

February 11th, 2022
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TESTIMONY IN SUPPORT OF HB559

Re: In Support of “Probation, Not Deportation”, Senate Bill 265/House Bill 559

Dear Honorable Members of the General Assembly,

My name is Luz Chavez Gonzales, I am a DACA recipient. I came to the U.S. from La Paz, Bolivia with my parents when I was 4 years old. My family and I settled here in Maryland, the state I grew up in, went to school, made friends and the place I call home.

Growing up, I didn’t know I was undocumented until I was 16 when DACA was announced. This--in addition to the rise of draconian deportation policies of the previous administration--made me commit to protect my family and my community and today I’m a Youth Organizer with United We Dream Action.

It is not news that the Criminal Justice System has disproportionately impacted Black, Indigenous and People of Color by incarcerating us at higher rates. This is true for immigrant communities who are twice criminalized by not only the Criminal Justice System but also the outdated and inhumane Immigration System.

My family and I understand far too well the impact of the issues intertwined between police and immigration. I too was a victim of police negligence that could’ve caused me to lose my protective status and sent me on a pathway to deportation.

The Criminal and Immigration Systems work together in a vicious cycle in which thousands of immigrants are incarcerated every single day often at for-profit detention centers where conditions are unsafe and unhealthy, particularly dangerous today given the onslaught of COVID.

Neither the State of Maryland, nor its people benefit from this harsh reality. On the contrary, we have witnessed way too much pain and grief from families who have been impacted by the Crim-migration System.

Let's be clear, HB-559 and its companion bill in the Senate might not solve all our problems, but it is an important step our State must take in the right direction. That is why we support the enactment of the "Probation, Not Deportation", Senate Bill 265/House Bill 559.

Thank you.

ORIGINAL

My name is Luz Chavez Gonzales, I am a Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals (DACA) recipient. I migrated to the U.S. from La Paz, Bolivia with my parents when I was 4 years old. But, growing up, I didn't know I was undocumented. I was introduced to the immigration movement at a very young age due to the involvement of my older cousin. Being resilient, she mobilized our whole family to join her at protests and marches. I was only nine years old when I went to my first immigration reform march. By the time I was fourteen, I had joined her in actions on Capitol Hill, going to congressional offices and shutting down roads as we called on the Obama Administration to stop deportations.

For a long time, I knew my aunt and uncle were undocumented, and I grew up going to these actions with the intention of showing my support. It wasn't until I was 16 that I learned that I was also undocumented. I remember the day my parents took me to a lawyer to apply for DACA. Initially, I didn't know what I was applying for, but midway through the process I stopped and asked. That's when my parents pulled me aside and told me that we were undocumented. In that moment, I felt alone and afraid because I realized that any small mistake would jeopardize the safety of my family. Because of that fear, I stopped joining protests and retreated into the shadows. After Trump was elected, fear lingered in my mind, and I had to choose between

staying in the shadows or organizing my community. Unfortunately, the uncertainty we face due to our status is not new. However, it has made me a resilient person that fights for their community.

My story as an undocumented student going through the college process wasn't straightforward, and the lack of support I received was something I always look back at. I graduated from community college in 2019 and became a National Dream.US scholar. Through that, I eventually became the first in my family to graduate from college and received my bachelors degree in Sociology and a minor in Political Science.

Never in a million years would I have thought that I – a scared Bolivian girl who didn't know she was undocumented until she turned 16 – would shape young leaders who would impact their communities. I have learned valuable lessons about the power of organizing since then, and I keep learning. DACA gave me the confidence to achieve my dreams. Now I can say I'm undocumented and no longer unafraid, and I know the power of speaking up about injustices. I am the direct result of knowledge and resilience. This is my home, and I am here to stay.