



Many struggles, one mission.

Testimony SUPPORTING SB0478

February 7, 2021

Dear members of the Judicial Proceedings Committee,

My name is Abby Cocke, and I am a resident of Baltimore City in District 43 and a strong supporter of SB0478. On behalf of Baltimore for Border Justice, a local advocacy and aid organization, I am submitting this testimony to urge you to SUPPORT SB0478, *Correctional Services – Immigration Detention – Prohibition (Dignity Not Detention Act)*. The profit motive should never be a part of justice, and it is especially grotesque when applied to the detention of immigrants and asylum-seekers. In addition to being a perverse incentive that rewards expansion of our already-bloated system of incarceration, it demonstrably leads to even poorer and less transparent conditions. It is essential that we prohibit this abomination in our state now, before it takes hold.

In April 2019, U.S. Immigrations and Customs Enforcement (ICE) advertised for private contractors to open a new Baltimore-area immigration detention center to house up to 800 people. Since these sorts of arrangements invariably involve kickbacks to local governments, this would create a monetary incentive for ramped up raids on immigrant communities to fill this new facility and keep the funds flowing. Preying on the bodies of vulnerable people and breaking up families in the name of profit hearkens back to our shameful history of slave catchers. Not only will undocumented immigrants be targeted, increased ICE presence will also impact all Hispanic Americans through profiling.

One of the companies that responded to the ICE advertisement was Immigration Centers of America (ICA), which runs a private immigrant detention facility in Farmville, Virginia. This facility has a long and dark history of abuses. When Baltimore for Border Justice wrote to this committee about last year's version of this bill, we outlined some of the worst of ICA's actions and inactions known at the time, but this past year has brought a new suite of horrors. In August 2020, nearly 90% of detainees at ICA's Farmville facility had tested positive for Covid-19. Despite having by far the worst outbreak at any similar facility in the country, resulting in at least one death attributed to the virus, inmates remain warehoused in bunk beds mere feet apart, receive only Tylenol in response to any coronavirus symptoms short of those requiring hospitalization, and are pepper-sprayed in response to hunger strikes. Rates of Covid-19 in surrounding communities with immigrant detention centers are, unsurprisingly, higher than those without them – we all pay the price when we allow the most vulnerable to be treated so incredibly poorly.

It would be a disaster for Baltimore to have a detention facility like the one in Farmville. Baltimore has always been a popular destination for new immigrants, and that remains true today – we are one of seven jurisdictions in Maryland where immigrants have stopped or slowed population loss in recent years. According to the nonpartisan Fiscal Policy Institute, immigrants make up 9% of Baltimore's population, but 12% of the workforce. They are statistically more likely to start new businesses and less likely to commit crime. But most importantly, THEY ARE PEOPLE, and we will not see their suffering be used to line pockets.

Thank you for your attention and for doing the right thing.

Sincerely,

Abby Cocke
Co-founder, Baltimore for Border Justice
Bmore4borderjustice@gmail.com
443-631-0432