

July XX, 2004

Dear Member of Congress:

We the undersigned national, state, and local organizations are writing to urge your support for an important provision that will help bring stability to the lives of many abused immigrants. The 'Women Immigrants Safe Harbor (WISH) Act' would allow lawfully present immigrant victims of domestic violence, sexual assault, trafficking, and other violent crimes to access critical assistance that will enable them to escape their abusers and regain their independence.

Under current law, battered immigrants are ineligible for federal safety-net benefits including Medicaid, State Children's Health Insurance Program (SCHIP), food stamps, and Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF) during their first five years in the country. The rules governing eligibility for Supplemental Security Income (SSI) are even more restrictive -- rendering most recent immigrants, including domestic violence victims, ineligible for the program.

Additionally, immigrant victims of violent crime, including sexual assault, are ineligible for critical safety-net benefits even though they make our neighborhoods safer by working with law enforcement officials to prosecute those who committed the crime against them. The "WISH Act" would remove these barriers.

A battered immigrant suffering abuse cannot wait five or more years for federal assistance. Denying victims of domestic violence access to safety net programs undermines the laws established to protect immigrant victims from abuse. While our immigration laws grant these victims relief, our welfare laws force them to choose between safety and destitution. By making victims of abuse eligible for safety-net benefits, the "WISH Act" would enable them to establish financial independence from their abusers and empower them to move out of violent situations and into safe and productive environments.

Abuse not only affects victims, it also jeopardizes the security of other family members. In one-to two-thirds of the households where one partner is abused, the children are also abused. Several studies show that even when children living in households with domestic violence are not abused, they suffer from mental health problems, engage in violent behavior more frequently, and have a higher incidence of alcohol abuse. Many battered immigrants seek assistance to not only remove themselves from violence, but to protect their children and families as well.

Current law keep immigrant victims of crime trapped in dangerous situations that could lead to serious consequences, including death. By actively working to introduce the "WISH Act" and ensuring its passing, you help to make certain that no person is forced to continue to endure violence.

Sincerely,

Legal Momentum (the new name of NOW Legal Defense and Education Fund)
National Council of La Raza
National Immigration Law Center