

Domestic violence survivors fear ICE

Worry of deportation if they call the police

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USA TODAY

When immigrant survivors of domestic violence contacted Libby Hasse during a crisis, the attorney had clear advice: Call the police.

But when a client called earlier this year to say that her abusive ex-husband was stalking her and sending threatening text messages, Hasse had to think twice. Her client worried that calling the police would mean involving Immigration and Customs Enforcement officers who could detain and deport her.

“She’s in this situation where she’s trying to weigh that risk and the benefit,” said Hasse, who works for the Tahirih Justice Center, a national nonprofit that serves domestic violence survivors. “If she calls the police today, are they actually going to be able to do anything against this guy that’s stalking her and if not, are they going to be working with ICE?”

Hasse and her client aren’t the only ones hesitant to call police, appear in court or even go to a domestic violence shelter as the administration of President Donald Trump ramps up its deportation efforts. The Alliance for Immigrant Survivors, a national network of advocates for those hurt by domestic violence, found that 75% of the 170 advocates they surveyed across the country said the immigrants they serve fear they’ll face arrest or deportation if they contact authorities.

Half of the advocates surveyed in the report said the immigrant survivors they worked with ultimately chose not to contact law enforcement due to fear, and even when they did and proceeded to trial, 70% were concerned about going to court. Additionally, advocates say that fewer women are going to domestic violence shelters after the Trump administration removed them from a list of places protected from ICE enforcement.

ICE detained a human trafficking survivor with no criminal record after she spoke to the police, the alliance’s re-



Federal agents patrol the halls of an immigration court in New York City on June 20. ICE is increasing its presence in courts across the country.

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port said. It also highlighted a survivor with a broken nose who waited two days to go to the hospital and who filed a police report only after her immigration attorney assured her it would be safe.

The number of people calling for help and information has tripled at the Tahirih Justice Center nationally during the first five months of 2025 compared with the same period last year, said Casey Swegman, the center’s director of public policy.

“They’re so afraid to call or go anywhere else,” she said.

USA TODAY reached out to ICE for comment but an agency spokesman did not respond.

Some abusers use the fear of increased ICE arrests to keep immigrant survivors from leaving, Swegman said. Recently, the center’s Atlanta office got a call from a woman who said that her abuser was threatening to report her to ICE.

“Her abuser was saying, ‘Look at the TV, look at what they’re saying, nobody cares about you. I can hurt you and nobody cares,’ basically making her feel like if she called the police, he would have the power to get her deported just by pointing a finger at her and saying that she doesn’t have lawful immigration status,” Swegman said.

“We have an entire population of survivors really living in the shadows right now, feeling too scared to come forward.”

Earlier in June one of Hasse’s clients, a domestic violence survivor with six children who are U.S. citizens, was in immigration court for her pending U visa, which protects immigrant victims of violence from deportation during their case. The client saw ICE agents by the elevator when she was leaving the courthouse in Houston, Hasse said, and later in the day, she heard that ICE had detained people in the courthouse.

“Every time she walks back into court for her case, that’s what she’s going to be thinking about, ‘Am I going to be detained today? Am I going to be separated from my kids?’ ” Hasse said.

Across the country, as ICE increases its presence in courts, officials are grappling with how to protect victims and witnesses from federal agents during their cases. In Harris County, Texas, home to Houston, the district attorney’s investigators give witnesses and victims a card with the case number and investigator’s phone number. If an ICE agent picks them up, they present the card so the agent can verify that they are important to an ongoing case.

Harris County began handing out the

cards in March, following a case in which ICE arrested Carmelo Gonzalez, a witness in his own daughter’s murder trial, in early February. He was on a plane to be deported when one of the prosecutors found out about his arrest and contacted ICE to let him go.

“We’re trying to fight violent crime, and that is going to require ICE taking into account that people they are deporting are not only victims of crimes quite often committed by American citizens upon them, but also they are witnesses in extremely violent felonies,” said Harris County District Attorney Sean Teare. “This card is part of that mission to make sure that we are able to do our jobs.”

Zain Lakhani, director of migrant rights and justice at the Women’s Refugee Commission, said the long backlog of U visas means it can take between 10 to 20 years before an immigrant survivor is given protection.

While survivors can be protected from ICE while they are in the process of obtaining a U visa, Lakhani said it’s arduous and the long wait times for U visas leaves “survivors who are waiting for those visas just anxiously, kind of in the pipeline, not able to really access the benefits that they need in order to rebuild their lives, to protect themselves and their children.”

Since Trump took office in January, some domestic violence shelters have also lost funding.

Matt Mirarchi, director of operations at Enlace Comunitario, a domestic violence survivor support organization for the Latino and immigrant community in New Mexico, said the shelter lost close to \$600,000 in federal funding that helps house up to 30 clients for up to two years.

Mirarchi said he also saw a decrease in attendance at the group’s prevention classes.

“The fear there is very palpable,” he said, adding the organization isn’t pulling back as a local resource.

Fabiola Landeros, an immigration rights organizer at El Centro de Igualdad y Derechos in Albuquerque, New Mexico, said that to make survivors feel safe coming forward, it is important to separate law enforcement from ICE.

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