
Blue Campaign Fights Against Human Trafficking

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(Flickr/The Advocacy Project)

Federal officials are promoting efforts to reach out to immigrants who are victims of human trafficking, domestic violence and other violent crimes.

On July 18, Department of Homeland Security (DHS) officials held a press conference to promote the Blue Campaign, a collaboration between law enforcement, non-governmental and private organizations to identify and end human trafficking.

The United States is home to many cases where people, often immigrants, are subjected to workplace and sexual exploitation. While this affects people from all socioeconomic backgrounds, traffickers often lure potential victims with the idea of finding better opportunities.

Marilu Cabrera, U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services (USCIS) public affairs officer states that there is a misconception among human trafficking and domestic violence victims regarding the amount of help available to them.

“We feel these people are not aware of the relief available to them. They have fear of government. They are also being exploited and threatened,” she said.

According to Cabrera, fear of deportation is one of the reasons victims refuse to seek help. “In a domestic abuse case, a spouse might threaten to not follow up with the victim’s paperwork and have them deported if they go to the police.”

In 2009, there were over 500 human trafficking investigations nationwide. According to DHS, from 2000 to 2012, USCIS processed and approved more than 3 thousand T Visa applications for victims of human trafficking. Although the number is low, DHS said the number of applications is increasing.

“That’s part of the reason we’re going to different communities across the country – because the T Visas are available, they’re just not being utilized,” said Cabrera.

Several government agencies also play a role in combating human trafficking. Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) works with USCIS to investigate internal and domestic human trafficking cases and provide immigration relief to victims. They also work with U.S. Customs and Border Protections (CBP) to help detect trafficking on the borders.

USCIS offers victims of human trafficking and other crimes a T Nonimmigrant Status (T Visa) and a U Nonimmigrant Status (U Visa). A T Visa provides immigration protection for victims of human trafficking that are willing to comply with law enforcement in the investigation and prosecution of human trafficking cases.

Eligible victims are not required to be in legal immigration status but they must be a victim of a severe form of trafficking in persons, be physically present in the U.S. on account of the trafficking and suffer extreme hardship involving unusual and severe harm if removed from the U.S. They must also file form I-914.

A U Visa may be given to victims of domestic violence who are the child, parent, current or former spouse of a U.S. citizen or permanent resident. If the citizen or permanent resident abuses them, they may be eligible to apply for a green card. They do not need the abuser to file for immigration benefits on their behalf.

A victim applying for a U Visa must be a victim of criminal activity in violation of U.S. law, must possess credible and reliable information that they have suffered substantial physical or mental abuse as a result of the crime and must aid in the investigation and/or prosecution of that criminal activity. The victim must also obtain a certification from law enforcement before they can apply for a U Visa with USCIS.

According to Scott Whelan, adjudications officer with the Office of Policy and Strategy at USCIS, the wait time for a U Visa is approximately one year. There has also been a dramatic increase in the number of people who have applied for a U Visa.

“Part of that is because we’ve been doing outreach,” Whelan said. “We’ve been to 30 cities nationwide and as the U Visa becomes more and more well-known, not only to law enforcement but in the immigrant community, more and more folks have applied.”

[Local law enforcement officials are sometimes the first to see the signs of violence. This is why the Federal Law Enforcement Training Center is training police officers to identify and give assistance to those who have been victims of domestic violence and human trafficking.](#)

Whelan added that the abuser does not have to be arrested or convicted in order for

someone to qualify for a U Visa, but they do have to give a testimony and gather hospital records or any evidence that supports physical abuse. If there is not enough evidence, USCIS will pursue an investigation, and the victim will not be placed in deportation proceedings.

“There are instances where you have a victimizer or a trafficker,” said Whelan. “You have a victim break free and they report their crime to local law enforcement but ICE gets to that criminal first, so local law enforcement can’t make the arrest. We’re not going to penalize the victim for that. As long as the victim was the victim of a crime and cooperated with law enforcement, they still are eligible for that visa.”

For more information about the T/U Visa, visit www.dhs.gov/bluecampaign .

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