

Committee on Public Health

COUNCIL OF THE CITY OF PHILADELPHIA
COMMITTEE ON PUBLIC HEALTH
AND HUMAN SERVICES

Room 400, City Hall
Philadelphia, Pennsylvania
Monday, June 1, 2026
1:11 p.m.

PRESENT:

COUNCILWOMAN NINA AHMAD, CHAIR
COUNCILWOMAN QUETCY M. LOZADA, VICE-CHAIR
COUNCILWOMAN CINDY BASS
COUNCILMAN MICHAEL DRISCOLL
COUNCILWOMAN RUE LANDAU
COUNCILMAN NICOLAS O'ROURKE

BILL: 260303

Committee on Public Health

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2 COUNCILWOMAN AHMAD:

3 Good afternoon, everyone. Welcome
4 to Philadelphia City Council's
5 Committee on Public Health and
6 Human Services. I now note that
7 the hour has come.

8 Mr. Sham, would you
9 please call the roll.

10 THE CLERK: Chair Ahmad.

11 COUNCILWOMAN AHMAD:
12 Present.

13 THE CLERK: Vice-Chair
14 Lozada.

15 (No response.)

16 THE CLERK:
17 Councilmember Thomas.

18 (No response.)

19 THE CLERK:
20 Councilmember Driscoll.

21 COUNCILMAN DRISCOLL:
22 Present.

23 THE CLERK:
24 Councilmember Bass.

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1 COUNCILWOMAN BASS:

2 Present.

3 THE CLERK:

4 Councilmember Landau.

5 COUNCILWOMAN LANDAU:

6 Present.

7 THE CLERK: And,

8 Councilmember O'Rourke.

9 COUNCILMAN O'ROURKE:

10 Present.

11 COUNCILWOMAN AHMAD: I

12 note for the record that a quorum

13 of this committee is present and

14 the hearing is called to order.

15 This is a public hearing

16 of the Committee on Public Health

17 and Human Services considering

18 testimony on Bill No. 260303.

19 Mr. Sham, would you read

20 the title of the bill please.

21 THE CLERK: Bill No.

22 260303, amending Title 21 of The

23 Philadelphia Code, entitled

24 "Miscellaneous," to add a chapter

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1 entitled U Visa and T Visa
2 Certifications, providing a process
3 for certified certifying agencies,
4 including timely responses to
5 requests, confidentiality of
6 requests, guidelines for the grant
7 and or denial of a request, and
8 other procedures, all under certain
9 terms and conditions.

10 COUNCILWOMAN AHMAD:

11 Thank you. Before we call up the
12 first panel, I would like to
13 recognize myself for some opening
14 remarks.

15 Good afternoon, everyone
16 and thank you again for all being
17 here. I want to start with the
18 people this bill is about. They
19 are our neighbors. They survived
20 something terrible, a serious
21 crime, in some cases human
22 trafficking. And then they did one
23 of the hardest things a frightened
24 person can do. They came forward,

1 they helped.

2 Federal law created two
3 protections for them, the U Visa
4 and the T Visa, but there is a
5 catch. A survivor cannot apply on
6 their own. First, a local agency
7 has to sign a certification
8 confirming they cooperated.
9 Without that signature, the federal
10 application does not even begin
11 here.

12 In Philadelphia, that
13 signature comes from three places:
14 the Police Department, the District
15 Attorney's Office, the Department
16 of Human Services. And right now
17 there is no shared policy of how
18 they handle these requests. No
19 timeline, no clear process, no
20 explanation when the answer is no.

21 We are not the first to
22 see this. Several states have
23 already formalized their process.
24 Here in Pennsylvania, House Bill

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1 1371 was introduced by Rep.
2 Hohenstein during the 2023 to 2024
3 regular session. Tried to do the
4 same statewide. It was the right
5 idea, but it never passed. So
6 while we wait on the Commonwealth,
7 our survivors wait too.
8 Philadelphia is going to act
9 instead.

10 Bill 260303 asks our
11 certifying agency to do four
12 reasonable things: First, respond
13 on a clear timeline with a faster
14 track for people who cannot afford
15 to wait, people facing deportation
16 and families racing the clock
17 because some of these protections
18 reach a survivor's parent, children
19 and younger siblings, but only
20 while the survivor is under 21.
21 Once they cross that age, that
22 protection for family can disappear
23 for good. A slow signature can be
24 the thing that ends it.

1 Second, protect
2 confidentiality. Third, give a
3 written reason when the answer is
4 no. And fourth, stop holding the
5 wrong things against people, like
6 how long ago the crime happened or
7 whether charges were ever filed.
8 This is also about public safety.
9 When survivors fear coming forward,
10 they stay silent. In a city where
11 victims stay silent is less safe
12 for all of us.

13 Mayor Parker says
14 Philadelphians should be able to
15 see, touch and feel what their
16 government does for them. That is
17 exactly what this bill delivers.
18 Instead of silence, a survivor gets
19 a date on the calendar and a
20 written answer they can hold in
21 their hand, something they can see,
22 something they can feel.

23 We have excellent
24 witnesses here to help us get this

1 right. I especially want to thank
2 Solveig Olson-Strom of Justice at
3 Work and Stephanie Costa of the
4 District Attorney's Office, who
5 worked closely with our office to
6 develop this legislation, their
7 guidance shaped the bill in front
8 of us and we are grateful for it.
9 So I'm going to stop talking and
10 start listening. Thank you all for
11 being here. Let us begin.

12 Mr. Sham -- I want to
13 first check with any of my
14 colleagues if they have any opening
15 comments.

16 (No response.)

17 COUNCILWOMAN AHMAD:

18 Okay. The Clerk will please call
19 the first panel to testify on this
20 bill.

21 THE CLERK: First up, we
22 have Francis Healy, Chief of Staff
23 and Deputy Police Commissioner,
24 Philadelphia Police Department; and

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1 Larry Krasner, District Attorney
2 for the City of Philadelphia.

3 (Witnesses approached
4 witness table.)

5 COUNCILWOMAN AHMAD:
6 Please state your name and begin
7 your testimony.

8 DEPUTY COMMISSIONER
9 HEALY: Good afternoon. My name is
10 Francis Healy. I'm the Chief of
11 Staff, as mentioned, to the Police
12 Commissioner, and I oversee legal
13 affairs for the Philadelphia Police
14 Department. On behalf of
15 Commissioner Bethel, thank you for
16 allowing the Police Department the
17 opportunity to testify regarding
18 Bill No. 260303.

19 The federal U Visa and T
20 Visa programs were created by
21 Congress in 2000 through the
22 Victims of Trafficking and Violence
23 Protection Act to encourage
24 immigrant victims of serious crimes

1 to cooperate with law enforcement
2 without the fear of deportation or
3 consequences. The program allows
4 certain crime victims who assist
5 police or prosecutors in
6 investigations to seek lawful
7 immigration status through the U.S.
8 Citizen and Immigration Services.

9 The Philadelphia Police
10 Department, through my office, has
11 been involved in the investigation
12 certification process for U Visa
13 applications since the federal
14 program was adopted and implemented
15 in 2000 as the primary law
16 enforcement agency in Philadelphia.
17 PPD serves as a major certifyin
18 agency authorized to complete and
19 sign the Form I-918 Supplement B,
20 which are the forms necessary to
21 initiate the certification process.
22 These forms verify that the victim
23 was helpful, is being helpful, is
24 likely to be helpful in the

1 investigation or prosecution of a
2 qualifying criminal activity.

3 The police department's
4 role in the U Visa process is
5 investigation and certifying in
6 nature. The department reviews
7 underlying police reports,
8 investigative records, arrest
9 information, victim cooperation and
10 prosecutorial involvement to
11 determine whether an applicant
12 satisfies the federal helpfulness
13 requirements.

14 Final approval or denial
15 of the immigration status rests
16 exclusively with ICE, not the
17 police department. Bill 260303
18 clearly impose additional
19 responsibilities on certifying
20 agencies. However, the question of
21 enforceability is largely academic,
22 as the PPD existing practices have
23 long been consistent with the
24 requirements set forth in the bill.

