



April 12th, 2023

To: Texas House State Affairs Committee

Re: Testimony Submitted AGAINST House Bill 1600

Honorable Chairman Hunter and Members of the House State Affairs Committee,

My name is Maria Ortega and I am a first generation college student at the University of Texas at San Antonio studying to attend law school, the daughter of immigrants, and an advocate for Dreamers. I am also an advocacy fellow and student participant with Breakthrough Central Texas, an educational organization that creates a path to and through college for students who will become the first in their families to earn a college degree. I am writing to oppose bill HB1600 because it is both inhumane and fails to address the root causes of problems in our immigration system.

Individuals who cross the southern border into Texas without authorization are overwhelmingly low-income immigrants from Caribbean, Central American, and South American nations. What they are looking for is better opportunities for their families. Often they are escaping poverty, crime, and a corrupt government, but this bill targets these asylum seekers as criminals. Our broken immigration system needs many improvements, and the reforms I am advocating for are not for borders to be 100% open. I agree that we have to prevent drug traffickers and human traffickers from entering and remaining in Texas without authorization. Instead, I am advocating for humane solutions for innocent working families who are migrating to escape misery or even worse, like the fear of experiencing violence or being killed in their native country if they remain. These people are not criminals like they are too often labeled.

I have first-hand experience with this issue. I helped guide my mother through her visa application. She paid \$10,000 and was still told a successful application process was not 100% guaranteed. Her only crime was to escape from a country where she was assaulted and witnessed the murder of the bus driver where she was held hostage. Her terrible experience is just one example of why people are immigrating without advance authorization. The current rules, regulations, and processes mean it takes many years before approving a case. Our existing immigration system is only designed for wealthy immigrants to gain authorized entry to the U.S. Visa requirements emphasize income, property ownership, and educational background and previous career. Most of the people who meet these requirements in their native countries are privileged individuals from the highest socioeconomic classes, but the rest get left behind. The United States has a long history of creating legal pathways for refugees and asylees to successfully join the economic and social fabric of the nation. I am advocating for those families who are coming and seeking opportunities that are contributing to the U.S. economy. I am not advocating for open borders but instead for reforms and more opportunities. I believe the system



can and should work for all sides instead of criminalizing large swaths of people whose only crime is seeking a better life for themselves and their families.

Another negative outcome the proposed legislation would produce is fear and reluctance within certain households and communities to engage fully in public life and institutions, for example by not reporting criminal incidents to the authorities. Individuals without authorized legal status will fear going out to work because of HB1600 and the ones who will suffer are their *children*. People like my parents are not criminals! They are escaping from actual criminals and came to the U.S to provide for their children. As their daughter, I am very proud of them for doing whatever they could so I could have the opportunities they did not have. Today, I attend a university as I pursue a Politics and Law degree and have been a community activist, teacher, writer and leader. My parents and I are proud of the woman I have become. HB1600 moves us backwards by denying others like me the opportunities I have benefited from. I urge you not to pass HB 1600.

Maria Ortega  
Breakthrough Central Texas