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U.S. officials boost efforts to protect immigrant crime victims

The U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services agency's U visa gives temporary legal status to people who suffer physical or mental abuse from crimes and help authorities apprehend perpetrators.

By Teresa Watanabe, Los Angeles Times

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U.S. immigration officials are boosting efforts to protect immigrant crime victims with increased funding and greater outreach to publicize visa opportunities for those who assist law enforcement in prosecuting their perpetrators.

The stepped-up efforts helped the U.S. Bureau of Citizenship and Immigration Services approve the maximum number of visa petitions for this category — 10,000 — for the first time since it began reviewing them in 2008.

The so-called U visa [grants](#) temporary legal status to those who suffer substantial physical or mental abuse in specified major crimes and help authorities pursue the cases; after three years, visa holders can apply for permanent residency.

One of the visa recipients this year is a Mexican immigrant in Los Angeles who was caught in the crossfire of a 2006 gang shooting while selling corn on the streets. He is paralyzed below the waist after a bullet lodged in his spinal cord, an injury that deprived his family of its major breadwinner and caused his two children to quit high school to work.

The victim was afraid of testifying against the perpetrators but did so because "it was the right thing to do," according to Rosa Rodriguez, a paralegal who worked on his case for Los Angeles attorney Jessica Dominguez.

One of his assailants has been convicted, and authorities are pursuing cases against the others.

"I feel relief that my children and I don't have to hide from Immigration anymore," the victim said in a statement. "I am very happy that we are able to stay in this country together."

Alejandro Mayorkas, the immigration agency chief who previously served as U.S. attorney in Los Angeles, said the U visa was a critical tool for law enforcement and crime victims.

"What is especially important about this is that it provides relief and assistance to individuals who are especially vulnerable," he said.

Mayorkas said the agency has boosted the number of staff members who process U visa requests from two in 2008 to 45 today. The agency has also increased training sessions and outreach about the visa; it has held four so far this year and two more scheduled.

The outreach includes presentations about the visa requirements and [application](#) steps to law enforcement, domestic violence shelters, community groups and others. Among other venues, agency officials have talked about the visa at national conferences of sheriffs and state legislators.

The agency has also created a specialized unit to handle the U visas and other crime-related visa petitions in the Vermont Service Center.

Some immigration hawks have questioned need for the visa, saying that crime victims should assist law enforcement regardless of immigration benefits. But Mayorkas said law enforcement officials back it as an important crime-fighting tool.

In reaching the annual cap this year, officials nearly doubled the number of U visa approvals from 6,000 in fiscal year 2009. The agency will resume issuing visas Oct. 1, the first day of its fiscal year.

Steven Espinoza, a Los Angeles attorney who represents several U visa [applicants](#), said immigration officials have significantly improved their service with quicker processing times and better information about the visa so both sides understand the requirements.

He said the visa has made a huge difference in people's lives. One of his clients who received the visa this year is a Mexican woman whose then-boyfriend broke her nose, pulled out her hair and hit their baby during a drunken rampage. Thanks to her cooperation with law enforcement, the man was arrested and deported.

"At the end of the day, we want crime to go down," Espinosa said. "What better way to do that than to have victims come forward with information?"