

Good morning, Chairwoman Grad and members of the House Judiciary Committee. My name is Kesha Ram, and I am a former state legislator and current chair of the Attorney General's Immigration Task Force. I have come before the Committee to share the work of the task force to date and convey the need for greater year-round state leadership and oversight in immigration matters as an integral part of Fair & Impartial Policing policy and practice.

I am grateful Attorney General Donovan appointed me to help lead this task force, which is comprised of attorneys, immigration experts, advocates, law enforcement, a dairy farmer, and others. It was formed in the direct aftermath of the Trump Administration executive orders of 2017 related to the travel ban and southern border wall, a time when the Attorney General was seeking ongoing guidance and input to help ensure the safety of all Vermonters in a changing legal landscape. It was one of our initial agreements, one I know is shared with many in the law enforcement community, that everyone is safer when people are able and willing to cooperate on matters involving the police either as witnesses to or victims of a crime regardless of their citizenship status or national origin. It has also been widely held on the task force that increasing the detention and deportation of non-violent undocumented immigrants, denying travel visas solely based on country of origin, and separating children from their families at the border all make us less safe.

In terms of the work of the task force, we provided early guidance to cities and towns to help them understand how to lawfully limit cooperation with federal immigration authorities if they chose to do so as a community, and we worked to better coordinate legal guidance and resources to help families understand their rights and supports if a loved one was detained. We then fell into a period of dormancy where individual task force members were called upon for their expertise in filing amicus briefs and formulating legal opinions to challenge the constitutionality of national immigration law enforcement. We recently renewed our work, reconvened as a task force, and were concerned to learn that timelines for adopting and implementing FIP model policy language and conducting law enforcement training were not being met.

While it is my belief that many in the law enforcement community are working to ensure the well-being of all who call Vermont home, there is a lack of immigration expertise that stymies both clarity and progress in the face of escalating threats to the liberty and safety of our immigrant community. Documented or not, they are integral to our schools, communities, places of worship, and workplaces in Vermont. I want to share just one story in addition to the ones you heard directly from friends and family of detained individuals. Recently, a popular pedestrian corridor between Winooski and Burlington, our two most multicultural cities in the state, was littered with leaflets from Patriot Front, a white supremacist, anti-immigrant group. The leaflets included a hotline to call to “report illegal aliens” to ICE with the website bloodandsoil.org at the bottom. A group of residents gathered the leaflets and collectively decided that they would not be any safer reporting the incident to law enforcement, even when encouraged to do so. If even documented citizens in diverse population centers feel this way, that should leave the Committee questioning how they can aid all Vermonters in continuing to see law enforcement as a resource and partner.

Our task force was able to build trust, work across differences of perspective and opinion, and begin to build a shared sense of the work ahead. Unfortunately, the future of task force is uncertain. The Attorney General’s Office has determined they can no longer convene discussions with multiple opposing parties in a case before the state. They would like to continue to be at the table with other stakeholders, but in a restructured body convened by another state entity. I leave that concern with you to consider being that convening agent, along with my express desire to continue to be of service on immigration matters. Finally, I thank you for holding this hearing today to continue to shine a light on the need for progress to keep all Vermonters safe and together with their families.