizenship and Immigration Services (USCIS), a component of the U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services within the U.S. Department of Homeland Security.

State equity courts play a critical role in this process. They are not deciding on immigration status. They are determining custody, guardianship, and the best interests of a child standard, which functions squarely within their traditional jurisdiction.

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However, I have seen firsthand how inconsistent standards or heightened scrutiny applied solely because a child is undocumented can create unnecessary barriers. In some instances, immigrant children face additional evidentiary burdens not imposed on U.S. citizen children in otherwise identical custody or guardianship proceedings. This inconsistency undermines both fairness and the integrity of our courts.

In some jurisdiction within the state of Maryland, jurisdictions are imposing policies which are unduly burdensome and are not required of United States citizens. For example, some jurisdictions are requiring ,1) a declaration of the minor in his or her native language and certified translation, 2) parental consent to custody/guardianship in the parent's native language and certified translation, 3) a declaration or affidavit by the parent or petitioner, and 4) most recent photo identification for the minor, and the parent/petitioner, such as a school identification, learner's permit, driver's license, or state-issued identification, etc.

The Fourteenth Amendment to the U.S. Constitution guarantees equal protection under the law to all persons within our jurisdiction. Children should never face additional evidentiary burdens or procedural barriers simply because of their immigration status. When courts apply inconsistent standards, it undermines fairness, due process, and public trust in our judicial system.

Immigrant children who appear in custody or guardianship proceedings are often among the most vulnerable. Many have experienced trauma, displacement, or instability. They deserve the same careful judicial consideration afforded to any other child.

HB923 affirms a simple but vital principle: every child who comes before our courts deserves equal treatment under the law, regardless of immigration status.

From a practical perspective, uniform standards promote judicial efficiency and clarity. Judges benefit from consistent guidance. Attorneys understand the evidentiary requirements. Most importantly, children are not subjected to confusion or delay during already vulnerable periods of their lives.

As a member of the MHBA and immigration attorney, I believe strongly that equal application of the law strengthens public trust in our judicial system. HB923 reinforces the principle that every child who appears before our courts is entitled to the same procedural fairness and substantive standards, regardless of where they were born.

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For these reasons, I am in favor of HB923.

Thank you for your time and consideration.

Respectfully submitted,

/s/ Liset Collazo-Dingle

Liset Collazo-Dingle, Esq., MHBA Board Member

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