

## **Jailed woman asks Costello to help her win release**

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### **Body**

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An attorney for a Collinsville woman who has sat in a Missouri jail since September has asked Rep. Jerry Costello, D-Belleville, to press the inmate's cause with immigration authorities.

Maria Perez was allowed on Feb. 22 to withdraw a guilty plea for cocaine possession that would have led to her deportation to her native Chile.

Her attorney, Neal Connors, had expected that the plea withdrawal would lead to a quick release for Perez, 42.

"Her appeal is stuck with the Board of Immigration Appeals, one of these administrative agencies that meets in some faceless office in suburban Virginia," Connors said on Monday. "I was told after the hearing (in February) that, because Maria is detained, her case would be expedited and she'd be out in four to six weeks.

"We're at the tail end of that period now."

Perez immigrated with her family in 1976, fleeing the regime of Gen. Augusto Pinochet, the Chilean dictator. Though she has lived in this country for 28 years, Perez never became a U.S. citizen.

In 2003, she pleaded guilty of possession of trace amounts of crack cocaine after a traffic stop. She was assured by her attorney at the time, Tom Hildebrand, that she'd get off with probation as a first-time offender.

Perez did not realize at the time that the cocaine conviction is considered an aggravated felony with mandatory deportation for noncitizens. She remains in jail in Charleston, Mo., about 175 miles southwest of Collinsville.

The Immigration Board of Appeals, based in Falls Church, Va., could not be reached for comment Monday.

Connors delivered a letter requesting help to Costello's office on Monday.

"It (the Immigration Board of Appeals) is a federal agency. It's within his (Costello's) striking distance in D.C. If he could just bring some attention to the matter, I think it would help.

"I know from experience that the Immigration Board takes its time. I'm willing to get in line with the next guy, but at some point we need to say, 'Come on!' This is a no-brainer and I don't want it to go on indefinitely."

David Gillies, a spokesman for Costello, said his office had not had time to examine its options.

"We just got this (Connors' letter) today and we're taking a look at it," Gillies said.

## Notes

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METRO PAGE 2

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