

Department of Legislative Services
Maryland General Assembly
2017 Session

FISCAL AND POLICY NOTE
First Reader

Senate Bill 616

(Senator Ramirez)

Judicial Proceedings

Victims and Witnesses - U Nonimmigrant Status - Certification of Victim
Helpfulness

This bill establishes provisions by which a victim or a victim's family member may request specified entities to certify victim helpfulness for purposes of obtaining U Nonimmigrant Status with the U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services (USCIS). The victim must have been a victim of a qualifying criminal activity and demonstrated helpfulness, as specified, in the detection, investigation, or prosecution of the criminal activity. If the victim satisfies the criteria, the certifying official must fully complete and sign the relevant certification form.

Fiscal Summary

State Effect: The bill's requirements can be handled with existing resources.

Local Effect: Baltimore City expenditures increase by an estimated \$61,200 annually. The bill is not anticipated to materially impact any other jurisdictions.

Small Business Effect: None.

Analysis

Bill Summary:

Definitions

A "certifying entity" means (1) a State or local law enforcement agency; (2) a State's Attorney or deputy or assistant State's Attorney; (3) any other authority that has responsibility for the detection, investigation, or prosecution of a qualifying crime or criminal activity; or (4) an agency that has criminal detection or investigative jurisdiction

in its respective areas of expertise, including child protective services; the Commission on Civil Rights; and the Department of Labor, Licensing, and Regulation.

A “certifying official” means (1) the head of a certifying entity; (2) an individual in a supervisory role who has been specifically designated by the head of a certifying entity to issue the relevant certification forms on behalf of that entity; and (3) any other certifying official, as specified in federal regulations.

The bill also specifies offenses that are included in the definition of “qualifying criminal activity” and indicates that the attempt, conspiracy, or solicitation to commit the offenses is also a “qualifying crime.”

Certification of Victim Helpfulness

For purposes of filing a petition with USCIS for U Nonimmigrant Status, a victim or the victim’s family member may request a certifying official to certify victim helpfulness if the victim (1) was a victim of a qualifying criminal activity and (2) has been helpful, is being helpful, or is likely to be helpful to the detection, investigation, or prosecution of that qualifying criminal activity. For purposes of determining helpfulness, if a victim has not refused or failed to provide information and assistance reasonably requested by law enforcement, the victim must be considered to meet the criteria.

If the victim satisfies the criteria, the certifying official must fully complete and sign the specified certification form and, with respect to victim helpfulness, include (1) specific details about the nature of the crime investigated or prosecuted; (2) a detailed description of the victim’s helpfulness or likely helpfulness; and (3) copies of any documents in the possession of the certifying official that demonstrate the harm endured by the victim due to the criminal activity.

The certifying entity must certify or decline certification of the form within 90 days after receiving a request. If the noncitizen victim is the subject of removal proceedings, the certifying entity must certify or decline certification of the form within 14 days after receiving a request. A current investigation, the filing of charges, a prosecution, or a conviction is not required for a victim or the victim’s family member to request and obtain the certification.

A certifying official may withdraw the certification only if the victim refuses to provide information and assistance when reasonably requested. A certifying entity may disclose the immigration status of the victim or person requesting the certification only in order to comply with federal law or legal process or if authorized by the victim or person requesting the certification.

Current Law/Background: Individuals without legal status in the United States who are victims of criminal activity may file for U Nonimmigrant Status, which is status set aside

for victims of crimes who have suffered substantial mental or physical abuse due to the criminal activity and who are willing to assist law enforcement agencies or government officials in the investigation of that activity. In order to file for the status, the individual must provide a certification from a federal, state, or local law enforcement official that certifies the information as specified above. In determining whether to grant the status, USCIS will give the certification “significant weight” during adjudication. However, it alone is not sole evidence that a petitioner meets eligibility requirements, as USCIS will look at the totality of the circumstances surrounding the petition before rendering a decision.

Certifying agencies are under no legal obligation to complete the certification; however, without one, the individual will be ineligible for U Nonimmigrant Status.

Local Fiscal Effect: Baltimore City advises that due to the timeframes established by the bill and the expected increase in certifications requested, it will require one full-time staff person in the State’s Attorney’s Office to assist in the processing and review of certification requests. Accordingly, Baltimore City expenditures increase by approximately \$61,200 annually, which accounts for the salary and fringe benefits of a paralegal. None of the other local jurisdictions that were asked to provide a fiscal estimate for this bill anticipated a significant impact.

Additional Information

Prior Introductions: SB 1023 of 2016, a substantially similar bill, received a hearing in the Senate Judicial Proceedings Committee, but no further action was taken.

Cross File: HB 1208 (Delegate Morales, *et al.*) - Judiciary.

Information Source(s): Maryland Commission on Civil Rights; Baltimore City; Montgomery, Washington, and Worcester counties; City of College Park; State’s Attorneys’ Association; Department of Human Resources; Department of Labor, Licensing, and Regulation; Department of Natural Resources; Department of State Police; Maryland Department of Transportation; U.S. Department of Homeland Security; Department of Legislative Services

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