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1 PPD has historically
2 acknowledged the receipt of the U
3 Visa requests, provided written
4 notice and explanation for any
5 denials and conducted subsequent
6 reviews when additional information
7 became available. Acting as a
8 federally recognized certifying
9 agency, the department has
10 continued to support immigrant
11 victims of qualifying crimes who
12 cooperate with investigations,
13 while also strengthening trust and
14 cooperation between law enforcement
15 and the immigrant communities.
16 That concludes my testimony. I'm
17 happy to answer any questions.

18 COUNCILWOMAN AHMAD:
19 Please state your name and begin
20 your testimony. We'll ask
21 questions after you're both done.

22 DISTRICT ATTORNEY
23 KRASNER: Thank you. Larry
24 Krasner, elected District

1 Attorney -- I should say
2 independently-elected District
3 Attorney in Philadelphia County.
4 I'm here with Stephanie Costa, who
5 is the head of our Immigration Unit
6 within the Philadelphia District
7 Attorney's Office. And I do want
8 to offer subsequent to this hearing
9 some talking points that Steph
10 Costa was kind enough to prepare.

11 I know that there has
12 been some communication, and I want
13 you to know that we are fully
14 supportive of Council's efforts to
15 make it possible for us as
16 prosecutors to vigorously prosecute
17 violent crimes and serious crimes
18 that happen, and trafficking that
19 happen against all victims,
20 including immigrant victims.

21 U Visas and T Visas are
22 an incredibly important tool for
23 prosecutors in the United States.
24 They have been of interest to me

1 personally since the day I took
2 office in 2018. Our Immigration
3 Unit did not exist previously in
4 the D.A.'s Office, and it was
5 created in large part based upon a
6 very successful model that was
7 being used by the chief prosecutor
8 in Brooklyn at that time, with some
9 modifications.

10 I have signed off in one
11 fashion or another on dozens of
12 certifications for a very good
13 reason. I'm going to tell you a
14 quick story and then I'll stop,
15 because I know you have questions,
16 and time is of the essence. We
17 prosecuted a case in which an
18 actual member of MS-13, not many of
19 them in the United States, but an
20 actual member of MS-13, which is
21 internationally well-known,
22 incredibly violent shooting group
23 had shot someone in Philadelphia.

24 The victim needed a U

1 Visa in order to be able to stay
2 here and in order to be able to
3 testify. There were things we had
4 to do with his family overseas to
5 protect them, because MS-13 is just
6 the kind of group that will kill
7 your family overseas if you testify
8 here. Because we have that unit,
9 because we take the U Visa, T Visa
10 process that seriously and because
11 we had a different president, we
12 were able to successfully and
13 vigorously prosecute that case,
14 obtain a conviction against this
15 vicious person for a vicious act.

16 We need these U Visas.
17 We need T Visas. Without getting
18 into details, the current federal
19 administration has done about
20 everything it can to make it hard
21 for us to prosecute serious crime.
22 And one of the things that I hope,
23 I hope, they are not doing is
24 scaring away victims, but we know

1 they are because they're arresting
2 them outside of the courthouse.

3 Another thing that I
4 hope they are not doing is denying
5 these visas. But if they are, that
6 may explain why some of them are
7 not coming. And we can see the
8 concern out there in something as
9 simple as this statistic. And then
10 I will stop and be available for
11 any questions you may have.

12 There are fewer
13 applications for U Visas,
14 significantly fewer in this
15 administration, especially right
16 now. There are victims who are so
17 afraid to engage with Customs and
18 Immigration Service, which is
19 connected to ICE. They're so
20 afraid to do that, that they are
21 running, they're running away from
22 court, they're running away from
23 subpoenas, they're running away
24 from even reporting crimes

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1 committed against them. And this
2 is an essential tool that we need
3 to use.

4 As an independent-
5 elected or as a department of the
6 City of Philadelphia, we all need
7 to work as hard as we can to make
8 sure that the tools that we have
9 are used to promote public safety
10 by successfully and vigorously
11 prosecuting terrible crimes that
12 are committed against anyone,
13 including immigrants.

14 And I want to applaud
15 all of you in Council for the
16 courageous stance that you have
17 taken time and again and are trying
18 again to take here, I suspect in
19 order to make sure that normal
20 functioning of prosecution and
21 policing and DHS can occur in truly
22 abnormal times. So I thank you for
23 that.

24 COUNCILWOMAN AHMAD:

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1 Thank you for your testimony. I'll
2 ask a question of the Police
3 Commissioner and then open up the
4 floor. I just wanted to ask Deputy
5 Police Commissioner Francis Healy,
6 in your testimony you mentioned
7 that Bill No. 260303 clearly
8 imposes additional responsibilities
9 on certifying agencies.

10 Can you explain how this
11 policy adds additional
12 responsibilities? The purpose of
13 this legislation is to streamline a
14 process for all certifying
15 agencies, which are PPD, District
16 Attorney's Office and DHS.

17 DEPUTY COMMISSIONER
18 HEALY: The bill actually has
19 specific deadlines, as when things
20 are due. You can't find that
21 anywhere else, so it doesn't really
22 affect us but that's the additional
23 responsibility. I said it's
24 actually academic in the fact that

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1 we process them anyway in the order
2 we receive them. They usually get
3 back out within 30 days.

4 COUNCILWOMAN AHMAD:

5 Yeah. So the reason for doing that
6 is to make sure it's done because
7 time does matter. As I said,
8 particularly in somebody who's
9 under 21 and soon not going to be
10 21, it actually impacts their
11 entire family, what they can do.
12 So that's the reason for us making
13 sure there was some kind of a time
14 frame put in so things didn't fall
15 through the cracks. That has been
16 the feedback we have gotten about
17 things that some of these things
18 fall through the cracks.

19 And one other question I
20 wanted to ask is, so in terms of
21 you mentioned U Visas, but not the
22 T Visas, right. So I just wanted
23 to see if people who were applying
24 for T Visas also came to your

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1 agency, would you be issuing those
2 certifying letters?

3 DEPUTY COMMISSIONER

4 HEALY: We have the protocols in
5 place. However, since 2000 we
6 haven't received any T Visa
7 applications. They've all been U
8 Visas.

9 COUNCILWOMAN AHMAD:

10 Okay. All right. Thank you.
11 Anyone wants to ask -- so let me
12 finish with the District Attorney
13 and then I'll turn this over.
14 Thank you.

15 So the survivors of
16 domestic violence, sexual assault,
17 human trafficking and other
18 qualifying crimes delay reporting
19 due to fear, trauma, or concerns
20 about their immigration status.
21 How might a provision preventing
22 denials based solely on the passage
23 of time help ensure the survivors
24 are not excluded from the

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1 certification process? Meaning
2 that delay in time should not be
3 held against them when they're
4 asking for that certification.

5 DISTRICT ATTORNEY

6 KRASNER: I totally agree with
7 that. I mean look, ideally, if we
8 have a credible victimization that
9 meets these legal standards, we
10 should turn this around in two
11 hours. We should turn it around
12 before the close of business. We
13 should turn it around if we have to
14 do a couple things 24/48 hours.
15 It's absolutely essential in these
16 times that we move quickly on these
17 matters.

18 COUNCILWOMAN AHMAD:

19 Thank you. I know the DA has to
20 leave in a few minutes. I wanted
21 to open the floor to my colleagues.

22 I recognize

23 Councilmember Rue Landau.

24 COUNCILWOMAN LANDAU:

1 Thank you. I just wanted to just
2 be clear to get a reality check.
3 When I was at the Commission on
4 Human Relations, we worked on U and
5 T Visas relatively -- at least
6 occasionally. Sometimes it was
7 busier. And exactly during Trump
8 1.0, we had far fewer people who
9 wanted to step forward in order to
10 apply to them.

11 But how long
12 realistically, especially to the
13 DA's office, is your turnaround
14 time? We hear from the Police
15 Department that they definitely do
16 it within 30 days. Is there a
17 backlog at the DA's Office?

18 DISTRICT ATTORNEY
19 KRASNER: I think the short answer
20 is heck no. Usually, when it's put
21 in front of me, it gets signed
22 within 10 minutes. But let me have
23 my expert Steph Costa speak to
24 that.

