

Wednesday, March 3, 2021

**House Bill 750: Office of the Attorney General - Right to Counsel in Immigration Proceedings
Coordinator**

Position: Support

Dear Delegates,

My name is Elam Boockvar-Klein, and I am a resident of Baltimore City. I am writing to urge you to support House Bill #750, to establish a Right to Counsel in Immigration Proceedings Coordinator. This bill would ensure due process in our immigration courts, giving hardworking immigrants in Maryland a shot at justice as they fight their cases to remain in this country.

Fundamentally, legal representation will curb the human rights abuses in immigrant detention centers, many of which are run by private companies in Maryland. Three years ago, I spent time in Georgia as an immigration legal assistant, working with lawyers at the Southern Poverty Law Center to get their clients released on bond. The attorneys represented migrants held at the notorious Stewart Detention Center, outside of Lumpkin, Georgia, which has been accused of a series of egregious human rights abuses in recent years. Perhaps most egregious of all, however, is that more than 98% of migrants' bond and asylum claims were denied. Almost none of them had legal representation, making it all but impossible to win their case, unable to navigate the maze of laws in a language often different from their own. The Southern Poverty Law Center attorneys, however, were able to win more than 30% of their clients' cases. I was present when two of their clients were released from Stewart, a life-changing turn of events that allowed them to be reunited with their families to fight their asylum cases from outside of the facility. We must give migrants the same chance here in Maryland.

Second, universal representation allows attorneys to identify patterns of abuse within detention centers, leading to class-action lawsuits that can improve conditions and policies for immigrants across the board. By virtue of simply having access to more clients - and therefore more case studies and evidence - lawyers create another check to the potential abuses of power in detention centers across the state. With inadequate federal oversight at these centers, it is imperative that we increase the presence of attorneys in these settings.

Finally, universal representation would save public dollars. The cost to indefinitely house immigrants in detention centers is astronomical. With more detainees represented, more would be able to successfully be released on bond, allowing them to be reunited with their families and fight the remainder of their case from outside of the center. And with fewer migrants stuck in prison-like detention centers for lengthy amounts of time, that means fewer of our tax dollars spent to perpetuate unjust detention.

For these reasons, I urge you to support HB #750. This program has already been implemented in Baltimore City and Prince George's County, with great success. Let's make it happen state-wide.

Sincerely,

Elam Boockvar-Klein
elam.boockvar-klein@werepair.org