

Submitter: Rev. Joshua Stromberg-Wojcik

On Behalf Of:

Committee: Senate Committee On Judiciary

Measure, Appointment or Topic: SB703

Chair Prozanski Vice-Chair Thatcher and members of the committee

My Name is Rev. Josh Stromberg-Wojcik and I am the Operations Assistant at the EMO HIV Day Center in Portland, OR, where I support the needs our Spanish-speaking clients as well as other clients who are all low-income.

I am also an ordained ELCA Lutheran pastor and served three years and three months as the pastor of El Camino de Emaús Lutheran Church in Burlington, WA, where I led worship, preached, planned and ran activities, planned and ran fundraisers, led the church, navigated conflict, bible study, and other conversations all in Spanish. I also served on the board of Farmworker Ministry Northwest and helped organize farmworkers marches in the Skagit Valley. I also worked at El Centro de la Raza in Seattle, WA as the Volunteer Coordinator, which houses legal clinics.

I enthusiastically support SB 703/HB 2788, Pathways to Protection and Citizenship. SB 703 allocates money to the Department of Human Services to award grants to nonprofit legal service providers that cover the cost of clients legal services. This is a bill that will save and strengthen families, improve outcomes in ODHS programs, bolster our workforce, and strengthen the general fund by helping immigrants transition from state services like Healthier Oregon to OHP.

Up to 1/3 of Oregonians without an immigration status are actually eligible under federal law for an immigration status. That is over 25,000 Oregonians who, but for the high cost of legal services, are living in fear, out of the employment mainstream, and unable to support their families. Immigrant and refugee communities make up more than 13% of our state's workforce, yet legal costs prevent many Oregonians from obtaining a more secure immigration status.

I have personally seen how challenging it is for immigrants to move towards citizenship. We have good family friends, from Mexico as well as from the Congo, whom my mom supported through those barriers and helped study for the citizenship exam. Our friends from Mexico literally lived in the US at least 25 years, working hard, paying taxes and supporting the US economy, before they were able to get citizenship. There were similar timelines and challenges for members of El Camino Lutheran for my Latiné parishioners, even just for getting permanent residency. Not least of those barriers are the costs of legal services. Often undocumented immigrants are underpaid for their work that frankly we white folks don't want to do, often skilled and challenging farm work or factory work, and struggle just to make

ends meet, let alone paying for legal services.

One of our clients here at the day center has entirely given up on ever moving towards citizenship entirely based on the high costs of legal services to move towards citizenship. He wishes he could given the current political climate and Trump's threats of deportation. But he's on social security and is barely scraping by as it is. Paying for a lawyer would require him either not to pay rent or not to buy food. That's just not possible. He hasn't seen his family in over 20 years. He missed several weddings and funerals. He dearly misses his family and wants to visit them so bad. His mother is going to die soon. He will very likely never see her before she dies. This is very common for immigrants from Mexico and Latin America. Going home to visit their families without proper documentation means perhaps never being able to come back to the US and continue supporting their families and communities here in the US. The only way they could ever see their families is with proper documentation. Usually, the biggest obstacle to obtaining that is money for legal services. This bill would change his life and that of countless hard-working Oregonians.

Thank you for your time and for standing with all Oregonians.

Sincerely,

Rev. Josh Stromberg-Wojcik
Operations Assistant
HIV Day Center
Ecumenical Ministries of Oregon