

**To:** House Committee on Judiciary

**From:** Mohammad Bader, MS, LPC | Interim Director, Department of County Human Services  
Peggy Samolinski | Director, Youth and Family Services Division

**Date:** March 23, 2021

**RE:** Testimony on HB 3230

Honorable Chair Bynum and Members of the House Committee on Judiciary,

We are writing in support of HB 3230, which establishes a universal representation program for immigration matters in the Department of Administrative Services.

HB 3230 would provide critical support to Oregonians in accessing the legal system to ensure their rights. It expands upon a highly successful pilot program, Equity Corps of Oregon, to establish an ongoing program that builds on the lessons of the pilot and the expertise and capacity in legal services and community-based organizations.

Legal defense for those facing deportation proceedings remains an urgent need throughout Oregon. In a 2018 survey conducted by the Oregon Law Foundation, 70% of participants identified immigration as a civil legal issue that had a very or highly negative effect on their lives. Unlike in criminal proceedings, respondents appearing before the U.S. immigration court do not have the right to court-appointed counsel. Meanwhile, the federal government is always represented by an attorney. Those going before the Portland Immigration Court without legal representation are nearly five-and-a-half times more likely to lose their cases and be ordered deported from the United States, many to situations where their lives are in immediate danger. (Source: Innovation Law Lab)

In Multnomah County, we have learned how vital this resource and approach is to protect the rights of disenfranchised individuals, particularly immigrants. In addition to the lack of court-appointed counsel, immigrants face significant barriers to both understanding the legal process and their rights, and accessing the pro bono legal services that do exist. Legal navigators within culturally specific organizations have proven to be a highly effective approach for engaging folks who need immigration-related legal support, empowering them with information, and getting them representation.

Multnomah County has leveraged state investment in Equity Corps of Oregon funding in the past two years to increase the number of people receiving this support. Our investment benefited an additional 262 individuals in FY2020 and over 400 individuals overall.

HB 3230 sustains and expands the proven community-embedded navigator model and adds several additional elements that, as a whole, will address barriers and gaps in representation for residents with

legal immigration issues. Those additional services include legal services, case costs, client assistance funds for fees, and capacity building support to service providers.

The views of members of the impacted communities were centered in designing how to deliver services through HB 3230. Community-based organizations, legal services providers, and immigrant rights advocacy organizations, such as Pueblo Unido PDX, El Programa Hispano Católico, Latino Network, IRCO, Innovation Lab, Causa, and several others representing impacted communities, also provided critical input on the elements of this bill.

We anticipate that there will be a significant need for these supports in the coming years to respond to both opportunities and challenges resulting from federal changes in immigration policy with the new administration:

- We foresee new opportunities stemming from policies that would allow people to regularize their legal status. These will require the deployment of resources to support applicants in navigating the complicated process. The need for immigration navigators is going to multiply as the demand will exceed the available resources.
- Challenges include the potential for fraudulent organizations and persons that would take advantage of applicants. In the past, as new immigration policies have emerged, we have seen a surge in scams. Many people have lost their opportunity for benefits and a significant amount of financial resources due to fraud.

We at Multnomah County support HB 3230 and ask that you take this critical step to address this inequity in our immigration legal system and promote racial equity in Oregon.

Thank you,

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