



Posted on Sun, Oct. 23, 2011

Officials seek out more human trafficking victims

By LAURA WIDES-MUNOZ
AP Hispanic Affairs Writer

The U.S. government offers roughly 5,000 visas a year to illegal immigrants who agree to testify against the traffickers who brought them to this country and then forced them into prostitution or other servitude. But in the first eight months of this year, only 524 victims applied for the visas and less than half were issued.

Federal prosecutors and officials say they want to raise awareness about predatory human traffickers and put them in prison. U.S. Citizens and Immigration Services officials are conducting a national tour, speaking to immigrant advocates and law enforcement officials about the visa program.

But they are facing the challenge of convincing illegal immigrants to come forward when sentiment against them is on the rise, and the Obama administration is touting a record number of deportations over the last year.

"Someone who came illegally and knew they were coming illegally might think they have no redress, and they are mistaken," immigration services Director Alejandro Mayorca told The Associated Press. Just because someone agreed to be smuggled into the country doesn't mean they should be victimized, he said.

Mayorca also stressed that law enforcement officers, prosecutors or a judge must sign off on the immigrant's application, ensuring against those who try to game the system.

Still, advocates who work with immigrant crime victims say federal officials are in part to blame for the lack of cooperation.

"If you are saturating a community with fear, you are going to create a perfect situation for victims not to come forward and give perpetrators impunity because victims and witnesses are so afraid," said Susan Bowyer, the directing attorney for the San Francisco-based Immigration Center for Women and Children.

She applauded the outreach efforts. In light of new federal policies that require local law enforcement agencies to check the immigration status of those arrested for crimes, the government needs a carrot to encourage illegal immigrants to cooperate more than ever, she said.

The visas aren't just rewards to the individual who helped law enforcement. They send a larger message to the immigrant community that they don't need to be scared of law enforcement and

that helping police could benefit them, said Gail Pendleton, co-director of the Des Moines, Iowa-based immigrant victim advocacy group ASISTA.

The trafficking visas, or T Visas, are part of a larger pool of visas Congress approved overwhelmingly in 2000 for immigrant victims of crimes. Recipients can eventually apply for citizenship. Another 10,000 U Visas were authorized for victims of crimes such as domestic violence, sexual assault, other violent acts and even extortion - but again, only for those who cooperated with law enforcement.

Experts say part of the problem is that although the visas were approved in 2000, officials didn't release regulations for implementing the visas until 2007. Many law enforcement agencies didn't want to promote a visa that wasn't even officially available.

But applications for U Visas jumped 56 percent from 10,742 in fiscal year 2010 to 16,768 in fiscal year 2011. And for the last two years, officials have approved the 10,000 U Visas, plus additional ones for the immigrants' relatives. Those immigrants who qualify, but for whom officials don't have space, can get "deferred action," which enables them to stay in the U.S. until new visas become available.

Seattle prosecutor David Martin, who supervises King County's domestic violence unit, said he has helped obtain U Visas for people who came to authorities because they were desperate.

"We're talking about people who've experienced rapes or seen murder. They needed some protection. Their lives were on the line. I don't think the calculation of being deported really entered into that," he said.

Those eligible for T Visas may have the same concerns, but finding them has been a challenge.

"They're better kept under wraps. With an abuser, at some point they're going to fall asleep, or if someone is shot, someone is probably going to hear it or maybe see it," Bowyer said. Trafficked victims may be housed in difficult to reach dormitories or face threats to their family back home.

And there's another problem. Many local law enforcement officers know they need the help of victims and witnesses to investigate standard crimes like rape or murder. But international human trafficking may not be on their radar. They aren't even looking for witnesses or victims, as the crime is only beginning to be on state books. Even immigrants in the very communities where the women, girls and sometimes even men are trafficked may not be aware of what's going on, said Mercedes Lorduy, co-director of Miami-based Vida legal assistance.

Lorduy said her organization even has trouble getting some law enforcement agencies to certify the more straight forward U Visa applications, let alone the T Visas. She said authorities are often concerned they're being asked to give someone a green card, rather than simply verifying the individual was a cooperative crime victim or witness.

"It sounds simple, but it's true. We really need to get the word out," she said.