

Testimony in support of HB 750 (SB 317) - Office of the Attorney General - Right to Counsel in Immigration Proceedings Coordinator.

To: Delegate Luke Clippinger, Chair, and Members of the Judicial Proceedings Committee

Date: February 26, 2021

Thank you for the opportunity to provide written testimony in support of HB 750: Office of the Attorney General - Right to Counsel in Immigration Proceedings Coordinator. As a Unitarian Universalist my belief in the inherent worth and dignity of every person leads me to support this bill.

Currently, people in deportation proceedings do not have a right to government funded counsel. Despite the grave consequences of deportation, many people have no option but to represent themselves in immigration court. In Maryland, it is estimated that more than 500 people held in immigration detention are forced to represent themselves in immigration court each year. This denies the fundamental human right to due process and harms both immigrant families and immigrant communities.

This bill would create a program that would provide legal representation to people in immigration detention in Maryland and to Maryland residents in other states. It would also provide support to families of detained Maryland residents who are facing deportation. Most importantly, it would ensure access to counsel for the full length of deportation proceedings.

Such a program is clearly needed, since people without legal representation are several times more likely to be deported than those with legal representation. Both Prince George's County and Baltimore City have developed universal representation programs that have transformed the lives of immigrants facing deportation and their families. Certainly, Maryland can do the same.

Sincerely,
Stephen Eckstrand
Rockville, MD