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I. Introduction

Seemingly every day, there is a new vicious assault on immigrant communities in our country. From the horrific tragedies in El Paso, Texas, and Gilroy, California to widespread raids in Mississippi at a company [where immigrant workers had been previously threatened and sexually harassed](#). From an abusive partner telling a spouse [that reaching out to help will lead to their deportation](#) to DHS [making it harder for victims](#) of abuse to stay in the country while they apply for immigration protections.

It is time to tell our Members of Congress they must act to protect immigrant communities and their access to safety and justice.

ASISTA in conjunction with the Alliance for Immigrant Survivors created this toolkit for advocates who work with survivors of domestic and sexual violence. This toolkit can help advocates engage in local efforts to connect with their Members of Congress while they are in District to let them know that changes in immigration policies are harming immigrant survivors of crime, making them less likely to seek protection from abuse and seek immigration relief created for their benefit.

This toolkit has four main sections:

- 1) How to engage your Member of Congress during recess
- 2) Social media and general messaging
- 3) Background information to help inform your advocacy
- 4) Resources to educate allies and members of Congress

Please feel free to use the content in this toolkit to customize templates to your organization's mission, voice and the community you serve. We will be updating this toolkit with other resources as there are other legislative or administrative actions.

Your local advocacy is key to creating critical advancements for survivors of violence.

The National Taskforce to End Sexual and Domestic Violence also has effective resources for engaging members of Congress on Violence Against Women Act (VAWA) Reauthorization. For additional information, [click here](#).

We are grateful for the assistance of the Asian-Pacific Institute on Gender-based Violence for their contributions to this toolkit. For questions about this toolkit, please contact: questions@asistahelp.org

II. General Messaging

- A. Immigrant survivors of domestic violence, sexual assault, and human trafficking deserve safety and protection from abuse.
- B. Victims of violence should never be forced to choose between living with abuse or facing deportation.
- C. Abusive partners, rapists, traffickers, or other abusers often exploit victims' lack of immigration status or dependent immigration status as a way to maintain power and control and to keep victims silent. Recent changes in immigration enforcement priorities are sharpening the tools of abusers and resulting in increased risks of harm to survivors.
- D. Survivors should not be deported before their immigration applications are decided.

III. Connecting with Members of Congress During Recess

Members of Congress are frequently home in their district during recess and often hold public events and meet with their constituents. Below are some ideas for how to connect with your Member of Congress while they are back in your district during the August recess - which runs through September 8 - to show them the impact of increased immigration enforcement on survivors of crime.

An essential part of this advocacy is to bring together a diverse group of allies to raise their voices collectively against the erosion of protections for immigrant survivors of violence. This may include, but is not limited to:

- Representatives from agencies and coalitions that advocate on behalf of survivors of domestic violence, sexual assault, and human trafficking
- Representatives from racial justice organizations
- Representatives from immigrant advocacy coalitions and groups

Think about other stakeholders who may care about immigrant victims' access to safety and justice in your communities, including labor organizations whose members may be facing abuses in the workplace, faith-based groups, and other grassroots advocacy organizations. Bringing together allies shows a powerful, united message to Members of Congress that a wide-range of their constituents care deeply about these issues and will not be ignored.

Here are a few ways to be seen and heard by your Members of Congress this recess so that you can deliver a message to protect immigrant victims of violence.

A. Townhall Meetings

Check if your Member of Congress is holding a town hall event by visiting www.townhallproject.com, your members' websites, or by calling their local offices to ask if they are holding an event where their constituents can raise their questions and concerns.

- a. [Connect with your Senators](#)
- b. [Connect with your Representative](#) (enter zip code in upper corner to find your Representative)

At these town halls, share your concerns about the impact of increased immigration enforcement and its effects on the willingness of survivors to seek safety and protection. Tailor your questions to the issues that are coming up in your own community. Perhaps you're hearing that survivors are afraid to go to court for a matter related to their abuse, or that survivors are hearing more immigration related threats from abusers.

Sample questions:

- *Over [75% of advocates](#) report that immigrant survivors have concerns about contacting police for matters related to their abuse. What efforts are you making to ensure that immigrant survivors can seek the protection they need without fear of deportation?*
- *[Recent changes in ICE policy](#) are increasing the risk that immigrant survivors are deported before their cases are decided. How are you holding ICE accountable for policies that harm immigrant survivors?*

If your Member of Congress isn't holding any public events, or is unwilling to come to an event, then you can consider an [empty chair townhall](#) to raise the concerns you'd want your Member of Congress to hear.

