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Police Captain Maria Alvarenga-Watkins, D.C. Metropolitan Police Department
(Retired)
Statement in Support of U-Visas, T-Visas, and VAWA Self-Petitions

November 3, 2011

To Whom It May Concern:

I strongly believe U-visa legislation is crucial and effective for police departments, all victims of crime, and communities at large. In my experiences as a police officer, captain, and trainer, I believe the U-visa should have more crimes included such as stalking, dating violence, robberies, witnesses of crimes, drugs, and crimes against children, the elderly and the disabled. Such provisions would further help law enforcement with their fight against criminals in our cities.

I retired from the D.C. Metropolitan Police Department in 2001. Throughout my over 20 years in the D.C. Metropolitan P.D., I had the opportunity to work in and to lead different units: community services, investigations, Internal Affairs, vice, patrol, training, and family and youth division. Due to my ability to speak Spanish, I also worked extensively with the Latino community. Furthermore, I became involved with other immigrant communities in the D.C. area that had many of the same issues and needs as the Latino community with respect to police services.

Before U-visas, T-visas, and VAWA self-petition legislation came into effect, I generally found that immigrants would neither report crimes nor cooperate with police. Police would often get involved by chance. For instance, if a victim were transported to the hospital for major injuries, the police would typically arrive only after hospital personnel called for them. Usually the victim was not very cooperative or would quickly disappear either from the hospital or from the address the hospital had on file. Our cases would not go further than the initial report. At one time, an irate citizen came to the police station to complain that local law enforcement was failing to protect the citizens that lived in a northwestern community. He explained that there were a number of robberies, assaults, rapes, threats and other crimes against Latino immigrants and the police were looking the other way. Upon investigating this claim, it was determined that many of those crimes had not been reported to police; one of the main reasons crime was not being reported in this community was because Latinos feared deportation.

During this time, I worked closely with Leslye Orloff, who was then working for Ayuda, Inc. Our partnership began out of the need to help victims of domestic violence—at that time, there were no criminal laws directly dealing with domestic violence, much less undocumented victims. Through our involvement with immigrant victims of family violence, sexual assault and other crimes, we realized that there were many perpetrators that were abusing and assaulting women and used the victim's undocumented status as a tool to exert power and control over her.

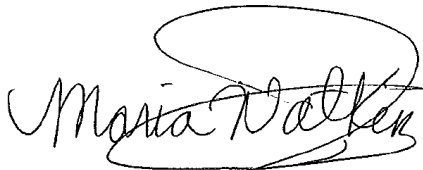
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Perpetrators and criminals thrive on immigrants' fear of deportation. The fear keeps immigrants from reporting crimes or calling the police, which allows predators to continue viciously victimizing immigrants without accountability for their crimes. These perpetrators sometimes lived in the victims' homes, were employers or co-workers at the victims' workplace, and roamed the streets among the community at large.

When Congress created the U-visa in 2000, it was a victory for police and victims of all communities. This provision gave law enforcement a "leg up" on perpetrators and a tangible tool to help immigrant victims of crime come forward to report the crime and cooperate with the subsequent investigation. This legislation helps law enforcement stabilize a reluctant victim's fears.

Since the U-visa legislation came into effect, I have had the opportunity to train a number of law enforcement officers around the country. Many are pleasantly surprised to learn they have a useful tool to combat crime against immigrant communities in their jurisdictions.

Respectfully,

A handwritten signature in black ink, reading "Maria Alvarenga-Watkins". The signature is written in a cursive style and is enclosed within a hand-drawn oval shape.

Maria Alvarenga-Watkins

Biography

Maria Alvarenga-Watkins retired from the Washington, D.C. Metropolitan Police Department, where she worked for over 20 years and retired at the rank of Captain. Throughout her career in the Department, she was assigned to various units and responsibilities to include patrol, vice, investigations, internal affairs, community services, and many others. Since retiring, one of her enjoyments in life is to be able to be a volunteer at church and her community, especially as a Court Appointed Special Advocate (CASA) with CASA of Central Texas. She received the "Jane Quantan Piper Volunteer Advocate of the Year" award for the State of Texas in 2005. Ms. Alvarenga-Watkins has most recently served on the board of the National Network to End Violence Against Immigrant Women and ASISTA. She serves on the board of the Wing Society for CASA of Central Texas. She conducts trainings and workshops on issues of Law Enforcement and the Immigrant community; specifically, the U-visa provisions for undocumented victims of crimes, understanding this law, the application of it by law enforcement, and networking between advocates and law enforcement agencies. Ms. Alvarenga-Watkins earned her BA degree in Administration of Justice from the University of the District of Columbia and a certificate in Public Management from George Washington University. She now resides in Texas.