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1 MS. COSTA: Similarly to
2 what you're saying, some weeks we
3 see 20, some weeks we see --

4 COUNCILWOMAN AHMAD:
5 Please state your name --

6 MS. COSTA: Oh, yeah.
7 Stephanie Costa, immigration
8 counsel at the DAO. Some weeks we
9 see two requests, some weeks we see
10 20. So of course, that dictates
11 how quickly I can get to it. But
12 about two weeks is the average, no
13 more than a month. And sometimes
14 if it takes a month, it's because
15 I'm trying to coordinate with the
16 specially-assigned attorney to make
17 sure that I have all the
18 information that's correct before I
19 sign off on the application. But
20 no more than 30 weeks.

21 If there's an urgency
22 like an age-out issue or the victim
23 has an immigration court hearing
24 coming up, then we do try to turn

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1 it over within 48 hours if we can.

2 COUNCILWOMAN LANDAU:

3 Great. Thank you.

4 DEPUTY COMMISSIONER

5 HEALY: I can just add that a lot
6 of the delay, but the issue is you
7 have to look into the records, but
8 then we also look into the court
9 history to see whether or not they
10 showed up in the court or anything
11 along those lines. So we do a good
12 investigation before, but also
13 sometimes identifying the
14 individuals, the names can get very
15 confusing with surnames and stuff
16 like that.

17 So I have an officer
18 dedicated in my office that does
19 this specifically. And she's a
20 bear. She goes through this stuff
21 and then she pulls out the records,
22 so 30 days is an average. But as
23 to what was just mentioned, we'll
24 get calls, a lot of these victims

1 are represented by counsel.

2 So we'll get the calls
3 from counsel saying, listen, we
4 have a problem, either can you
5 recertify because we've done some
6 certifications and you need a
7 recertification of the time periods
8 extended on their side, not ours,
9 and we'll prioritize them and put
10 them up front and try to -- our
11 goal is always get them out as
12 quickly as possible, but a lot of
13 times also they won't give enough
14 information in the form. And so,
15 we will go back and forth a lot
16 with that, but make sure they get
17 the information so they can file
18 accurately.

19 COUNCILWOMAN AHMAD:

20 Thank you very much. And I just
21 wanted to add that we actually
22 changed it. We had a 30-day limit
23 on it first. But in conversation
24 with the DA's Office, we made it 90

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1 days. So in the case that you had
2 to do more work, you had that
3 ability to do that.

4 I want to recognize
5 Councilmember O'Rourke.

6 MR. O'ROURKE: First of
7 all, thank you, Madam Chair, for
8 hosting this hearing and
9 acknowledging my presence today. I
10 apologize for stepping out. I
11 don't know if these questions were
12 already asked while I was out, but
13 I just wanted to get these on the
14 record to our panel. Also, good
15 afternoon to D.A. Krasner. I'm
16 sorry I missed your name.

17 MS. COSTA: Stephanie.

18 COUNCILMAN O'ROURKE:
19 Thank you, Stephanie, for your
20 work. And good afternoon to you as
21 well.

22 Commissioner Healy, I
23 wanted to ask you two questions:
24 How many U Visas does PPD

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1 investigate yearly? And how many
2 of those are approved by the USCIS?

3 DEPUTY COMMISSIONER

4 HEALY: Well, in the last five
5 years we've done 1084, in the last
6 five years. Year-to-date we have
7 90 on average. We've been
8 increasing since 2021. It's
9 actually been increasing from 180
10 in 2021 to 229 received
11 applications. The disapprovals are
12 year-to-date 45.

13 When I say disapproves,
14 a lot of times they'll go back for
15 more information. We initially
16 disapprove them and then they'll
17 say, listen, we don't have enough
18 information and they give us back
19 another -- not reapply, but they'll
20 give us additional information and
21 we ultimately certify. A lot of
22 times the disapprovals will be a
23 result of either the individual
24 victim being also a perpetrator of

1 a crime in another venue of some
2 sort or wanted. You'd be
3 surprised. People apply for the U
4 Visa certification when they're
5 still wanted for criminal charges
6 in other jurisdictions. So there's
7 a vast variety of why we'll
8 disapprove.

9 But the good thing is we
10 don't disapprove the victim if the
11 case didn't get charged. If
12 somebody didn't get charged, if the
13 case got dismissed or any of those
14 things are not a disqualifying
15 factor, so regardless of how long
16 it was. So originally when this
17 first passed, there was concern
18 that, well, this is 10 years old,
19 this is 5 years old. That's not
20 relevant towards this the U Visa
21 certification process. We don't
22 bother that.

23 The issue is we do the
24 best we can, but we get a

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1 substantial amount of numbers every
2 week that come in to the point
3 where I have a dedicated officer
4 that handles these specifically in
5 my office.

6 MR. O'ROURKE: So when
7 you send them back, that's fairly
8 normative. So how does that affect
9 the time frame? What's the normal
10 time frame for a full process and
11 ultimate certification or full
12 investigation and certification?

13 DEPUTY COMMISSIONER
14 HEALY: Well, within 30 days we
15 send the initial -- if it's
16 approved, we don't hear back.

17 MR. O'ROURKE: So 30
18 days without the --

19 DEPUTY COMMISSIONER
20 HEALY: I don't hear back --

21 COUNCILMAN O'ROURKE: --
22 if it's a clean approval.

23 DEPUTY COMMISSIONER
24 HEALY: Say that again. I'm sorry.

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1 MR. O'ROURKE: So 30
2 days if it's a clean approval. But
3 if it gets sent back, what's the
4 normal time roughly?

5 DEPUTY COMMISSIONER
6 HEALY: Within 30 days. I mean,
7 we're working fast to get them out
8 the door because I have that many
9 backing up.

10 MR. O'ROURKE:
11 Understood.

12 DEPUTY COMMISSIONER
13 HEALY: But to your point of
14 whether or not how many ICE is
15 approved, I don't get that
16 notification.

17 MR. O'ROURKE: Okay.

18 DEPUTY COMMISSIONER
19 HEALY: I know there's only 10,000
20 I believe annually per year that
21 they approve.

22 MR. O'ROURKE: Okay.
23 All right. Thank you very, very
24 much.

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1 COUNCILWOMAN AHMAD:

2 Thank you. I know that District
3 Attorney has a victim's family
4 coming. So if no one has any
5 questions further for the D.A., we
6 would like to excuse you, District
7 Attorney.

8 DISTRICT ATTORNEY

9 KRASNER: Thank you very much.
10 Steph Costa will remain. We do by
11 the way have data consistent with
12 the prior question about the number
13 of applications and number of
14 denials from our office. And I
15 thank you for your --

16 COUNCILWOMAN AHMAD:

17 Thank you. I'll have Stephanie
18 respond to that part of your
19 question.

20 DISTRICT ATTORNEY

21 KRASNER: -- attention.

22 MS. COSTA: Good
23 afternoon. Our numbers are pretty
24 consistent with --

1 COUNCILWOMAN AHMAD:

2 Please state your name --

3 MS. COSTA: Sorry.

4 Stephanie Costa for the DA's
5 Office. Our numbers are relatively
6 consistent with the police
7 department 2024 and 2025
8 respectively. We received about
9 230 or so applications each of
10 those years. Year-to-date we've
11 received 67, which is actually a
12 pretty big drop-off from years
13 past, which could have something to
14 do with the allegations that ICE
15 has been targeting individuals with
16 applications pending for U Visas
17 for removal, which previously was
18 not the administration's practice.

19 But to give you a sense,
20 in 2025 we received about 230. We
21 denied about 40 of them and about
22 25 were remained open until the
23 following year. That's because
24 when the request is based on a

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1 pending prosecution, sometimes we
2 have to wait until a trial happens
3 or something like that in order to
4 certify. But the rest of those
5 were approved.

6 COUNCILWOMAN AHMAD: Any
7 more questions for the panel?

8 (No response.)

9 COUNCILWOMAN AHMAD:
10 Well, thank you very much for both
11 your testimonies.

12 MS. COSTA: Thank you.

13 COUNCILWOMAN AHMAD:
14 Mr. Clerk, would you please call up
15 the next panel.

16 THE CLERK: We have Tara
17 Gontek, Chief of Staff to
18 Pennsylvania State Representative
19 Joe Hohenstein.

20 (Witness approached
21 witness table.)

