

Testimony on Senate Bill 245 – Favorable
HB 444 – Public Safety – Immigration Enforcement Agreements – Prohibition
Senate Judicial Proceedings Committee

January 22, 2026

Honorable Chair Bartlett, Vice Chair Davis, and Members of the Committee,

My name is Robert Van Rens, and I am the Executive Director of the Golden Mile Alliance. The GMA works on behalf of 321 storefront businesses and around 400 other enterprises based on the west side of Frederick. Our mission is economic and community development, and that takes place in the busiest and most productive commercial district in Frederick County. The Golden Mile is one of the economic engines that help run the fastest growing county in Maryland, and the immigrant communities that make up a large part of the Golden Mile are integral to that growth. The Golden Mile does not exist without them, and we celebrate their invaluable contribution to our city and our county.

The Golden Mile area, which encompasses most of Frederick's new City Council District 2 and a portion of District 1, is the most densely populated district in the County. We are the most diverse community in both the city of Frederick and Frederick County. 40% of the Golden Mile's residents speak a language other than English at home. Nearly 30% of the population were born outside the US, and among the places of origin represented are Latin America, Southeast Asia, West Africa, West Asia and North Africa, and the Caribbean. Our eateries offer 25 distinct national cuisines and over 20 languages are spoken in our schools. The Golden Mile is a snapshot of the modern American immigrant experience.

While some of the highly visible businesses in the district are ones that many people know and that serve a wide customer base, many, even a majority, are supported by the surrounding community. They were started to meet a need felt by people living far from their homeland, who wanted the comforts of familiar foods, the opportunity to gather with others who shared a language or other traditions, or they needed assistance navigating a bewildering interface with a government that had expectations different than those that they had grown up with – tax codes, drivers licensing and vehicle registration, and other official services.

287(g) is one of the obstacles to success for many of these businesses. The residents that support the local markets, the small restaurants, the beauty salons and other shops that are so much a part of the local community are afraid to leave home any more than they absolutely must. They are afraid to stop for gas. They are afraid to shop for groceries. They are afraid of - any- interaction which might bring them into contact with local law enforcement, because many of them are convinced that if they are pulled over or stopped while on foot, that they will be taken into custody. They are certain that once that happens, they will be sent to the Frederick County Adult Detention Center and turned over to immigration authorities, and they are convinced that, regardless of their status, whether legal resident or US citizen, they will enter the deportation pipeline.

The sheriff insists that 287(g) has helped bring down crime, but the numbers don't hold up. In 2024, Frederick County experienced a 4% overall drop in crime, while Montgomery and Prince George's County, both of whom have larger immigrant populations in both absolute terms and as a portion of the county's population, saw greater a greater drop – 7% and 6% respectively. Neither county participates in the 287(g) program.

There is no evidence to suggest that 287(g) helps reduce crime because the immigrant population, regardless of status, does not commit crimes at a higher rate than the rest of the population. Suggesting that they do is racially discriminatory, and in fact the opposite is true; compared across income levels, communities with a high concentration of immigrants experience lower rates of crime than comparable non-immigrant populations. The Golden Mile is a testament to this – our crime rates are comparable to the Downtown district, and many of the violent crimes that occur in the area are committed by someone from outside the community.

The impact of 287(g) on the Golden Mile business community is not trivial. Businesses that were thriving are suffering. Stores and restaurants that were primarily supported by the community have seen a drop-off in business. Residents that were employed by local enterprises have been laid off. Others are afraid to come to work, and some businesses struggle to fill openings. This economic engine is beginning to falter.

This economic withering is not confined just to the Golden Mile, either. Many residents of the district work elsewhere in the county; while our county sees a surge in biotech, in logistics, and in other industries, many of the people who work in those facilities, and who help build the new warehouses, labs, and homes, live in the Golden Mile area. When the construction crews and the warehouse workers and the shift foremen stop coming in because they worry that a green card or a US passport isn't protection from being deported, that growth slows down.

When the immigrant community is oppressed, our society at large is impacted as well. We are not separate or apart from those who do not share our ancestry; virtually all of us are born of those who came here from somewhere else, and to insist that more recent immigrants have less right to the protections of law defies reason. Recent immigrants are an integral part of our community and our economy, and attempting to remove them breaks both. We can see that breakage ourselves in rising prices for food, for housing, for many services as the people who work in those industries are no longer available.

I ask that you for a favorable return on this bill.

Thank you for your time and I welcome any questions.