

February 7, 2021

Helen Beneš Kaiser
Hyattsville, MD 20782
helena.benes@gmail.com

TESTIMONY IN SUPPORT OF SB478
Correctional Services – Immigration Detention – Prohibition (Dignity Not Detention Act)

My name is Helen Beneš Kaiser and I have resided in Maryland District 22 for the past two and a half years. I am writing you as a core leader of the Bend the Arc: Jewish Action, Prince George's County Minyan, and as a member of Jews United for Justice (JUFJ) and of Maryland Against ICE Detention (MDAID) as well as an ally of CASA. I strongly urge this committee to report favorably on SB 478, the Dignity Not Detention Act.

I write not only as a Jew who feels called by the Torah – which commands us to love and welcome the stranger (the refugee and immigrant) as our neighbor – but as a child of political refugee from formerly communist Czechoslovakia and as the daughter-in-law of Jewish refugees from Nazi Germany. My father, who had fled Nazi-occupied Czechoslovakia in 1938, later sought asylum in the United States in 1948 after the Communist government took over in his country and became a naturalized citizen after the Hungarian Revolution of 1956.

My parents-in-law fled Nazi Germany in 1938, sought asylum in the U.S. and became highly productive citizens of this country. Indeed, my husband's grandfather, who did not receive a visa in time to escape Nazi Germany, died in the Theresienstadt concentration camp. I grew up being grateful for the asylum granted my father and my parents-in-law and as an adult have been committed to assuring that refugees and other immigrants fleeing persecution would find a safe haven in our country and especially in the state in which I live.

I have been horrified to learn that our progressive state cooperates with ICE to detain immigrants in three facilities and that even more immigrant detention centers may be opened in Maryland. ICE tactics mirror those from totalitarian regimes that my parents-in-law escaped from, and I find it abhorrent that these strategies – such as separation of families and holding children hostage – are still relied upon today in the United States. Maryland has no mandated role to play in federal immigration detention and it is time for our state to step up and lead on the issue, and end all contracts with ICE.

I believe that nobody in our country, a country that welcomed my father and parents-in-law and provided them liberty from persecution, should live in the fear that drove my family to immigrate here. You have the power to end this persecution here in our state, and as your constituent, I urge you to do so. I respectfully urge a favorable report on SB478.

Sincerely,

Helen Beneš Kaiser