22 MS. GONTEK: Good
23 morning.

24 COUNCILWOMAN AHMAD:

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1 Good afternoon. Please state your
2 name and begin your testimony.

3 MS. GONTEK: Thank you.

4 Good morning. I am Tara Gontek.
5 I'm Chief of Staff for
6 Representative Joe Hohenstein. I
7 will be reading his testimony
8 today, as he was unable to be here.
9 He is in session in Harrisburg,
10 hopefully getting ready to pass a
11 budget. And I also want to thank
12 Madam Chair and the entire
13 committee for taking up this very
14 important piece of legislation.

15 And I know the
16 representative also sends his
17 heartfelt gratitude. Thank you,
18 Chair. As the sponsor of companion
19 bills to protect trafficking and
20 crime victims in Harrisburg, I want
21 to thank my Council colleagues for
22 taking up this issue. At its
23 heart, these are crime victim
24 protection and public safety bills.

1 They will give a tool to law
2 enforcement that will enable police
3 and investigators to secure victim
4 cooperation in the prosecution of
5 crime.

6 They will give
7 noncitizen victims of serious
8 crimes the message that we see them
9 and we are ready to support them.
10 When this bill passes, we will be
11 standing up for the safety of our
12 neighborhoods, towns and cities,
13 because when a victim, any victim,
14 comes out of the shadows, the light
15 that is cast makes everyone a bit
16 safer.

17 I want to provide some
18 basic information based on my
19 experience as an immigration
20 attorney who has presented and
21 prepared numerous U and T Visa
22 cases over the years. These visas
23 do not give something for nothing.
24 There are no handouts in the world

1 of violent crime. If a person, a
2 human being who is not a U.S.
3 citizen, is a victim of a serious
4 crime, they must demonstrate that
5 they have suffered serious harm.
6 Then they must cooperate with the
7 police, providing information and
8 testimony that often places them at
9 risk a second time, and then they
10 must prove their case to
11 immigration examiners.

12 All that gets them is
13 three years in the U.S., at which
14 time they have to go through the
15 entire process again. And then
16 they wait another five years to
17 apply for U.S. citizenship. The
18 standard time for a person from a
19 time a crime is perpetrated against
20 them until they actually get U.S.
21 citizenship with processing delays,
22 criminal court delays, and just the
23 standard eligibility wait times is
24 more than 15 years.

1 What is the harm people
2 suffer to make them eligible for a
3 U Visa, you might ask? Well, to
4 answer that, I can let you know the
5 stories of some of my clients. The
6 convenience store clerk, born in
7 India, who broke up an armed
8 robbery while a bullet whizzed past
9 his ear; the rape victim, born in
10 Mexico, who stood up not just to
11 her rapist but also to her fear
12 that she would be deported if she
13 reported it; the mother born in El
14 Salvador, who took her U.S.-born
15 teenage daughter into the police to
16 talk through the details of
17 molestation by a family member that
18 the girl had just revealed to her;
19 and the newsstand owner born in
20 Kazakhstan, who watched his
21 livelihood go up in flames from an
22 arsonist's match.

23 The testimony of all of
24 these individuals made their

1 community safer, and every victim
2 who is empowered to stand up makes
3 us all safer. A U Visa can provide
4 safety through a pathway to
5 citizenship and legal employment.
6 State and local law enforcement
7 agencies, prosecutors and judges
8 play a crucial role in the U Visa
9 process by certifying that the
10 victim has assisted with the
11 detection, investigation, and
12 prosecution of the crime.

13 Without this, a crime
14 victim cannot obtain a U Visa.
15 Unfortunately, certifying agencies
16 are not required to have an
17 internal policy or procedure for U
18 Visa certification, which can lead
19 to unclear information and delays
20 for victims. Current Pennsylvania
21 law does not provide the clear
22 guidance certifying agencies need
23 to process U Visa certification
24 requests quickly and

1 comprehensively. Ultimately, this
2 lack of guidance can lead to
3 incomplete petitions and delays for
4 victims.

5 It also means the crime
6 victims in different parts of the
7 state get different results, even
8 when the crimes they suffered are
9 identical. Right now non-citizen
10 crime victims are subject to
11 discrimination, prejudice, and
12 ignorance in many parts of the
13 state. Sometimes the differences
14 are intentional. Sometimes they
15 are the result of lack of
16 knowledge.

17 By establishing clear,
18 standardized procedures for local
19 officials to meet the federal
20 requirements, along with training
21 in these requirements, we need to
22 make sure that every victim is
23 treated with the respect, dignity,
24 and human kindness that their

1 suffering and courage deserve.
2 This legislation will ensure a more
3 clear, more consistent and victim-
4 centered approach to the U Visa
5 certification process by requiring
6 officials to develop a publicly
7 accessible protocol.

8 It will establish
9 requirements for certifying
10 officials and agencies related to
11 request processing time frames,
12 record keeping, language access,
13 training, and victim notification
14 by providing a blueprint for the U
15 Visa certification process. We can
16 empower certifying agencies to help
17 victims produce the strongest
18 petition possible for approval.

19 I also want to recognize
20 my clients over the years who took
21 the brave step to stand up to
22 people who abused them or
23 victimized them. These brave souls
24 refused to be defined by

1 victimhood, but rather using the
2 tools provided under federal law,
3 they stood up for themselves, took
4 control over their own lives and
5 became fuller, more complete
6 participants in our society.

7 They taught me about the
8 perseverance of the human spirit.
9 And even though they do not have
10 citizenship papers, they are
11 quintessential examples of good
12 citizenship. The last thing our
13 society needs is for crime victims
14 to stay in the shadows. The last
15 thing that a victim of a serious
16 crime needs is to face systemic
17 barriers that keep them in the
18 dark.

19 Let's all step towards
20 the light, clear a path to safety
21 and citizenships for these
22 vulnerable Pennsylvanians and vote
23 yes on this legislation. Thank you
24 very much.

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1 COUNCILWOMAN AHMAD:

2 Thank you so much. Please thank
3 Rep. Hohenstein for powerful
4 testimony. This also was very
5 illuminating for all of us on this
6 committee to understand the nuance
7 involved on all of this. So thank
8 you very much.

9 Anybody have any
10 questions?

11 (No response.)

12 COUNCILMAN DRISCOLL: I
13 just want to make a comment. I
14 followed Joe's career. It
15 represents Hohenstein's career.
16 He's really been out front on this
17 issue and just give him our regards
18 and tell them to get us a budget, a
19 good one.

20 MS. GONTEK: Likewise.

21 COUNCILWOMAN AHMAD:

22 Thank you very much for your
23 testimony.

24 MS. GONTEK: Thank you

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1 all very much.

2 COUNCILWOMAN AHMAD:

3 Mr. Sham, would you please call the
4 next panel.

5 THE CLERK: We have
6 Chris Setz-Kelly, Assistant Chief
7 Immigration Legal Practice,
8 Defender Association; Isabel Abreu,
9 Managing Attorney, HIAS PA; Miguel
10 Romero, Survivor Staff Attorney,
11 Nationalities Service Center;
12 Solveig Olson-Strom, Independence
13 Foundation Fellow at Justice at
14 Work; and Lucas Nascimento,
15 Community Justice Partnerships.

16 (Witnesses approached
17 witness table.)

18 COUNCILWOMAN AHMAD:

19 Good afternoon. Anyone can start
20 with their testimony. Please state
21 your name before that.

22 MS. ABREU: Hello. I am
23 Isabel Abreu. I am a managing
24 attorney at HIAS Pennsylvania, a

1 nonprofit agency founded in 1882.
2 Through immigration legal services,
3 we support low-income immigrants as
4 they build new lives in our
5 community. For the last 10 years,
6 I have represented immigrant
7 survivors of domestic violence and
8 sexual assault.

9 Much of my work involves
10 preparing U and T Visa cases for
11 survivors of violent crime and
12 human trafficking. For many
13 survivors, lack of immigration
14 status is used by abusers as a tool
15 of control. Abusers often threaten
16 deportation, separation from
17 children or arrest if survivors
18 seek help. As a result, many are
19 afraid to report crimes or
20 cooperate with law enforcement.

