Thank you Chairmen Moore and Naughton and members of the committee,

My name is Hema Sarang-Sieminski. I am finishing my first week as Policy Director for Jane Doe Inc. I have practiced immigration law for 15 years on behalf of immigrant survivors and now work with this Coalition to lift up survivor-centered work across the Commonwealth. I am also a daughter of immigrants, a member of the LGBTQ community, a parent, and a survivor.

Every day, immigrant survivors of sexual and domestic violence in this Commonwealth hear messages that they are less than human and unworthy of safety. These very real messages come in too many forms – perhaps from the supervisor who threatens to report their undocumented status if they speak up about being sexually assaulted on the job, or the perpetrator of campus sexual assault who tells a survivor that nobody will believe a gay immigrant student.

BUT ALSO in the barrage of anti-immigrant and dehumanizing messages that fill the air we all breathe on our commutes, on social media and in the news. These messages breed fear, separate survivors from resources that can help, deny offender accountability and cultivate a climate of dangerous and deeply damaging silence. Safe Communities is an opportunity to shift this climate of fear and silence.

We know immigrant survivors are targeted for violence because they are less likely to be believed by the society in which we live. This disbelief is only magnified when a survivor experiences multiple forms of oppression perhaps on account of a disability or their gender identity. People who cause harm know this. We cannot reinforce and reward this by refusing to challenge policies that create a climate of fear. Blurring the lines between community policing and immigration enforcement magnifies the fear felt by all immigrants – and especially immigrant survivors. It reinforces rape culture and puts survivors at increased risk of harm.

So many of us have been called to action by the demands of the #metoo movement—a movement of survivors and survivor advocates who refuse to let rape culture and silence triumph over survivor truths, safety and accountability. #metoo holds at its core the belief that every survivor can and should be believed. At JDI, our member programs know what survivors go through as they survive and begin the long process of healing from experiences of domestic and sexual violence. We do not believe in the dichotomy of deserving v. underserving immigrants or survivors. No survivor’s journey is the same, AND safety and dignity are not rights that should only belong to “perfect survivors.” Many survivors have coped with their trauma through addiction. Some have criminal histories as result of their efforts to survive. These survivors who are at increased risk in the current climate, deserve the opportunity to access services, find safety, heal, and thrive regardless of their immigration status.

It’s time to reclaim a culture of community care in the Commonwealth. The Safe Communities Act restores fundamental safety protections for all residents. Survivors of sexual and domestic violence deserve nothing less. JDI and our member programs respectfully urge the Committee to give Safe Communities a quick and favorable report. I look forward to our continued work together.