VISITING THE IMMIGRATION COURT IN CONTRA COSTA COUNTY ON 1/16/25

Mary Schreiber, Shawn Gilbert, Ana Pan, and Diane Bianchi met Ali Saidi, Director of Stand Together Contra Costa and an Immigration Attorney, to get an orientation to the Deportation Court at 1855 Gateway Blvd, Concord. It had been brought to our attention that signage was inadequate and we observed that this is true. Based on a previous meeting with Connie James of United Latino Voices of Contra Costa County, we agreed to work on a letter to our Senators and Congresspeople bringing the no signage issue to their attention. The letter asks them to do what they could to enforce compliance with Federal guidelines for signage in Federal buildings. A letter was drafted by Connie, edited by Diane, Shawn and Brooke and sent to the LWVDV Board for approval. The letter was approved at the January Board meeting and has been sent to the legislators.

During our visit to the court, we learned that we could only sit in the Master Court on the 9th and 10th floor where the first formal hearings for immigrants take place. We could not sit in the Merit Courts where a summoned immigrant and the government present their arguments for and against removal. The judge reviews the evidence and decides on the merits of the case.

Upon arriving on the 10th floor, one must go through a thorough security check, like the ones given at airports by TSA. After clearing the security check, we waited in the small lounge area with a number of seats for anyone waiting for their appointment time and for volunteers helping. Children often accompany their parents and books are provided to them. Also, in this lounge area is a large screen which lists everyone who has an appointment in the Master or Merit courts, the time of the appointment and the courtroom number with the name of the attending judge.

We had a mini tour of the floor. Ali showed us the room where pro bono attorneys wait to meet with migrants to provide them with some advice.The day we attended there was a small group of applicants, but usually the number of people seeking advice from an attorney can be quite large. This limits the amount of time the attorney has with each client to five minutes. The group Ali works with, Contra Costa Immigrant Alliance, has prepared a Spanish/English packet for the immigrants with answers to many of the questions clients may have while going through the process. Additionally, the packet includes several pages listing numerous legal groups who immigrants can contact for help.

We also learned that the “judges” were in most cases former prosecutors or JAG attorneys. Their mandate is to follow the Executive Orders and administrative policies of

the political party in power. This is not a neutral position in the sense of interpretation of applicable court cases and established laws.

We were allowed inside the court, but before we went in the fire alarm went off which had never happened since the Court's opening. There were no clear exit signs for fire evacuation and we learned that Federal courts are not subject to local Fire district requirements even though it was the local fire department who responded to the alarm..

Everyone evacuated safely down the stairwell. There was no fire, but the event posed the question: What if there had been a fire.--would the judges reschedule the appointments of those impacted? How would they be notified? Would applicants leave the site and how would one identify who had left the site for fear of his/her life?

We returned to the 10th floor and went through the security check again. We then went into one of the Master courtrooms to observe. In front of us was a Spanish interpreter, the judge, her assistant and a large screen where another person sat and periodically injected something into the court proceedings. We learned later that the woman on the screen was an attorney either from the Justice or Homeland Security Departments. Her job is to represent the government. Each case varied and this particular immigration judge was very patient, explained the situation and steps the applicant needed to take. She answered his/her questions. Each person in this session had previous court appearances; none were there for the first time.