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Testimony in Opposition to HB 1554

By Jennefer Canales-Pelaez
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My name is Jennefer Canales-Pelaez and I am a Policy Attorney and Strategist with the Immigrant Legal Resource Center and a resident of Harris County. I am providing my comment today in opposition to HB 1554, a dangerous bill that would prohibit Texas cities and counties from using public funds to support legal representation for immigrants in their immigration matters. This bill would strip local governments of the ability to support programs that ensure due process and stabilize our Texan communities. It would also encroach on local government's ability to have control over how to spend our local dollars and further encourage state overreach.

Everyone deserves an opportunity to defend themselves in court, especially when the stakes are as high as family separation and in 2020, Harris County created the Immigrant Legal Services Fund because it understood this premise. Harris County understood that immigrants, like everyone else in our county, are a vital and integral part of our society. Our leadership understood that when we say Houston Strong, we mean, everyone in Houston because when tragedy hits, the city as a whole comes together for each other, regardless of status. This past year, when we were abandoned by our state for weeks without water or power after Hurricane Beryl, it was us Houstonians that looked after each other. In the hottest days a month after Hurricane Beryl, I saw how Houstonians helped each other remove trees from their homes, handed cold water and ice to one another, not one of them worried about who was an immigrant.

Legal defense funds are created by local officials that we elected and entrust to spend our local tax dollars in ways that align with our community's values. Harris County recognizes the need to invest our dollars in our most vulnerable community members because we are all we got! HB 1554 seeks to end local autonomy and prescribe a one size fits all direction as to what each locality should or should not dedicate their local tax dollars to. I urge you to vote no and say no to state overreach.

