

HB 0750 – SUPPORT
Office of the Attorney General – Right to Counsel in Immigration Proceedings Coordinator
House Judiciary Committee
March 3, 2021

Dear Chair Clippinger and members of the House Judiciary Committee:

My name is Edgardo and I am a resident of Hyattsville, Maryland. I am currently detained at a Virginia Detention Center. I have now been detained for 21 months. As a current client of Capital Area Immigrants' Rights (CAIR) Coalition, I am writing to express my support for HB 0750: Office of the Attorney General – Right to Counsel in Immigration Proceedings Coordinator.

Before being detained, I lived with my wife and my two dogs. I have been with my wife for 10 years. She is a U.S. Citizen. I am very close to her family. I spend a lot of time with my nieces and nephews. I've watched them grow up and I love them very much. I also worked as a foreman for a construction company. I supervised 5-6 people. I liked my job a lot because I was able to financially support my family and surround myself with great, hardworking people. I was working hard, learning new skills, and growing in my job.

I am originally from El Salvador. I came to the U.S. in 2009. I came here fleeing for my life because I was experiencing many problems with criminal organizations in my country. I wanted to be safe.

When I was first detained by ICE 21 months ago, I did not know anything about my legal situation. I did not understand English well, and still do not. Everything having to do with immigration was so complicated and difficult, but even more so in English.

Being in detention is unexplainable. When something like this happens to you, it is so hard. You lose contact with your family and you are always alone, worrying about them. I have lost family members during this time. My mother-in-law died this year. We were very close and this was so painful for me. It pains me that life is happening outside and I am not a part of it. I could not be there for my wife. My wife was sad and alone and I was so frustrated that I could not help her.

I have always been the principal breadwinner for my family: both my wife and my family in El Salvador. Without my income, my family is struggling to make ends meet.

When I was first detained, I was told by other detainees that there was a program for free representation. I was so scared to seek out legal help. I knew that immigration lawyers charge ridiculous fees. I knew people who were paying thousands of dollars, one-paid \$50,000, for lawyers who just took their money and did not do anything. Their families were drowning in debt and the people were deported because the lawyer did not do anything. There was no way that I could even afford a lawyer. I went to one of the meetings with CAIR Coalition and they told me that I qualified for free representation under the Prince George's County Safe Cities Program.

Having a lawyer has been empowering. Thanks to my lawyer, I have learned so much about how the laws work, how they change, and how they affect me. It is terrifying to be detained and not have control on what is happening with your case. It gives me peace to know that there is someone fighting for me who knows how to navigate this world of immigration law. Honestly, without her, I have no idea what I would do. I would probably already be deported, because I would not know that there are other options for me.

Being in detention, I have seen and learned about many people's cases. There are so many things that you cannot do without a lawyer, but they expect you to. I could not do the work that my lawyer does. When people do not have lawyers in immigration proceedings, they think that their only option is to be deported and that is what the ICE officers tell you. Detention is very difficult; people do not want to experience this so they do not fight their cases. I have seen countless people, who fear for their lives in their country of origin, who have entire families in Maryland, but they do not have the resources, they do not have the information, to fight their cases.

This bill is so necessary because people deserve to know their rights and have access to help. Most of us in detention do not have the resources to find lawyers ourselves, let alone lawyers who won't just take advantage of us. This program helps alleviate giant economic burdens on families and it helps give people hope to keep fighting for their families. I wish a program like this existed in the whole country, because people everywhere need help, but Maryland would be good to start.

The Prince George's County program is not enough. I have encouraged people to find help from CAIR Coalition but they cannot be represented because they do not live in the right place. This bill will do so much good for people in Maryland. I am still in the fight: for my case, for my life, and for my family. But I feel at peace knowing that I have my lawyer by my side. Everyone deserves the same opportunity.

I urge a favorable report on HB 0750.