21 I am here to testify in
22 support of this bill establishing
23 clear standards for U and T Visa
24 certification requests in

1 Philadelphia. These visas provide
2 important federal protections, but
3 access depends on certifications
4 from local law enforcement. Yet
5 there is currently no uniform
6 system governing how local agencies
7 respond.

8 In my work, I have seen
9 how this lack of clear protocol
10 affects survivors seeking safety.
11 Survivors and advocates are often
12 left without clear guidance about
13 where to send certification
14 requests, whether they were
15 received, how long they will take
16 or if they will even receive a
17 response. That uncertainty has
18 real consequences.

19 Our agency represented a
20 survivor who was referred to our
21 office shortly after separating
22 from her abuser. She waited more
23 than seven months for a response to
24 her U Visa certification request.

1 During that time, she experienced
2 significant instability. While
3 certification is only the first
4 step in a longer process, delays
5 and uncertainty at this stage can
6 prevent survivors from accessing
7 the protections Congress created
8 for them.

9 In the absence of a
10 uniform process, I've also seen
11 local law enforcement agencies
12 adopt additional requirements that
13 disqualify survivors from accessing
14 these protections. Some agencies
15 have denied certifications based on
16 prior immigration history. This
17 practice directly undermines the
18 purpose of the U and T Visa
19 program, which were specifically
20 designed to encourage survivors to
21 report crimes and cooperate with
22 law enforcement. Regardless of
23 their lack of immigration status or
24 prior immigration histories, this

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1 bill helps ensure that local
2 processes, or lack thereof, do not
3 undermine access to federal
4 protections created for immigrant
5 survivors.

6 The bill also
7 strengthens and promotes public
8 safety by encouraging survivors of
9 crime to make reports to law
10 enforcement. Clear and consistent
11 standards strengthen trust in law
12 enforcement and improve reporting
13 and investigation of serious
14 crimes. I urge the Council to
15 support this legislation. Thank
16 you.

17 COUNCILWOMAN AHMAD:
18 Thank you. Please state your name
19 and begin your testimony.

20 MS. OLSON-STROM: Good
21 afternoon. My name is Solveig
22 Olson-Strom and I'm an attorney at
23 Justice at Work Pennsylvania, a
24 nonprofit legal services

1 organization that serves low-wage
2 workers as they pursue economic and
3 social justice. At Justice at
4 Work, we often see workplace abuse
5 that rises to the level of labor
6 trafficking, particularly among
7 immigrant low-wage workers, who are
8 especially vulnerable to
9 exploitation in the workplace.

10 Traffickers will often
11 threaten noncitizens with detention
12 and deportation to coerce them to
13 continue working. Now more than
14 ever, immigrant trafficking
15 survivors are afraid to come
16 forward. Congress created the T
17 Visas via the Trafficking Victims
18 Protection Act in 2000 to protect
19 immigrant trafficking survivors
20 from deportation and to improve
21 public safety for all by helping
22 trafficking survivors feel safe in
23 reporting their trafficker and
24 cooperating with law enforcement.

1 T Visas also provide
2 work authorization and can
3 ultimately offer a pathway to
4 lawful permanent residents and U.S.
5 citizenship. To be eligible for a
6 T Visa, survivors must show
7 willingness to comply with
8 reasonable requests for assistance
9 in the detection, investigation or
10 prosecution of the trafficking.

11 A signed certification
12 form from a law enforcement agency
13 greatly strengthens a T Visa
14 application and is considered
15 valuable evidence of a survivor's
16 willingness to cooperate with law
17 enforcement in the investigation of
18 their trafficking. However,
19 currently there's no expectation --
20 currently, there's no expectation
21 that law enforcement agencies
22 respond to a request for
23 certification, let alone within a
24 certain time frame.

1 Agencies can also be
2 unfamiliar with the certification
3 requirements. For example, there's
4 no requirement that the agency
5 actually engage in an investigation
6 or prosecution of the trafficker
7 following a survivor's report in
8 order for the agency to agree to
9 sign the certification. A lack of
10 consistent practices and shared
11 understanding across agencies leads
12 to opaque processes and delays
13 following certification requests
14 that can re-traumatize survivors as
15 they're trying to recover and
16 rebuild their lives.

17 This legislation will
18 create consistency among law
19 enforcement agencies and reduce
20 barriers for survivors seeking
21 protection. Recently we had a
22 client with a pending T Visa who
23 was unfortunately detained by ICE.
24 As part of our efforts to secure

1 his release, we requested an
2 updated certification from the DA's
3 Office based on the labor
4 trafficking he experienced here in
5 Philadelphia.

6 Thankfully, the DA
7 responded quickly and sent us the
8 updated signed cert, and I'm happy
9 to report that his T Visa was
10 approved and he has been released.
11 But the survivor was lucky. There
12 was no requirement or policy that
13 the DA even respond to our request.
14 This legislation will ensure that
15 all survivors have a similar
16 experience across all certifying
17 agencies every time. Thank you.

18 COUNCILWOMAN AHMAD:
19 Thank you. Please state your name
20 and begin your testimony.

21 MR. SETZ-KELLY: Good
22 afternoon. My name is Chris Setz-
23 Kelly and I am the Assistant Chief
24 of Immigration in the Defender

1 Association's Community Defense
2 Unit. I'm testifying in support of
3 Bill 260303. U Visas and T Visas
4 are federal protections created by
5 Congress to help immigrant
6 survivors of serious crime and
7 human trafficking.

8 These protections
9 recognize a simple reality: People
10 are less likely to report crimes or
11 cooperate with law enforcement if
12 they fear deportation. Immigrant
13 survivors often face barriers that
14 make them especially vulnerable;
15 language access issues, isolation,
16 financial dependence, fear of law
17 enforcement and fear that their
18 immigration status could be used
19 against them.

20 Congress created these
21 visa protections so survivors could
22 seek safety and justice without
23 risking removal from the United
24 States. U Visas are available to

1 victims of serious crimes, such as
2 domestic violence, sexual assault,
3 trafficking, stalking, kidnapping
4 and felonious assault, who have
5 suffered significant harm and are
6 willing to cooperate with law
7 enforcement in the investigation or
8 prosecution of these crimes.

9 T Visas provide similar
10 protections for survivors of human
11 trafficking. But before someone
12 can even apply to the federal
13 government for one of these
14 protections, they first need a
15 certification from a local law
16 enforcement agency confirming that
17 they were a victim and helpful in
18 the case. That certification can
19 come from agencies like the Police
20 Department, the District Attorney's
21 Office or the Department of Human
22 Services, but that's where many
23 survivors get stuck.

24 Right now there are no

1 consistent statewide standards in
2 Pennsylvania governing how agencies
3 handle these requests. That means
4 access to protection often depends
5 less on whether someone qualifies
6 under federal law and more on which
7 office happens to review their
8 certification request.

9 Some survivors wait
10 months or years for responses.
11 Others receive no explanation for
12 denials at all. In some cases,
13 requests are denied because too
14 much time has passed since the
15 crime occurred because no charges
16 were filed or because a case did
17 not end in a conviction, even
18 though federal law does not require
19 any of these things.

20 More than 20 states have
21 already adopted laws creating
22 clearer standards for U Visa and T
23 Visa certifications, but
24 Pennsylvania has not. Efforts to

1 pass statewide legislation have
2 stalled, leaving cities like
3 Philadelphia without a uniform
4 system, whereas other cities such
5 as New York and Chicago have local
6 policies in place as well.

7 Bill No. 260303 helps
8 close that gap by creating a fairer
9 and more transparent practice
10 across Philadelphia agencies. The
11 bill creates clear timelines for
12 agencies to respond to requests,
13 including expedited review for
14 survivors facing urgent
15 consequences, such as deportation
16 proceedings. It requires written
17 explanations when requests are
18 denied, creates an opportunity for
19 reconsideration, strengthens
20 confidentiality protections and
21 prevents agencies from denying
22 certifications for reasons that
23 conflict with federal law.

