

County Council Speech April 2015

Alexis Downs

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Good Evening,

My name is Alexis Downs, currently residing at 10806 Vista Rd Columbia, MD. I am providing testimony on behalf of the Foreign-born Information and Referral Network where I am currently one of three immigration services providers. I have the honor of working amongst a team of individuals who are passionate and dedicated to county residents. As a team, we work together to ensure foreign-born county residents and their families can meet their short and long term needs and aspirations. We cannot do this without your support and I am here tonight to thank you on behalf of our clients and employees.

Your support of FIRN has such a vast impact on county residents. We are currently doing our best to keep up with the pace of the foreign-born population in Howard County. County residents looking to book an immigration related appointment at FIRN are currently being offered appointments for mid-June; about a month and a half wait time. When emergency cases come up, as they always seem to on a weekly basis, we find ways to squeeze individuals in an already jam packed schedule. There is never a dull moment at FIRN.

FIRN provides services to a diverse group of immigrants with a wide range of inquiries. Some of our services we offer for free and for some services we charge nominal fees to county residents that can afford to pay. Many of our clients are hard working individuals who can afford to pay our nominal fees that help supplement some of the costs in supporting FIRN. However, many others cannot afford our services and therefore those who demonstrate an inability to pay are offered full or partial discounts. We have for instance ongoing cases for individuals residing at shelters, victims of domestic violence,

individuals receiving dialysis, children that have been abandoned and neglected, individuals that recently lost a job, and the list could go on. Your support is essential for these clients. By investing in FIRN, you are investing in the community. FIRN's work for these vulnerable populations has exponential results. Just one example of these results is our work with 3 county residents who found themselves homeless this year. These three individuals all hailed from different countries, had different immigration statuses, but they had something in common: They did not have access to the legal documentation they needed to stabilize their lives. One individual was a naturalized US Citizen and with FIRN's help was able to secure a replacement citizenship certificate. Yet another had an expired permanent resident card that had to be renewed to access his social security benefits. Another had no legal status when he came to FIRN but discovered he was eligible to obtain a work permit. This is just a small example of the work FIRN engages in. Keep in mind those are three cases and we see an average of 20-30 individuals in a day between the immigration counselors and social worker.

Thank you for your time tonight and again I thank you on behalf of FIRN clients and staff.