

County Council Budget Hearing for FY16

Wednesday, 29 March 2015 | 7:30pm

**Testimony by Jill Marie Bussey, President of the Board of Directors
for FIRN, Inc. (5999 Harpers Farm Rd., Suite E-200, Columbia, MD)**

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Good evening, members of the County Council! Thank you for this opportunity to provide testimony. I am Jill Marie Bussey, and I am the President of the Board of Directors for FIRN. I have served on the Board since 2008 and have lived in the County for over thirteen years.¹ I am here with our Board, team, clients and friends [please stand] to THANK YOU for your support and your contributions during Howard County Celebrates New Americans, the Special Naturalization Ceremony that was held right here on April 18th! It was truly a wonderful celebration of citizenship - not just for the 50 new US citizens and their families, but for our entire community. We also thank you for your support and contributions to our Ribbon Cutting in January and taking the time to listen to how FIRN is growing to better meet the needs of our immigrant neighbors.

We are very grateful for the County's past support - support that has contributed significantly to FIRN's growth and the successful integration of our foreign-born neighbors.

I am here on behalf of the Board tonight to support the FY16 funding

¹ My residential address is 5257 Open Window, Columbia, MD 20144.

² Data from U.S. Census Bureau's pooled 2009-2013 American Community Surveys.

proposal for FIRN - funding that is critically needed for FIRN and our foreign-born community so that it does not lose ground so recently gained. As you heard during our Ribbon Cutting ceremony, our testimony before the Executive and tonight, FIRN has been a good steward of the funding received last year – it expanded its offices, doubled its staff, and enhanced its technology to more efficiently and effectively address the unique needs of our growing and diverse immigrant population. FIRN now requires the proposed funding to maintain these critical improvements and to continue to support the great community that warmly welcomes and receives our new neighbors.

I believe you are well aware of our demographics - current census data indicates that nearly twenty percent (20%) of the County's residents are foreign-born.² Our rich cultural and ethnic diversity is a tremendous asset to our County. As we saw on Sunday at the South American CultureFest held at the Miller Branch Library – our community is enriched and enhanced by our international awareness, global perspective, and celebration of culture. Thanks to the Library, CA and the Community College – Howard County residents were able to “travel” to 10 countries in a single afternoon! As we have been for the past five festivals, FIRN was there to celebrate and to provide education about the services we provide and volunteer opportunities. We were also able to share more about the inspiring lives and work of this year's American Success Award recipients – immigrants who have achieved success in their professions and have demonstrated an outstanding commitment to service.

² Data from U.S. Census Bureau's pooled 2009-2013 American Community Surveys.

One would think that with the festivals, ceremonies, galas and ribbon cuttings that is all that FIRN does. The truth is the day-to-day work that is not so public is what is most important to our residents in need – parents who are struggling to meet the basic needs of their families, children like Brayán (who testified before the County Executive) who have just been reunited with their mothers but are facing unthinkable uncertainty in the Immigration Courts, families that would not have a holiday meal if it weren't for FIRN and our gracious partners. I note that children like Brayán continue to flee unimaginable violence and poverty in El Salvador, Honduras and Guatemala – we expect another surge of children to seek refuge and reunification with their families this summer.

For all of these reasons, it is important for FIRN to continue to build capacity to address the changing needs of our community. In summary, I request that you approve the CSP funding recommendations for FIRN as a critical and unique human services organization in our County. We would, of course, also be very grateful if there was any opportunity for the Council to increase the current proposal.

**The County's investment in the foreign-born now is a great
investment in Howard County's future!
Thank you for your time and consideration.**