24 Most importantly, this

1 bill is about trust. Public safety
2 depends on people feeling safe
3 enough to report crimes, seek help
4 and cooperate with investigations.
5 When immigrant communities fear
6 that coming forward could place
7 them or their families at risk,
8 crimes go unreported and survivors
9 are left vulnerable.

10 The bill sends an
11 important message to immigrants in
12 our city. If you're a victim of a
13 crime in Philadelphia, the city's
14 agencies will treat your request
15 fairly, handle it consistently and
16 protect your information. This
17 legislation will not determine who
18 ultimately receives a visa. That
19 decision remains with the federal
20 government. But it will help
21 ensure that survivors in
22 Philadelphia at least have a fair
23 opportunity to access the process
24 Congress created for them.

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1 In the absence of
2 statewide action, Philadelphia has
3 the opportunity and the
4 responsibility to lead here. We
5 urge City Council to pass Bill
6 260303. Thank you.

7 COUNCILWOMAN AHMAD:
8 Thank you so much for your
9 testimony. Please state your name
10 and begin your testimony.

11 MR. ROMERO: Good
12 afternoon, Madam Chair and members
13 of the committee. My name is
14 Miguel Angel Romero. I am
15 Survivor -- I'm a staff attorney in
16 the Survivor Services Department at
17 National League Service Center,
18 which is a nonprofit in
19 Philadelphia that provides
20 comprehensive support to
21 immigrants.

22 I primarily work with
23 survivors of human trafficking and
24 crime to obtain U and T Visas from

1 the federal government. As
2 background, U Visas are available
3 to immigrants who suffer mental or
4 physical harm arising from certain
5 times of criminal activity. In
6 contrast, T Visas are available to
7 survivors of sex and labor
8 trafficking as part of the
9 application process.

10 I work with immigrants
11 to obtain certifications from law
12 enforcement, verifying that they
13 assisted in the investigation or
14 prosecution of the criminal
15 activity at issue in their
16 application. U Visa applicants
17 must provide one of these
18 certifications in order to proceed.
19 For T Visa applicants, supplying a
20 certification is strongly advised.

21 In my work, I see
22 firsthand how difficult and often
23 time-consuming it can be for
24 survivors to navigate the system in

1 order to apply for a U or a T Visa.
2 For example, delays have serious
3 consequences. Delay can postpone
4 an immigration filing, prolong
5 uncertainty and leave someone
6 without a pathway towards safety
7 and stability.

8 During that period,
9 survivors may be more vulnerable to
10 continue exploitation, retaliation
11 and pressure not to participate in
12 the investigation. Further, when a
13 person has already experienced
14 trauma, uncertainty and silence
15 from government agencies can become
16 yet another barrier to seeking
17 protection and justice.
18 Confidentiality is equally
19 critical. Survivors are often
20 understandably afraid that
21 disclosing their immigration status
22 could expose them to enforcement
23 consequences, retaliation or
24 renewed control by an abuser or

1 trafficker.

2 Strong confidentiality
3 protections help ensure that people
4 can request certification without
5 fear the information they share
6 will be used improperly, and that
7 protection is not just a matter of
8 privacy. It is essential to
9 survivor safety, to meaningful
10 access to relief and to build in
11 the trust needed for survivors to
12 come forward and cooperate with
13 investigations.

14 Bill No. 260303 would
15 improve the certification process
16 in many ways. Among other things,
17 it would direct applicable agencies
18 to develop dedicated protocols for
19 handling the U and T Visa-related
20 certification request. It would
21 also help reduce delays at a time
22 when civility and safety matter
23 most and it would protect survivor
24 confidentiality in the current

1 climate.

2 When anti-immigration
3 sentiment too often shapes public
4 conversation, it is specifically
5 important for the city to respond
6 with empathy, common sense and
7 humanity. Survivors of crime and
8 trafficking should not be made to
9 feel that coming forward would
10 expose them to more danger or less
11 dignity. Further, we want to live
12 in a society where people report
13 crimes and help with investigations
14 that serve law enforcement in its
15 pursuit of justice. And it is good
16 for everyone because we all should
17 want safe communities.

18 For all of these
19 reasons, I urge Council to pass
20 Bill No. 260303, create a process
21 that is timely, consistent,
22 confidential and truly responsive
23 to the needs of survivors. Thank
24 you.

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1 COUNCILWOMAN AHMAD:

2 Thank you for your testimony. I
3 think we have one more witness
4 here. Please state your name and
5 begin your testimony.

6 MR. NASCIMENTO: Good
7 morning, everyone. My name is
8 Attorney Lucas Nascimento. Happy
9 Liberation Month, everyone. Thank
10 you to Councilmember Ahmad,
11 Councilmember Lozada, Councilmember
12 O'Rourke, Councilmember Driscoll
13 and Councilmember Landau and to the
14 Honorable Kenyatta Johnson,
15 President of Philadelphia City
16 Council.

17 My name is Lucas
18 Nascimento. I'm a public interest
19 attorney, founder of Community
20 Justice Partnerships. We're a
21 501(c)(3) organization and a public
22 interest law firm. We were founded
23 in 2024 so we're the little brother
24 of many of the other excellent

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1 public interest organizations in
2 the city. We are a team and
3 coalition of advocates, organizers,
4 educators, activists and lawyers
5 who fight together and
6 collaboratively fight for community
7 justice here in the city of
8 Philadelphia.

9 Thank you for this
10 opportunity to testify regarding
11 Bill No. 260303. When asked by
12 Councilmember Dr. Nina Ahmad's
13 office to endorse this bill, it
14 really wasn't difficult to find a
15 lot of reasons why I should support
16 because this bill, as an
17 immigration advocate since 2008,
18 this bill presents issues dear to
19 my heart. My first legal
20 internship was with the Legal Aid
21 office in Florida representing
22 victims of domestic violence under
23 VAWA, Violence Against Women Act.

24 At CJP, we respectfully

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1 request an opportunity to work with
2 each one of your offices. We want
3 to provide statistics and research
4 to show how this bill and others
5 like it are so critical to
6 protecting victims of violent
7 crimes and trafficking in our city.
8 We can offer to provide pro bono
9 assistance and other services
10 necessary to make sure this bill is
11 implemented effectively and
12 efficiently.

13 I'd also like the
14 opportunity to work with members of
15 City Council, also with the
16 District Attorney's Office, the
17 Philadelphia Police Department, the
18 Office of Inspector General, the
19 Defender's Association of
20 Philadelphia as well as the
21 American Immigration Lawyers
22 Association and any other legal
23 service providers or volunteers
24 here in the city who want to help

1 make sure this bill is not only
2 implemented, but it's strong as its
3 language.

4 Immigrants' rights here
5 in America are human rights. When
6 the federal government hinders,
7 harms or hurts anyone's rights
8 within our borders, it can, will
9 and does affect all of us, citizens
10 and non-citizens alike. Similarly,
11 when the people of the City of
12 Philadelphia speak up, join forces,
13 speak out and take action, we all
14 benefit as one city, one people.

15 The United States, along
16 with a number of other countries,
17 provide for crime victims' rights.
18 Some even provide a bill of rights
19 for victims of crime. I believe
20 that this bill, upon its adoption,
21 will become part of that process of
22 protecting the rights of crime
23 victims and victims of trafficking.

24 Bill No. 260303 provides

1 all the important protections for
2 undocumented victims of crimes and
3 victims of trafficking. It ensures
4 that victims of crimes and
5 trafficking will be given the
6 proper procedures and due process.
7 I want to highlight those key
8 terms, due process by our local
9 government agencies when issuing
10 certifications of cooperation with
11 local law enforcement in the
12 prosecution of their cases, the
13 prosecution of their abusers and
14 the prosecution of their
15 traffickers.

16 U.S. Congress codified
17 the U Visa program at Immigration
18 Nationality Act, INA 101 Subsection
19 (a)(15)(U) and the T Visa program
20 at INA 101 Subsection (a)(15)(T).
21 Congress has already spoken and has
22 given us, as a people, the City of
23 Philadelphia, the road map and how
24 it's up to our city, our lawmakers,

1 our advocacy, organizations and our
2 law enforcement agencies to get the
3 job done, ensure a path to
4 legalization for undocumented
5 individuals who cooperate as
6 witnesses in these important
7 criminal cases, in which they are
8 victims.

