

Vera Institute of Justice

Criminal Justice Issues and Prisoners' Rights

<https://www.vera.org/blog/three-new-bills-could-advance-immigrant-justice-in-maryland>

Public Facing Advocacy Writing

Noraa mother of three who was detained by Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) and incarcerated for 10 months after calling for help when her car broke down recently [recounted](#) her experiences to the Maryland Senate Judicial Proceedings Committee. Together with a broad coalition of advocates and people directly impacted by the immigration system, Nora is advocating that Maryland take steps to end local immigration detention contracts and collaboration with ICE.

This week, Maryland's General Assembly heard testimony on a set of three policy proposals that are shifting the national conversation on immigrant justice. Instead of rushing to detain and deport immigrants in large numbers, advocates and policymakers are advancing a multifaceted approach parallel bills that would simultaneously end immigration detention, advance legal representation for people facing deportation, and shrink the pipeline of people subjected to deportation to begin with. While the Biden administration takes initial steps to ameliorate harm to immigrant communities, transformative change requires that states like Maryland provide a path forward for a bold vision of justice. [Hundreds of people](#) have been deported in the past few weeks [and thousands remain](#) in immigration detention even amid the pandemic.

If passed, the bill advancing universal representation in Maryland would make the state the first in the nation to adopt a statutory right to appointed counsel for detained immigrants. [The bill](#) builds on local [universal representation programs](#) and [Vera's SAFE Initiative](#) partner sites in Baltimore and Prince Georges County by guaranteeing this right for both people detained in the state who are facing deportation and Maryland residents detained out of state. This legislation comes at a time when release from detention is [nearly impossible](#) without legal representation.

But representation alone is not enough to address the systemic issues and structural racism pervasive throughout the detention and deportation machinery. Another bill, the [Dignity Not Detention Act](#), would end local and state contracts with ICE for immigration detention. The state still operates three detention facilities in Frederick, Howard, and Worcester Counties, and ICE was [reportedly](#) exploring adding another in the Baltimore area. Imprisoning immigrants who are in deportation proceedings has always been [cruel and unnecessary](#). A 2019 inspection by the Department of Homeland Security's [Office of Inspector General](#) even found that Howard County Detention Center had multiple standards violations, including excessive strip searches, cold meals, and inadequate medical care. Amid the pandemic, the costs of detention have been deadly and freedom from detention has never been more critical.

As the federal government continues to detain immigrants, it also continues to encourage local collaboration for immigration enforcement. By limiting collaboration between local police and ICE, Maryland's [Trust Act](#) would ensure that local resources not be diverted for immigration enforcement that harms and criminalizes communities and families like Noras. This will allow the state to invest instead in programs that protect and support communities. Everyone should be able to live freely and safely, and community members like Nora should feel safe calling for assistance during an emergency without fear of being torn from their families.

Yet some legislators and law enforcement groups are baselessly [claiming](#) that these bills will make Maryland less safe and arguing that people are better off detained in Maryland than transferred to a facility further from their community. But the reality is that there are no good detention settings, and people are not better off incarcerated. People should not be detained at all rather, they should be released to their families and communities and connected with counsel and other support services. Its time for states to dismantle the infrastructure that incentivizes profits for localities on the backs of their own community members. And for those whom ICE continues to cruelly detain, Maryland should guarantee representation to give them a chance to make their cases and be released.

Maryland's campaigns to end immigration detention and local collaboration with ICE and advance universal representation all share the goals of ending mass incarceration and advancing freedom for immigrant communities. Collectively, they're an innovative approach that speaks to the intersectional experiences of immigrants with the justice system. It is time for Maryland to disable the racist drivers of our immigration system by moving forward policies that center the dignity and humanity of all.

To learn more about the SAFE Initiatives work in Maryland, contact [Corey Lazar](#) or [Mayra Melendez](#).

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