



*Protecting Immigrant
Women and Girls
Fleeing Violence*

March 11, 2019

The Honorable Ralph Northam
Governor of Virginia
Office of the Governor
P.O. Box 1475
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Sent VIA electronic mail to:

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RE: Request to veto VA Senate Bill No. 1156 to preserve community trust and meaningful access to emergency assistance for immigrant women and girls

Dear Governor Northam,

The Tahirih Justice Center is a non-partisan national immigration advocacy and legal services organization that has assisted over 25,000 women and girls fleeing gender-based violence over the last 22 years. A large percentage of our clients reside in Virginia, with both our national headquarters and Greater DC offices located in Falls Church. The women and girls we serve survive horrific abuse such as female genital cutting/mutilation, human trafficking, rape, forced marriage, and domestic violence. As a result, we are deeply concerned about the recent passage of SB 1156, and we respectfully urge you to veto it.

VA SB 1156 is a blanket prohibition on local law enforcement policies that “restric[t] the enforcement of federal immigration laws.” The law’s simplistic appeal belies the fact that rather than promoting public safety, such a prohibition ultimately puts survivors of violence and community members in even greater danger. In passing the Violence Against Women Act, a bipartisan US Congress recognized the need to *shield survivors* from immigration enforcement to prevent perpetrators from using our immigration system as a tool of exploitation and abuse. It is well-documented that laws and policies such as VA SB 1156 deter survivors of gender-based violence from accessing critical, life-saving emergency services - not least of which is help from local police. Tahirih client and Virginia resident Maria,* who was penalized for reporting her traffickers to law enforcement, explains: “If I had known that my reporting would have led to my deportation proceedings, I would have never called for help in the first place.”ⁱ

Blanket policies that have a “chilling effect” on crime reporting not only endanger victims and witnesses including young children but tie the hands of law enforcement and erode community trust. The deterrence effect is so powerful that even those who live in so-called “sanctuary” jurisdictions may still be fearful of

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coming forward to report crime. In light of her experience, Maria notes: “I cannot trust the police. I cannot trust this system.”

Of grave concern is also the ways in which these policies unwittingly empower and embolden dangerous criminals. In 2017, the Texas state legislature passed SB4 which was designed to minimize the distinction between federal immigration and local law enforcement. In the wake of its passage, Tahirih client Sarah* aptly remarked: “This is exactly what my [abuser] has been waiting for.”

When perpetrators abuse victims with impunity, the safety of all Virginians – including US citizens - is at risk. This is readily apparent in the case of mass, indiscriminate shootings and law enforcement officer homicides. In recent years, researchers have noted that a striking number of perpetrators of these crimes have a history of domestic violence.ⁱⁱ If victims do not feel safe reporting abuse to law enforcement, their abusers remain at large and free to commit crimes against others. In one example, a client’s US citizen abuser also faced criminal charges for grand larceny, driving while intoxicated, burglary, and assault on a police officer.

By contrast, when immigrant survivors do feel safe to come forward, they serve as a tremendous asset to law enforcement, their communities, and potential future victims.ⁱⁱⁱ Our client Rebecca* survived severe abuse at the hands of a U.S. citizen who was also engaged in sex trafficking of young girls. Rebecca reported him to police and went on to serve as a key witness. She even wore a wire to help federal prosecutors secure a conviction and he is currently serving a prison sentence.

Your careful consideration of our perspective is much appreciated, particularly considering our extensive experience serving immigrant survivors of gender-based violence in the state of Virginia and other regions of the country. Not only will vetoing VA SB 1156 protect survivors, but it will send a strong message to the public that laws and policies founded on fear and discrimination do not ultimately serve the interests of our communities.

Respectfully,



Irena Sullivan
Senior Immigration Policy Counsel

*Pseudonym

Cc: The Honorable Mark R. Herring via banderson@oag.state.va.us

ⁱ<http://www.tahirih.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/05/2017-Advocate-and-Legal-Service-Survey-Key-Findings.pdf>;
<http://www.tahirih.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/01/Tahirih-Justice-Center-Survey-Report-1.31.18-1.pdf> at p. 8.

ⁱⁱ*Men Who Strangle Women Also Kill Cops*, Domestic Violence Report, Vol. 19, No. 6, August/September 2014, p. 85.
<http://www.orlandosentinel.com/opinion/os-ed-letters-domestic-violence-elevated-to-national-security-threat-20171110-story.html>;

ⁱⁱⁱ This was recognized by a bipartisan US Congress through passage of the Trafficking Victims Protection Act in 2000 and its progeny.