



BILL NO: Senate Bill 616
TITLE: Victims and Witnesses – U Nonimmigrant Status – Certification of Victim Helpfulness
COMMITTEE: Judicial Proceedings
HEARING DATE: February 21, 2017
POSITION: **SUPPORT**

The Amara Legal Center strongly supports the passage of Senate Bill 616. The Amara Legal Center is a nonprofit legal services organization which provides free legal services to survivors of sex trafficking in Maryland, Virginia, and the District of Columbia. Senate Bill 616 would clarify the process for victims of human trafficking to request that an official certifies the individual as “helpful” for purposes of applying for U Nonimmigrant Status Visa (U Visa). The bill would also clearly define helpfulness and requiring that officials sign and complete a victim’s certification if they meet the definition of helpful. The Amara Legal Center supports this bill because it will strengthen the support available to some of the most marginalized victims of human trafficking.

Each year approximately 14,500 to 17,500 foreign nationals are trafficked into the United States through force or deception for the express purpose of economic exploitation.¹ Undocumented immigrants who enter the United States voluntarily also become particularly vulnerable to sex and labor trafficking victimization once they arrive due to poverty, limited language skills, isolation from social services, and lack of familiarity with US laws. Through our work with survivors of human trafficking, Amara recognizes that in general victims are unlikely to identify themselves to law enforcement officials and undocumented victims are especially reluctant to seek assistance for fear of deportation or other consequences related to their immigration status.

The U Nonimmigrant Status Visa is available to victims of human trafficking who have been certified as helpful or willing to be helpful to law enforcement officials in the investigation or prosecution of criminal activity. A U Visa provides temporary immigration relief and an opportunity to apply for lawful permanent resident and employment authorization. The United States Congress created the U Visa as part of the Trafficking and Violence Protection Act to help law enforcement agencies investigating human trafficking and other crimes and to protect undocumented victims of trafficking. Senate Bill 616 would enable Maryland to better implement the U Visa program by clearly defining what qualifies as helpful for certification and outlining the certification process for victims and state officials.

Strengthening and clarifying the process for victim relief through the U Visa program in Maryland will encourage undocumented trafficking victims to come forward, connecting more victims with the resources available for their recovery and helping law enforcement officials

¹ U.S. Dep’t of State, Trafficking in Persons Report, June 2004, at 23 (2004)
<https://www.state.gov/documents/organization/34158.pdf>



investigate and prosecute more perpetrators of human trafficking. For these reasons, the Amara Legal Center supports SB 616. We respectfully urge a favorable report.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Stacie Reimer". The signature is written in a cursive, flowing style.

Stacie Reimer
Executive Director
Amara Legal Center