



Everything Cleveland

City of Cleveland takes important steps to ensure citizen safety: We all should follow its lead: Megan Sprecher and Michael McGrath

By Plain Dealer guest columnist

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By Megan Sprecher and Michael McGrath

Last year, because of cooperative work between the Legal Aid Society of Cleveland and the Cleveland Police Department, Rosa Gomez* was able to free herself and her young child from an abusive relationship.

Gomez and her baby lived in constant fear. The child's father, a U.S. citizen, was very abusive. He would yank Gomez to the ground by her hair. When she was pregnant, he pushed her down the stairs. After more than a year of daily insults, threats and assaults, Gomez sought help from the Cleveland Police Department. She wanted a better future for her child and safety and security for herself.

Thanks to Gomez's cooperation and assistance, the Cleveland Police Department detective assigned to her case quickly put together a strong case against the abuser. The detective promptly referred the evidence to the prosecutor's office.

The prosecutor swiftly charged Gomez's abuser with domestic violence and two other related crimes. Gomez faced her abuser in court, testifying against him for more than an hour. The prosecutor called Gomez "an ideal witness." Her testimony was so convincing that the abuser pleaded guilty to domestic violence. He received a jail sentence and probation.

Gomez then sought assistance from the Legal Aid Society of Cleveland. Gomez's cooperation with the investigation and prosecution of the crime made her eligible for a U Visa. The U Visa, a nonimmigrant visa, was created by Congress in 2000 for victims of serious crimes (including domestic violence and sexual assault). Congress created the U Visa with three goals in mind: encouraging the immigrant community to report crimes, strengthening trust between the immigrant community and law enforcement, and providing humanitarian relief to crime victims.

This relief is especially important for victims of domestic violence, who often are reluctant to press charges and who live in fear of retaliation from their abusers. Many victims remain with their abusers and do not seek the help of police for fear of deportation.

Gomez received the first known U Visa in Ohio.

One of the many requirements when applying for a U Visa is a form signed by law enforcement (usually police, prosecutor or judge) certifying that the crime victim was, is or is likely to be helpful in the investigation and/or prosecution of the crime.

Eighteen months ago, the Cleveland Police Department issued a divisional notice outlining the procedure for signing these certification forms. With the help of this notice, several other crime victims in Northeast Ohio have obtained U Visas. Up to 10,000 individuals can receive a U Visa annually in the United States.

On March 22, City Council President Martin Sweeney and Councilman Jay Westbrook introduced a resolution in support of the U Visa and the Cleveland Police Department's involvement in signing certification forms.

Council adopted the resolution, taking an important step to promote safety in our community. Additionally, with this action, City Council made clear that Cleveland is open to diversity and remains immigrant-friendly.

Police certification of U Visas is a powerful tool to build trust between immigrants and the Northeast Ohio community they now call home.

Cleveland City Council's recent attention to the importance of U Visas underscores the city's commitment to safety, immigrants and especially victims of domestic violence. However, our community cannot stop here -- while the city has offered additional help and protection for victims of crime, we must continue to help our neighbors and encourage friends to get help from the police, Legal Aid and other service providers who are in positions to help.

**Gomez's name was changed to protect her identity.*

Sprecher is a staff attorney at Legal Aid and works in the Community Advocacy Program, a Legal Aid partnership with the MetroHealth System. McGrath is the chief of police for Cleveland. He has been a safety officer for more than 37 years and police chief since 2005.

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