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Criminal Justice Issues and Prisoners' Rights

<https://www.vera.org/blog/facing-deportation-my-story-about-the-promise-of-having-a-lawyer-in-immigration-court>

Public Facing Advocacy Writing

My name is Alicia Fullard.

I am a mother, grandmother, and aunt. I am a unit supervisor at the Daughters of Sarah Nursing home, where Ive worked for more than 20 years. I am an immigrant, and I am a citizen of the United States of America. But if it werent for my immigration lawyer, I wouldnt be here today.

My story is proof that programs like the New York Immigrant Family Unity Project (NYIFUP) matter, because people like me need legal representation when fighting deportation.

Though I was born in Jamaica, the United States has been my home for most of my life. I arrived in the United States 30 years ago as a teenager with a green card. I came to this country in search of opportunities that werent available to me in my country of birth. I built the life I had hoped for as I settled in Albany, starting a career in elder care and raising my family. During all this time, I never had any trouble renewing my status as a lawful permanent resident.

Then, my world fell apart. I returned to Jamaica in 2014 to visit relatives I hadnt seen in decades. On my way home to Albany, immigration officials stopped me at John F. Kennedy International Airport. I was stunned when these officials informed me that my green card was being taken away, and I was being put in deportation proceedings. I discovered this was all happening because of an arrest from 16 years before, for which I had received three years of probation. No one had ever informed me that this conviction from 1998 could affect my immigration status. I had lived a quiet life ever since and had nothing else on my record.

I didnt know how to make my case in immigration court. Even though I had been steadily employed at a nursing home for 20 years, I didnt have the resources to pay for an immigration attorney. I was afraid that I was going to be displaced to a country that, before my trip, I had not been to for almost 25 years. I was worried that I wouldnt get to see my nephew and my grandchildren grow up, that I would be torn away from my job and my community.

Thankfully, in New York, programs exist that help immigrants who are in removal proceedings and cannot otherwise afford to hire a lawyer. Through such a program, I met a pro bono immigration attorney. My attorney connected me with a public defender who assisted me in getting the old conviction vacatedan option I didnt even know existed. With my record cleared, my immigration attorney successfully argued that there was no reason to deport me. To my great relief and my familys joy, the immigration judge terminated the removal case against me in January 2017.

My lawyers then suggested something that I had not really considered before: naturalizing. They introduced me to another legal team that helped me file an application, accompanied me to my naturalization interview, and came to my oath ceremony. I am so grateful that I was able to get representation when I was most in need. Having a lawyer meant the difference between being a U.S. citizen todayand losing everything. Today, one of the attorneys who represented me leads a team of NYIFUP attorneys who help people like me understand their options and stay with their families and communities.

My story is not uncommon. Programs like the New York Immigrant Family Unity Project matter because there are thousands of detained immigrants facing deportation across New York State who would otherwise have no access to an immigration attorney. Like many others out there, I had legal options and claims that I was not even aware of because I did not have a lawyer on my side. Without a lawyer, people like me do not stand a chance in our complex immigration system. Continued support for NYIFUP from New York State and from the public is incredibly important to me because NYIFUP is vital to giving people like me a fair day in court. For them, and for me, representation is life changing.

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