If you attend or host events, be sure to get the word out, including inviting members of the press. Take pictures and videos to share on social media along with your central messages and demands. Members of Congress need to hear your voice now more than ever.

B. Schedule a Meeting with Your Senator or Representative:

Recess is a good time to request a meeting with your Member of Congress. Again, it is essential to bring effective partners to reinforce your demand that Members of Congress take action to protect survivors of gender-based violence. What other organizations or groups in your community care that survivors have access to protection?

Be prepared to share stories about your or your organization's experience working with immigrant survivors. If you are sharing a story of an individual survivor, make sure to get consent from the survivor before sharing their story as well as taking precautions to protect confidentiality.

If you're not able to meet with your Member of Congress directly, you may be able to meet with a member of their staff. Staffers often have subject matter expertise on the topic and can be good messengers to your Member. Developing good relationships with these staffers is important to keep up future advocacy efforts.

It is often a good tip to leave behind "one-pagers" or other resources the staffer could use if they need additional information. See the Additional Resources tab for more information on some potential leave behind materials.

To find out when your Senators and Representatives will be in the state/district for a meeting, consult the Congressional calendars. Click [here for the Senate](#) and [here for the House of Representatives](#) calendars.

1. Sample script/email for scheduling a recess visit.

*My name is **[name]** and I work at/volunteer with **[Organization]**. We work with **[allied organizations/groups]** and we would like to request a meeting with Congressperson **[name]** to discuss the Administration's attacks on immigrant survivors of gender-based violence. We would like to share with you concerns we have about immigrant survivors in our community being afraid to access resources and institutions designed for their protection. We'd like to discuss the immense hardship survivors face while they are waiting for their immigration cases to be decided by USCIS, which can take years. We'd also like to discuss how the administration's recent changes in immigration policy create a chilling effect on immigrant survivors coming forward to access the help they need to escape abuse. **[Identify who will be coming from your office and other agencies]**.*

*We are available **on these days and times** and would need less than an hour of the Congressperson's time. Please let me know if and when Congressperson **[name]** is available to meet. We would greatly appreciate the chance to meet to discuss these important issues further. Thank you for your time and help, and please contact me at **[email address]** if you need additional information.*

2. Following Up

After the meeting, be sure to send an email thanking the Member or their staffer for taking the time to meet with you and your allies. You may also want to send them any follow up information that may have been discussed during your meeting and remind them of any commitments they may have made to safeguard and advance protections for immigrant survivors.

IV. Social Media

1. Hashtags: #ImmigrantSurvivorsToo #ImmigrantWomenToo

2. Sample Tweets:

We stand with immigrant survivors of domestic violence, sexual assault and human trafficking and demand their rights be protected. We urge [\[your representative's twitter handle\]](#) to act now to protect survivors.

Immigrant survivors of gender-based violence should not have to fear that reaching out for help will result in their deportation.

Immigrant survivors of gender-based violence deserve protection and justice. We must protect their rights to access critical protections without fear of deportation.

3. Sample Images for Facebook Posts:



<https://asistahelp.org/may-2019-advocate-survey-key-findings/>

V. Background Information to Inform Your Advocacy

Immigrant communities face heightened levels of harassment and violence nationwide. These latest attacks on immigrant communities, like those in El Paso, Texas, and Gilroy, California, were fueled by racism and white supremacy and are devastating and destructive to our entire nation. As the National Taskforce to End Sexual and Domestic Violence [recently wrote](#):

With each incident of mass violence, it becomes more evident that gender-based violence, abuse, oppression, and bigotry are inextricably tied, and efforts to prevent these heinous acts require a larger societal commitment to end abuse and oppression in all its forms, particularly at the intersections.

The quest to end domestic and sexual violence must align with the quest to end racism, misogyny, xenophobia, homophobia, transphobia, religious bigotry toward Jewish and Muslim communities, and other forms of oppression toward marginalized communities, including immigrant and Native American communities.

For these reasons, Congress must work at these intersections to combat these forms of bigotry, and to uphold our nation's commitment to critical protections for immigrant victims of violence.

