



10400 Little Patuxent Parkway  
Suite 450  
Columbia, MD 21044  
☎ 410.992.1923  
✉ [info@beluminus.org](mailto:info@beluminus.org)  
🌐 [www.beluminus.org](http://www.beluminus.org)

For more information, scan  
the following QR Code:



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Gabriel Maximilian Moreno, Esq.  
CEO  
Luminus Network  
10400 Little Patuxent Pkwy, Suite 450  
Columbia, Maryland 21044  
E: [gmoreno@beluminus.org](mailto:gmoreno@beluminus.org)  
P: 410.303.3899

**TESTIMONY ON (SB 0553 – Victims and Witnesses - U Nonimmigrant Status - Certification  
of Victim Helpfulness) – POSITION: FAVORABLE**

To: Chair Senator William C. Smith, Jr., Vice Chair Senator Jeff Waldstreicher, and members of  
the Judicial Proceedings Committee

From: Gabriel Maximilian Moreno, Esq.

Honorable Members of the Maryland General Assembly, my name is Gabriel Maximilian Moreno, Esq. I am the CEO of the Luminus Network headquartered in Columbia, Maryland, District 12, and a resident of District 13. For more than 40 years, Luminus has empowered immigrants by offering legal and social services to meet their goals. I am submitting this testimony **in support** of **SB 0553 – Victims and Witnesses - U Nonimmigrant Status - Certification of Victim Helpfulness**.

As an organization dedicated to serving immigrants and their families in Maryland, we see firsthand the urgent need for policies that protect and empower immigrant victims of crime. SB0553 strengthens the U Visa certification process, ensuring that survivors can access justice and protection without unnecessary barriers.

The U Nonimmigrant Status (U Visa) was established by Congress under the Victims of Trafficking and Violence Protection Act of 2000 to encourage undocumented crime victims to come forward without fear of deportation. It provides temporary legal status and a path to lawful permanent residency for individuals who have suffered substantial mental or physical abuse and have been helpful, or are likely to be helpful, in the detection, investigation, or prosecution of certain crimes.

The importance of the U Visa program cannot be overstated:

- **Encourages Crime Reporting & Public Safety:** Studies show that undocumented immigrants are significantly less likely to report crimes due to fear of deportation. A 2019 study published in the American Journal of Public Health found that over **45% of Latinos** reported being less willing to call the police if they were victims of a crime due to immigration fears. By strengthening the U Visa process, SB0553 helps bridge the gap between law enforcement and immigrant communities.
- **Reduces Domestic Violence and Trafficking Vulnerability:** Data from the National Immigrant Women's Advocacy Project (NIWAP) found that **76% of immigrant domestic violence victims** stay in abusive relationships longer due to fear of deportation. The U Visa provides a crucial lifeline for these survivors, allowing them to leave dangerous situations and seek legal protection.
- **Enhances Law Enforcement Investigations:** The Department of Homeland Security (DHS) reports that the U Visa program has significantly increased cooperation from immigrant victims and witnesses, helping law enforcement agencies prosecute violent crimes, including human trafficking, sexual assault, and gang-related offenses.

#### How SB0553 Strengthens the U Visa Process

SB0553 improves Maryland's approach to U Visa certification by:

- **Clarifying the "helpfulness" standard** to establish a rebuttable presumption that victims are helpful unless they refuse or fail to provide reasonable assistance to law enforcement. This protects victims from unfair denials based on misunderstandings or language barriers.
- **Reducing processing time for certification requests** from 90 to 30 days (and from 14 to 7 days for victims facing deportation), ensuring that vulnerable individuals receive timely protection. Currently, the backlog for U Visa processing at the federal level exceeds **five years**, and delays at the local certification stage only add to victims' hardships.
- **Requiring certifying entities to develop protocols for limited-English-proficient petitioners**, ensuring language is not a barrier to obtaining justice. This is particularly vital given that Maryland has a **rapidly growing immigrant population**, with over **930,000 foreign-born residents**, many of whom have limited English proficiency.

As Maryland continues to grow as a diverse and inclusive state, it is imperative that we adopt policies that support all residents in seeking justice, regardless of their immigration status. SB0553 is a commonsense measure that promotes public safety, supports crime victims, and enhances cooperation between law enforcement and immigrant communities.

Luminus respectfully urges the General Assembly to **return a favorable report on SB0553** to ensure that Maryland remains a place where all victims—regardless of immigration status—can seek safety and justice. Thank you for your leadership and commitment to protecting immigrant crime survivors.