

Testimony of Maria Serna to the Philadelphia City Council Committee on Public Safety
March 12, 2014

Good morning, ladies and gentlemen of city council. My name is María Serna and I am a member of JUNTOS and the founder of the Fight for Driver's Licenses Group. I want to let you all know of some of the history of our state and city and why the trust between community and police has been completely broken.

In 2009 I received a letter from PennDOT, the same letter that close to five hundred thousand immigrants in the state of Pennsylvania received at that point. The letter said I had to surrender my driver's license. Not knowing what to do, many members of the community and I began to hold meetings in Northeast Philadelphia. After several meetings, five fellow immigrants and I decided to take the State of Pennsylvania to court, demonstrating that the State had violated our right to due process. We won the case, and today I am able to display my driver's license.

This is not the case, however, for thousands upon thousands of immigrants whose rights have been trampled on and who lack any sort of document that recognizes their identity. Lacking a local valid ID or a driver's license, people are placed in difficult circumstances. When they cross the police's path, in the streets or in a traffic stop, many of them are in reality beginning a process of deportation. Those deportations have broken up families and left many young people without one or two parents to care for them. This is why for JUNTOS, deportations are the number one issue to address & why we have devoted ourselves to build cohesive power for our community, to end to the policies and practices that separate our families.

In Philadelphia, we have seen cases where being involved in an accident or even interacting with the police can lead to a deportation. There is an obvious connection between the lack of local identification and the beginning of deportation proceedings. We hear story after story of families split apart through deportation because an adult was pulled over or stopped in traffic due to racial profiling. Sometimes a community member shows their foreign ID's, which in turn triggers a series of questions on migratory status by the police, even when the Philadelphia Police Department is under an executive order not to request such information. All of this history has created a deep culture of mistrust and fear that has damaged our community. Many people live in fear of being pulled over, talking to police, reporting incidents, working with police as victims of crimes, etc. What this has led to is an insecure community. ICE Holds magnify this problem. If there is ever a sentiment that police are doing federal enforcement than we can never even begin to build this trust to engage in deeper communications with our community.

For all these reasons, we in JUNTOS and the Fight for Driver's Licenses wish to end all deportations and all destructive policies, such as ICE holds, that endanger the right of our community to due process, that breeds fear and that rips apart families.

As long as a single ICE hold is being enforced there will always be a fear of the police from the community. We cannot allow that any ICE hold is enforced here in Philadelphia, just as we must always continue to fight against all deportations. There is a Criminal Justice System and Federal Immigration System, those two systems should not ever be crossed. If the city of Philadelphia wants to build trust within the immigrant community and local police then it needs to end this practice 100%. Deportations break up families, and the enforcement of ICE holds produces deportations. It is time to end such an inhumane practice. No more ICE holds! Stop all ICE holds and let us live with dignity, the way all human beings deserve to live!