



Unitarian Universalist Legislative Ministry of Maryland

Shared Voices for Liberal Religious Values in Maryland

TESTIMONY IN SUPPORT OF SB 718:

Criminal Procedure - Government Agents - Requests for and Use of Immigration Status Information

TO: Senator Bobby A. Zirkin, Chair and Members of the Judicial Proceedings Committee

FROM: Tammy Spengler, Co-Chair Immigration Task Force, Unitarian Universalist Legislative Ministry of Maryland

DATE: February 19, 2019

Thank you for considering my request to support SB718/HB1165 *Requests for and Use of Immigration Status Information*. This bill will help restore trust in the undocumented immigrant population with our public institutions such as hospitals, social service agencies, and local law enforcement.

I am a Unitarian Universalist with guiding principles in our faith to respect the worth and dignity of every person and to create and promote justice, equity and compassion in human relations. I am also a social worker and co-chair of the HoCoIndivisible Immigration Action Team.

During the past two years, I have agonized over the climate of hate and fear that has transpired in our county. I have listened to individual immigrants in my role as a therapist and I have listened to immigrant groups and supporters of immigrants such as ESOL teachers or advocacy groups such as KIND (Kids in Need of Defense) whom we invite to our by-monthly Indivisible Immigration Action Team Meetings. We also have gone into the detention center to speak with detainees. I have heard from immigrants from Haiti, El Salvador, Korea, Canada, Guatemala, Philippines, Vietnam, Trinidad, and Nigeria. Over and over comes the question, "Why am I so hated?" And we also hear, "Thank you for standing up for us. I thought no one cared."

They have shared stories of being afraid to send their children to school, on a field trip, to go on public transportation, or to go to the food bank. Most try to avoid all government or public service contact, not just the police. They are afraid to trust anyone. One DACA student is so anxious that she struggles to stay in the same residence for more than a few weeks, even though she has a temporary visa. Her anxiety gets too high and she leaves her apartment to stay in another state or with a friend. She never watches the news anymore because the scenes of people being taken away are too triggering. She then cannot sleep or focus on her studies. She has been here since the age of 4 and fears for her safety

if she is deported back to a country unknown to her, where her father was murdered before her eyes and a brick with her name tied to it was in the yard when she and her mother fled.

The climate of fear that has been promoted in the national news and is paralyzing many of our immigrant neighbors, is also affecting the citizens of MD. As a therapist I have heard from virtually all of my patients that their anxiety and depression have increased since 2016 and a sense of despair grips many of them. This despair is not because of a fear of undocumented immigrants flooding the border, but because of what we have become as a nation. Hearing and seeing inhumane policies such as taking children away from their parents, locking them in detention centers for unknown amounts of time, losing these children in a system possibly never to be reunited with their families, is impacting everyone. I believe it is hard for most Marylanders, not just Unitarians, to imagine how we could have moved so far away from the principal of respecting the worth and dignity of every person and especially every child.

Although the State of Maryland is not directly responsible for what is happening on a national level, we cannot be silent bystanders. This bill offers the State of Maryland a chance to set a different example and calm the fears of immigrants and all residents of Maryland who are horrified by these policies. This bill says we will not further inhumane practices and immigrants will be treated fairly and humanely in our state.

It is time for Maryland to clarify our values that we do not operate from fear, but compassion. We do not leave behind the most disadvantaged. We are better than that. We are a state filled with knowledgeable people called to service. A state that listens to and supports its most vulnerable populations by creating safe spaces for them to seek help from the police, not to fear them. Immigrants in Maryland need to know that it is safe to ask for food if they need it, or to see a doctor if they are sick or injured. They need to know that they should not be afraid of being asked their immigration status and turned over to ICE if they seek government services.

By passing this bill, you can help calm the fears of immigrants. Maryland should be a leader in creating sound, just, immigration legislation. The politics of fear and racism must stop at the Maryland border. We can create an environment that allows everyone to thrive and we can be proud to call ourselves Marylanders