9 It goes without question
10 that the U Visa and T Visa programs
11 enjoy overwhelming support by law
12 enforcement agencies all around the
13 country, so this bill sets the tone
14 for all agencies of the City of
15 Philadelphia to be not only more
16 aware of the crime of trafficking,
17 how it affects a diverse and
18 multinational, ethnic and racial
19 population in our city, how the
20 undocumented are often targeted and
21 victimized by traffickers and their
22 abusers because of their
23 vulnerability, their limited
24 English-speaking ability.

1 We need to be aware of
2 the causes and roots of
3 trafficking, domestic violence, why
4 crimes go unreported and further,
5 how victims of domestic violence
6 and trafficking are often too
7 afraid to speak to report their
8 crimes, and many times are
9 unfortunately overlooked by law
10 enforcement. We need a law
11 enforcement with cultural
12 sensitivity and language skills and
13 resources to properly investigate
14 and prosecute these crimes, so that
15 undocumented persons will not be
16 afraid, come out of the shadows and
17 come forward as cooperating
18 witnesses in their cases.

19 This bill will spread
20 like wildfire to proper awareness,
21 right attitude among members and
22 leaders of our city agencies who
23 should be there to help
24 undocumented victims of crime and

1 trafficking and domestic violence
2 who should never be stigmatized,
3 judged or prosecuted or even
4 deported for reporting their
5 crimes.

6 A few statistics.
7 According to the Philadelphia
8 Police Department, and forgive me
9 if I don't have it right on the
10 facts, crime data and crime
11 statistics, over 4500 arrests were
12 executed in 2025 for violent
13 crimes. According to the National
14 Incident Based Reporting System,
15 NIBRS and the Federal Bureau of
16 Investigation, FBI, nearly 50% of
17 these interpersonal crimes may be
18 domestic violence-related.

19 The U.S. Department of
20 Justice Bureau of Justice
21 Statistics and National Crime
22 Victimization Survey (NCVS) reports
23 that nearly 50% of domestic
24 violence crimes actually go

1 unreported every year around the
2 country. Again, without question
3 undocumented persons are even less
4 likely to report crimes to which
5 they are victims without the proper
6 protection for fear of retaliation,
7 not only by their abusers and their
8 traffickers, but even sometimes by
9 prosecutors and even law
10 enforcement.

11 The City of
12 Philadelphia, our laws and our
13 people can be a model for the
14 nation, I believe that, and the
15 world. That said, in terms of
16 ensuring the protection, promising
17 organic laws, the founding
18 documents the Bill of Rights, I
19 would like to ask this final
20 question, what rights does this
21 bill really protect, if not human
22 rights?

23 To quote from the
24 Pennsylvania Supreme Court in the

1 case Wiley v. Woods cited at 393
2 Pa. 341 (1958) case, "Due process
3 of law, while incapable of exact
4 definition, generally means law in
5 the regular course of
6 administration through courts of
7 justice according to those rules
8 and forms which have been
9 established for the protection of
10 human rights." Due process is
11 human rights. And that's what this
12 bill will accomplish to protect
13 when it's passed. Thank you.

14 COUNCILWOMAN AHMAD:

15 Thank you for your testimony.
16 We'll ask questions of our
17 panelists and I'll open up the
18 floor to my colleagues.

19 I know one of my
20 colleagues has to leave early so I
21 will actually yield the floor to
22 you if you have a question and then
23 I'll go.

24 COUNCILMAN O'ROURKE: No

1 questions.

2 COUNCILWOMAN AHMAD:

3 Okay. You're good?

4 COUNCILMAN O'ROURKE:

5 (Shaking head).

6 COUNCILWOMAN AHMAD:

7 Okay. I have a quick question for
8 Isabel Abreu. You mentioned about
9 that one survivor who waited seven
10 months for a response to a U Visa
11 certification. Do you recall -- I
12 mean, we have everybody say they're
13 very quick, they do everything very
14 fast and we really don't need this
15 because we're all doing everything
16 beautifully. So I wondered if
17 you're able to share where this
18 certification applied to?

19 MS. ABREU: Thank you
20 for the question. So HIAS
21 Pennsylvania has requested
22 certifications from the
23 Philadelphia Police Department,
24 District Attorney's Office, the

1 Department of Human Services.
2 We've been doing this work for many
3 years. We have gotten
4 certifications from all of those
5 agencies over the course of our
6 time doing this work, but it is not
7 uncommon for us to encounter
8 delays, denials and
9 nonresponsiveness.

10 And the example that I
11 gave was regarding a certification
12 that we requested from the
13 Philadelphia Police Department.

14 COUNCILWOMAN AHMAD: I
15 just wanted that on the record.
16 Thank you. I also wanted to ask
17 Solveig Olson-Strom, you noted that
18 traffickers often use threats of
19 detention and deportation to
20 silence victims and delays. How do
21 you see this being perceived by
22 those traffickers to say now
23 there's a clear process? And would
24 that stop the coercion as a result

1 of this?

2 MS. OLSON-STROM: Thank
3 you for the question. I mean, it's
4 hard to say. I honestly don't know
5 to what extent most traffickers are
6 aware of the T Visa program. But
7 there's a lot of misunderstanding
8 about the rights of immigrants and
9 undocumented people. Another
10 tactic that traffickers often use
11 is try to convince the person that
12 they have no rights, that if they
13 go to law enforcement, they'll be
14 the ones arrested, they don't have
15 a right to be paid for their work,
16 they don't have any workplace
17 protections, things like that.

18 So I think this bill
19 offering this kind of sort of
20 security for survivors when they do
21 reach out will help social services
22 providers like us and others show
23 potential victims that there is a
24 path forward, a path to safety that

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1 is more reliable and secure than
2 without the protections this bill
3 provides.

4 COUNCILWOMAN AHMAD:
5 Anybody else have any questions?
6 (No response.)

7 COUNCILWOMAN AHMAD: I
8 want to thank all of you for your
9 testimony and we all have it in
10 writing as well. I appreciate it
11 and we will look forward --
12 hopefully, this bill will pass and
13 then we would like to work with you
14 to make sure that your clients know
15 about it, the communication, so
16 that they can have a sense of
17 security and feel more confident in
18 their participation with our law
19 enforcement. So thank you very
20 much, all of you.

21 And now, we will --
22 Mr. Sham, are there any other
23 panels to testify on this bill?

24 THE CLERK: There are no

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1 additional panels.

2 COUNCILWOMAN AHMAD: We
3 will now go to public testimony,
4 public comment. Please call the
5 first speaker on public comment.

6 THE CLERK: The first
7 speaker on the public comment list
8 is Leah Hynansky.

9 (Witnesses approached
10 witness table.)

11 MS. HYNANSKY: Good
12 morning. My name is Leah Hynansky.
13 Thank you, Councilpeople. We got
14 these wonderful signs so I thought
15 I'd show it. I'm on the Survivor
16 Board with New Day. I'm a victims
17 advocate. I'm a consultant and
18 trainer with New Day to stop
19 trafficking and I work with
20 Philadelphia Anti-Trafficking
21 Coalition and Pennsylvania Human
22 Trafficking Awareness Group.

23 Thank you,
24 Councilmembers, for this hearing

1 today. I speak for the cries and
2 the pain of so many children and
3 people. I love this word protect.
4 Being a victim of a crime so
5 horrific is misunderstood by so
6 many so often, and to see
7 legislation and advocacy happen
8 throughout Philadelphia and
9 Pennsylvania is so promising and
10 affirming.

11 It is particularly
12 heartfelt for me, as I am a
13 survivor of child trafficking. Any
14 crime of this magnitude is so
15 beyond typical human comprehension.
16 I would like to ask you to hold in
17 your minds for a moment the
18 physical and emotional consequences
19 of the qualifying crimes for T and
20 U Visas, such as human trafficking,
21 torture, incest and more.

22 Writing out a process
23 and having a publicly-accessible
24 protocol for these requests creates

1 a physical and psychological
2 structure of accountability that is
3 necessary for both the agencies
4 doing the work and the survivors of
5 these crimes. In my experience,
6 acknowledging and certifying that
7 someone is a victim gives them much
8 more access to services, care and
9 support.

