

Testimony in support of SB0317/HB0750 Right to Counsel in Immigration Proceedings Coordinator

To: Hon. Luke Clippinger, Chair, and members of the House Judiciary Committee
From: Ross Wells
Date: March 3, 2021

I am writing in **support of Senate Bill 0317/House Bill 0750**, Right to Counsel in Immigration Proceedings Coordinator, on behalf of the Immigration Justice Team at the Washington Ethical Society.

SB0317/HB0750 would empower the Office of the Public Defender to coordinate legal representation for Maryland residents facing detention or deportation in immigration court. Having legal counsel has been shown to be the critical difference in whether an immigrant gets to be free pending adjudication of his or her asylum request, and whether an immigrant is deported or is allowed to live freely and safely with his or her family in America.

Since 2004, I've led delegations of youth and adults from our congregation, the Washington Ethical Society (WES), to perform service work in El Salvador. I was also a credentialed, international election observer during the Salvadoran Presidential Election of 2009. For the past 10 years, WES has had a Sister Community relationship with the people of El Rodeo, a tiny farming community near the Honduran border. In June, twelve of us will return to celebrate the coming of clean running water to every family in the community. We've been working on this for eight years. We're in it for the long haul. I have visited El Salvador a total of 14 times. This experience has given me a window into the push and pull of migration from one of the most dangerous places on earth.

In this regard, I know of what I speak. Our good friend Carlos Ramos, an outstanding young man, joined the National Police so he could remain in his home town of El Rodeo, have some cash income and help with the family farm on weekends. However, he had to flee the country after he and his police team arrested MS-13 gang members in 2016. For doing their job, two of his four police team members were murdered by MS-13 and one is in hiding. Gang members beat Carlos so badly that he was hospitalized. Then they came for him in the hospital. His family was threatened with death. It was only after hearing this threat that Carlos set out on the migrant trail for the U.S. and a plea for asylum in our country. He was able to get a lawyer and was granted asylum.

In spring of 2017, members of the 18th Street gang murdered another friend of mine named Enrique Martinez, just outside of San Salvador. His "crime" was to help his uncle work on his mini-bus and setting foot in 18th St. Gang territory. Gang members learned that Enrique and his family lived in MS-13 territory. That's all it took. They dragged him into a van with darkened windows and drove away. They shot him in

many places before they delivered fatal shots to his head. "Kike" was one of the kindest and most gentle men I've ever known and one of the most "street-smart". None of that mattered.

I understand that "credible fear" is very difficult to determine from afar. My experience in El Salvador is that when one of the gangs target someone, their whole family is at risk. Returning refugees are often targets for extortion. In some circumstances, deportation can mean death.

The Salvadoran police are not in a position to help anyone who has been targeted by a gang in El Salvador. This includes family members, as they are often used as leverage to coerce individuals to comply with the demands of the gangs. There are thousands of gang members willing to maim or commit murder in order to join or advance their position in the gang. Killing is an initiation rite, a point of pride and a signal that this person will do "whatever it takes" for the gang.

Our immigrant neighbors need legal representation to avoid being deported without council and becoming a death statistic in their home country. It's the least that we can do.

Respectfully submitted,

Ross Wells
12 Sherman Avenue
Takoma Park, MD 20912