Abusive partners and perpetrators often exploit victims' lack of legal immigration status or dependent immigration status as a way to maintain power and control and to keep victims silent. Recent changes in immigration policy are sharpening the tools of these abusers and resulting in increased risks of harm to victims of gender-based violence. Unfortunately, abusers' threats that victims will be at risk of deportation if they reach out for help are being actualized.

- Victims of domestic violence have been arrested at courthouses and many victims fear going to court for a matter related to their abuse.¹
- Advocates have seen a significant increase in the number of victims reporting that abusive partners are threatening them with deportation as part of broader abuse.² Survivors are being deported before their immigration applications are adjudicated, which gives credibility to abusers' threats.³

¹ E.g. Michael Gordon. "Mother and her son turned up for a domestic-violence case. Then ICE arrested them" Charlotte Observer (July 20, 2018), available at: <http://bit.ly/2SXzmfw>

² Jesse Paul "Colorado advocates see rise in immigrant domestic violence victims reporting deportation threats by their abusers" Colorado Sun (July 29, 2019), available at https://coloradosun.com/2019/07/29/colorado-domestic-violence-immigration-threats/?fbclid=IwAR1cQHeEOkmxtRovZ4bwHEAb047cT9crf4qJiuniFGrUMT_WG5JkFHujpQA

³ Alexandra Villareal. "US deporting crime victims while they wait for special visa" Associated Press (July 18, 2018), available at: <https://www.apnews.com/81e9280f78bb4f899d7ad2f64a0240a8>

- Immigrant victims around the country are afraid to reach out for help to address domestic violence and sexual assault due to fears of deportation.⁴
- New policy changes are making it harder for survivors to access immigration relief and benefits for which they may be eligible, including but not limited to:
 - Limits on domestic violence-based asylum cases
 - The proposed public charge rule
 - Increased immigration enforcement efforts
 - Proposed changes to housing guidance on mixed status families
 - Needless fraud detection initiatives that permit anonymous claims against immigrants without consequence

Congress created special immigration protections in the Violence Against Women Act (VAWA) for survivors of domestic violence, sexual assault, human trafficking, and other forms of violence to allow survivors to seek protection without fear of deportation, including:

- VAWA self-petitions that help certain family members of abusive U.S. citizens or lawful permanent residents
- U visas that help victims of certain crimes - including domestic violence, sexual assault, and trafficking - who participate in the investigation or prosecution of those crimes
- T visas that help victims of human trafficking who help investigate or prosecute human trafficking.

Right now, there are substantial delays in processing for humanitarian-based applications like VAWA self-petitions, U and T visas,⁵ which create increased instability and risk of danger for survivors. Congress must protect immigrant survivors and their ability to access life-saving resources, services, and immigration benefits.

⁴ See e.g. Claudia Boyd-Barrett. "Facing Anti-Immigrant Rhetoric and ICE Raids, Fewer Undocumented Victims Willing to Report Domestic Violence" California Health Report (Feb. 21, 2019), available at <http://bit.ly/2H2rzpK>

⁵ Processing times for U visa applications are at 51.5-52 months (time from initial filing to waitlist determination); adjudication of VAWA self-petitions are taking 16-21 months, and adjudication of T visa applications are taking 15.5 to 26 months. See USCIS. "Check Case Processing Times" available at <https://egov.uscis.gov/processing-times/>

VI. Additional Resources

Below find some additional advocacy resources you may find helpful to prepare for your meeting and town hall events or else use as resources to leave behind for your engagement with your Members of Congress.

A. Good “Leave Behind Documents”

- [Human Rights Watch, “Immigrant Crime Fighters” How the U visa Program Makes U.S. Communities Safer](#)
- [Survey: Immigrant Survivors Fear Reporting Violence](#)
- [Statement: National Task Force to End Sexual and Domestic Violence calls for unified efforts to end racism, abuse, and oppression and calls for legislation to curb gun violence](#)
- Asian Pacific Institute on Gender-Based Violence, [Effects of Increased Entanglement on Immigrant Survivors](#)

Please contact Cecelia Friedman Levin, ASISTA Senior Policy Counsel, at cecelia@asistahelp.org if you have any questions about this toolkit or if you would like help designing and implementing your local advocacy efforts.