10 People who understand us
11 and who understand this level of
12 trauma and know how to help us work
13 toward healing growth -- and know
14 how to help us work toward healing,
15 growth and an independent and self-
16 actualized life with choices and a
17 voice of one's own. I absolutely
18 agree and love that you can't deny
19 somebody a certification based on
20 the amount of time that has passed.

21 We, as survivors, live
22 with these experiences in our
23 bodies and our brains for our whole
24 lives. We cannot leave it. The

1 trauma is so big that it becomes an
2 integral part of our biology. We
3 deserve support, understanding and
4 a clear and streamlined and
5 respectful and efficient process.
6 I know that the world is sometimes
7 afraid of the consequences of
8 coexisting with and acknowledging
9 crimes like these. I think we are
10 more afraid of ourselves sometimes
11 and our reactions to these crimes
12 and the shame involved with them,
13 the stigma, the marginalization,
14 and the underreaction or
15 overreaction.

16 Imagine the terror and
17 fear of the person that is the
18 victim and how much they want
19 safety. The sooner you bring some
20 sense of stability into someone's
21 life, the greater the possibility
22 for them to heal and to become a
23 productive and contributing member
24 of society. Consent is a word that

1 is misused and ignored by so many.
2 There is sometimes a fascination
3 with this level of trauma and a
4 need to share with others or
5 revictimize.

6 It can be so difficult
7 to process what you see and
8 experience when interacting with
9 victims, when their experience is
10 so far removed from yours, which
11 makes confidentiality even more
12 relevant. It is critical to
13 protect the safety of the
14 applicant's immigration status so
15 that they are not revictimized
16 during the process of applying.

17 Sharing someone's status
18 is incredibly dangerous. It is
19 also so difficult to trust people
20 who have power over you, and
21 working with authorities can feel
22 very similar to the power and
23 control dynamic between an abuser
24 and a victim. It is so polarized

1 and extreme. Structure and
2 timeliness are important to
3 survivors. Boundaries, trust and
4 safety have been destroyed in our
5 lives in such a massive way so many
6 times and repeatedly.

7 This level of crime
8 typically has a disturbing history
9 leading up to it. These are the
10 first steps to building ourselves
11 back and to regaining our autonomy.
12 When the barriers faced by
13 survivors of these crimes are met
14 with support and care, it leads to
15 so much growth and potential in
16 human beings.

17 When people are met with
18 empathy and care and understanding,
19 there is so much possibility for
20 growth and healing, and the obvious
21 choice for that is respectful
22 process, law and protocol. Calming
23 the brain after serious abuse is
24 the most effective means of helping

1 survivors, and efficient processing
2 of paperwork, along with safety,
3 confidentiality and accountability
4 of city officials leads to
5 possibilities for work,
6 authorizations and services that
7 can help so much and this bill will
8 aid in that. It is a basic human
9 right to be timely, to issue
10 certifications and to put reasons
11 for denial into writing, especially
12 considering the gravity of these
13 crimes.

14 Survivors are still
15 actively involved with the crime in
16 many ways. Because even if the
17 crime has stopped, the experience
18 takes so much more time to
19 overcome. Thank you for the
20 opportunity to speak with you
21 today. I hope that these words
22 will be helpful in your decision to
23 support Bill No. 260303. I am
24 doing everything that I can with

1 all my heart to try to speak on
2 behalf of people who do not yet
3 have a voice and who deserve one
4 more than anyone that I know,
5 because their story is one of
6 survival, of strength and of
7 knowing things that no body and no
8 mind should ever know.

9 They deserve only the
10 most respectful process and every
11 kindness and support that you can
12 offer. I urge you to please
13 support this bill, 260303. Thank
14 you very much for the opportunity
15 to speak with you today.

16 COUNCILWOMAN AHMAD:
17 Thank you so much for your
18 testimony, Ms. Hynansky. Thank you
19 always for speaking up for
20 survivors. We deeply appreciate
21 it, and really to highlight the
22 psychological empowerment something
23 like this does. The fact of having
24 structure, the fact of having

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1 expectations, to have expectations,
2 to allow somebody to say I deserve
3 to have expectations is empowering
4 and is a human right. So I thank
5 you very much for your testimony.

6 Mr. Sham, can you please
7 call the next speaker.

8 THE CLERK: There are no
9 other speakers on the public
10 comment list, Madam Chair.

11 COUNCILWOMAN AHMAD: I
12 would like to thank all our
13 witnesses for joining us today. We
14 will now temporarily end the public
15 hearing and go into public meeting.
16 I will note for the record that a
17 quorum of the committee is present.

18 The Chair recognizes
19 Councilmember Driscoll for a motion
20 on Bill No. 260303.

21 COUNCILMAN DRISCOLL:
22 Thank you, Madam Chair.

23 I move that Bill No.
24 260303 be reported from this

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1 committee with a favorable
2 recommendation and further move
3 that the rules of Council be
4 suspended to permit first reading
5 of this bill at the next session of
6 Council.

7 (Duly seconded.)

8 COUNCILWOMAN AHMAD: It
9 has been moved and properly
10 seconded that Bill No. 260303 be
11 reported from this committee with a
12 favorable recommendation and
13 further move that the rules of
14 Council be suspended to permit
15 first reading of this bill at the
16 next session of Council.

17 All those in favor of
18 the motion will signify by saying
19 aye.

20 (Aye.)

21 COUNCILWOMAN AHMAD: All
22 opposed?

23 (No response.)

24 COUNCILWOMAN AHMAD: In

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1 the opinion of the Chair, the ayes
2 have it, the motion carries. Bill
3 No. 260303 will be reported from
4 this committee with a favorable
5 recommendation with the request
6 that the rules of Council be
7 suspended to permit first reading
8 at the next session of Council.

9 Any closing remarks from
10 anybody?

11 (No response.)

12 COUNCILWOMAN AHMAD:

13 Okay. This concludes the business
14 before the Committee on Public
15 Health and Human Services today.
16 Thank you very much for your
17 attendance. All right. Thank you
18 so much.

19 - - -

20 (Committee on Public
21 Health and Human Services concluded
22 at 2:20 p.m.)

23 - - -

24

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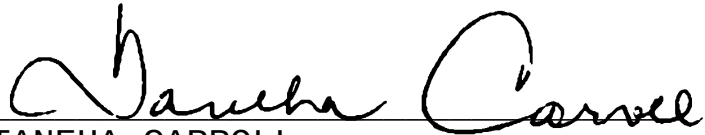
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I, hereby certify that the proceedings
and evidence noted are contained fully and
accurately in the stenographic notes taken
by me in the foregoing matter, and that
this is a correct transcript of the same.



TANEHA CARROLL
Court Reporter - Notary Public

(The foregoing certification of this
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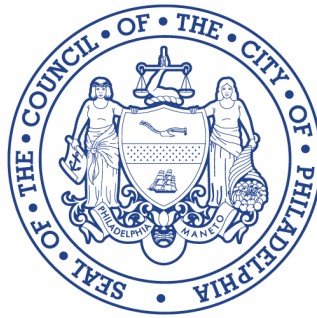
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City of Philadelphia

*City Council
Chief Clerk's Office
402 City Hall
Philadelphia, PA 19107*



Meeting Agenda

Monday, June 1, 2026

1:00 PM

Room 400, City Hall

Committee on Public Health and Human Services

The Committee on Public Health and Human Services of the Council of the City of Philadelphia will hold a Public Hearing on Monday, June 1, 2026, at 1:00 PM, in Room 400, City Hall, to hear testimony on the following item:

260303

An Ordinance Amending Title 21 of the Philadelphia Code, entitled “Miscellaneous” to add a Chapter entitled “U-Visa and T-Visa Certifications,” providing for a process for Certifying Agencies, including timely responses to requests, confidentiality of requests, guidelines for the grant or denial of a request, and other procedures, all under certain terms and conditions.

Attachments: [Bill No. 26030300](#)

Immediately following the public hearing, a meeting of the Committee on Public Health and Human Services, open to the public, will be held to consider the action to be taken on the above listed item. Copies of the foregoing item are available in the Office of the Chief Clerk of the Council, Room 402, City Hall.