



**BEFORE THE COUNCIL OF THE DISTRICT OF COLUMBIA
COMMITTEE ON THE JUDICIARY AND PUBLIC SAFETY**

**BILL 22-0877, “PROTECTING IMMIGRANTS FROM EXTORTION AMENDMENT
ACT OF 2018”**

**Testimony of Amy Nelson, Director of Legal Services, Whitman-Walker Health
October 9, 2018**

I am Director of Legal Services at Whitman-Walker Health (WWH or Whitman-Walker). I have held that position since January 2015. I joined Whitman-Walker as Supervising Attorney in September 2008. I offer these comments on behalf of Whitman-Walker in support of the “Protecting Immigrants from Extortion Amendment Act of 2018” – and specifically, in support of the proposed amendment of the District of Columbia Theft and White Collar Crimes Act of 1982 to expand the crime of extortion to include notification of law enforcement officials about another person’s immigration status.

WWH provides high quality, holistic health care and related services to more than 18,000 individuals, including nearly 13,000 DC residents – approximately 5,000 of whom are living with HIV. Through our integrated model of care, we serve consumers from every Ward in the City at our four sites – the Elizabeth Taylor Center in Ward 2 (currently located at the We Work facility in Ward 2 while the Elizabeth Taylor Center is being expanded); our Northwest clinical site at 1525 14th Street NW, in Ward 2; our Youth Services site in Ward 6; and the Max Robinson Center in Ward 8.

WWH is the nation’s oldest medical-legal partnership. Established in 1986 to provide pro bono legal assistance on matters related to HIV/AIDS, the legal program has expanded to

serve not only individuals living with HIV, but also LGBT individuals and families, and patients of WWH regardless of their LGBT or HIV status. WWH Legal Services now provides advice and representation on a range of issues including immigration; discrimination in employment, healthcare, education, and housing; federal and local public benefits; private health and disability insurance; preparation of wills and advance directives; medical confidentiality; debtors' rights; and name and gender marker changes in legal records for transgender individuals. WWH also partners with an extensive network of volunteer attorneys to provide pro bono placement on these matters. We are proud to be on the front lines of the District of Columbia's health care and community support systems.

WWH Legal Services provides free legal services to more than 3,000 families and individuals each year – nearly one-third of whom are immigrants. We assist these approximately 1,000 immigrant individuals and families not only to obtain relief under the immigration laws, but also to access affordable health care, fight discrimination in the workplace, obtain identity documents, and avoid or obtain relief from “notario fraud” – a problem that arises when a person uses a notary public license to fraudulently represent that they have a legally licensed to assist people with immigration issues as a “notario publico” (in many immigrant communities the title “notary” often denotes legal authority).

Our in-house and volunteer attorneys help immigrant families to file, and successfully pursue: asylum applications; applications for green cards and U.S. citizenship; applications/renewals of protected status under DACA; applications under VAWA and U, T, and SIJS status; and petitions for family reunification.

These immigrant families are working diligently to pursue or maintain lawful status in the United States; nevertheless, they remain exceptionally vulnerable to exploitation. In this

current political climate, immigrant families too often are afraid to seek police assistance when they are victims of criminal wrongdoing. Likewise, they have few places to turn when defrauded by persons falsely claiming to be immigration lawyers.

This bill would further the District of Columbia's goal of being a Sanctuary City by protecting residents against exploitation on the basis of their immigration status. Too many employers and notaries use the threat of exposure to immigration officials to extort money, sex, criminal acts, and more from DC's immigrant residents. In light of the Administration's curtailment of Temporary Protected Status for immigrants from a number of countries, and intensified, often unconscionable efforts by ICE to identify, detain and deport law-abiding, hardworking individuals and families, as many as 35,000 District residents are at risk and particularly vulnerable to extortion based on their immigration status.

The District government already provides support for immigrants through Immigrant Justice Legal Services Grants, the DC Healthcare Alliance program, and the issuance of limited purpose driver's licenses. This bill expands access to justice for immigrants in DC, and Whitman-Walker Health strongly supports its passage.

Thank you for the opportunity to share our experience. Please let me know if we can provide any additional information or be of assistance to the Council in any other way.

Respectfully submitted,

A handwritten signature in blue ink, appearing to read 'Amy Nelson', with a long horizontal flourish extending to the right.

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