

SUBJECT: Yes on SB 1543

Chair Prozanski, Vice-Chair Thatcher and members of the Senate Judiciary Committee,

On behalf of Oregon's Interfaith Movement for Immigrant Justice (IMIrJ), we are writing in support of SB 1543 - a bill to provide immigrant Oregonians with legal support during deportation proceedings.

For over 15 years, IMIrJ has accompanied immigrant Oregonians who are at risk of detention and deportation under our federal government's dysfunctional and discriminatory immigration system. We've walked alongside parents who are terrified of being separated from their children, and whose whole livelihoods, families and lives truly hinge on the single decision of a single judge in an overtaxed immigration court system. We've accompanied teenagers and unaccompanied minors forced to navigate - *on their own* - complicated legal proceedings that will forever impact the future possibilities and pathways available to them. And we've supported people fleeing persecution and violence, still struggling to process the traumas they've survived outside the U.S., while having to plead their case for asylum on their own, when their very physical safety and lives are at stake.

Over and over again, we've witnessed the fear and frustration of immigrant and asylum-seeking Oregonians who – unable to find, much less afford, a competent attorney to represent them – are left with no choice but to try to figure out and represent themselves in a complicated, inaccessible legal system, often with considerable cultural and language barriers. Tragically, *most* of them lose their cases - despite very valid legal claims - and are deported, with life-altering (and sometimes life-threatening) consequences. Additionally, the lack of options and trusted legal representation makes it easier for community members trying to navigate this unjust system to be taken advantage of.

We have accompanied multiple families who trusted someone that was not trained to take their specific immigration because they wanted to try everything to stay together. Every time, these community members borrow money or make cuts in food or other essential items to be able to pay for services. One family with two elementary school children got in touch with us after the person who was helping with their immigration case had not returned their calls for months and had failed to follow up on their case. While we were able to accompany them and connect them to trusted legal representation, their case had been hurt by the bad representation they had received for years.

But it doesn't have to be this way. In SB 1543, Oregon has an opportunity to safeguard due process by allowing immigrant Oregonians to access the rights afforded to them under existing law, and navigate immigration proceedings with an attorney at their side. We are especially supportive of structures that provide a holistic approach to legal representation that acknowledges the importance of ensuring that members in our community have agency, support from other members of our community, and understand the process.

Representation by an attorney is the single most outcome determinative factor in deportation proceedings. Representation by an attorney improves someone's chances of staying with their family by 457 percent.

We've witnessed in practice that another way is possible. SB 1543 further expands the successful Equity Corps pilot program funded by Multnomah County, the City of Portland, and the State of Oregon to create statewide infrastructure for immigration legal defense. Under the Equity Corps program. One asylum seeker accompanied by IMIrJ was able to receive asylum for her and her young child due to legal representation from Equity Corps.

Across our various wisdom and faith traditions, we share some core, fundamental beliefs – a belief in the inherent dignity and sacredness of all human beings, regardless of where we were born or what circumstances we were born into. Nearly all of our traditions also profess some version of the “golden rule”; *to love our neighbors as ourselves*. In practice, applying this ethic of reciprocity requires a recognition of - and accounting for - how historical and ongoing injustices and inequalities mean that immigrant and refugee Oregonians (especially those who are Black, Indigenous, or other people of color) are at a systemic disadvantage in our legal systems, including our immigration legal system.

SB 1543 is one proven way to help right these injustices, and to protect the rights of immigrant and refugee Oregonians through the provision of accessible, culturally responsive, and community focused legal services. Services that make all the difference in ensuring that families and our communities can remain together, make life together and flourish, in this shared state of Oregon that we call home.

Thank you.

Interfaith Movement for Immigrant Justice