



## Connecticut Fair Housing Center

Testimony of Maria Cristina Cuerda from the Connecticut Fair Housing Center in favor of H.B. 5938, the Transparency and Responsibility Using State Tools (TRUST) Act.

Dear Members of the Committee,

My name is María Cristina Cuerda. I am a fair housing specialist at the Connecticut Fair Housing Center here in Hartford. I investigate and work on housing discrimination cases and do outreach and trainings throughout the state of Connecticut to provide information about the rights of individuals under federal and state fair housing laws. Thank you very much for this opportunity to share my thoughts with you about the TRUST Act.

The Connecticut Fair Housing Center is a statewide, non-profit dedicated to ending housing discrimination and affirmatively furthering fair housing. Our work is part of the greater struggle for civil rights embodied by Martin Luther King, Jr., Cesar Chavez and the many individuals locked out of our society because of the color of their skin, their national origin, their sex, religion, age, disability, source of income, sexual orientation, gender expression or identity. The immigrant rights movement is a struggle for civil rights.

Secure Communities has wide-ranging and extremely damaging effects on the lives of undocumented immigrants in the State of Connecticut. Not only does it result in the deportation of individuals never convicted of a crime, quite contrary to its stated goal, but it also creates fear of the authorities in immigrant communities. This fear undermines our public safety and the ability of individuals to seek recourse through our legal system when they are the victim of a crime and when they are exploited at work or retaliated against by their landlords.

Here at the Connecticut Fair Housing Center, we have had at least two recent cases where people were denied housing because they were not US citizens. These people were in the country legally and felt safe enough to report it. We understand from our contacts that in many communities this type of discrimination occurs frequently and because people are undocumented they feel they cannot report it and cannot enforce their rights.

Secure Communities legitimizes the exploitation of a group of people based on their national origin and sends the message that they have no right nor any access to justice.

What does that mean in real terms? It means that when workers are not paid what they are owed, they cannot seek justice because they do not trust, and instead fear, public institutions that were set up to punish employers who break the law. It means that when a victim of domestic violence does not call the police for help because of her undocumented status, she and her children will continue to live in fear of their lives merely because they crossed the border to escape the crushing poverty of their native land. It means that when an immigrant is assaulted and robbed

at knifepoint on the streets at night the perpetrator of that crime will go unpunished. When people do not trust the institutions set up to protect them the real message you are sending is: It is open season on immigrants. Lack of faith in institutions should not be something we encourage as a society.

For the last six years I have worked as an organizer in the undocumented community in Springfield, Massachusetts, just over the border, where I live. I know many people in Springfield who work in the tobacco fields, the nurseries and the landscaping companies in Connecticut, north of Hartford. I have personal knowledge of numerous cases where individuals were not paid for the work they performed. Because of mistrust and fear, those individuals did not seek redress. And, the employers who broke the law continue to do so because of programs like Secure Communities. I have driven by immigrants stopped on the highways by the State police, holding their hands up. I know that this mere police stop will cause the separation of parents from their children because the State police will turn those people over to ICE just because they don't have a driver's license.

We must undo Secure Communities because it contributes to an environment of hostility toward and racial profiling of Latinos. Passing the Trust Act is your chance to undo this harmful policy and to reaffirm your belief that when one person within a community is harmed by injustice we all are harmed.

Thank you for your time and consideration.

Respectfully submitted this 22<sup>nd</sup> day of March 2013.