

Press Release

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SCHAKOWSKY JOINS ADVOCATES, VICTIMS FOR PRESS CONFERENCE IN SUPPORT OF HER NEW BILL TO PROTECT IMMIGRANT WOMEN FROM DOMESTIC VIOLENCE

CHICAGO, IL -- U.S. Representative Jan Schakowsky, Chief Deputy Democratic Whip, today joined immigrants who have escaped domestic violence and advocates from domestic violence and immigration advocacy organizations to hold a press conference in support of her new bill, the Immigrant Victims of Violence Protection Act. Joined by lawyers and advocates from organizations across Chicago at Heartland Alliance's Midwest Immigrant & Human Rights Center, Representative Schakowsky spoke of the need to offer new legal protections to immigrants trapped in abusive relationships.

Currently, the immigration status of many immigrant women is controlled by their spouse. If ties with their spouse are severed, they could face deportation or separation from their children. Representative Schakowsky introduced the Immigrant Victims of Violence Protection Act (H.R. 3188) in the House of Representatives on June 30, joined by 77 original co-sponsors including Chicago Representatives Rush, Jackson Jr., Gutierrez, and Davis. The bill would give immigrant women more control over their immigration status and lift the legal barriers blocking them from fleeing abusive relationships.

Representative Schakowsky was joined today by two immigrants who recently escaped their abusive husbands. Although they both married U.S. citizens and had children with their spouses, they never attained residency status because their husbands never successfully filed spouse immigrant visas on their behalf. They both suffered verbal and physical abuse at the hands of their husbands, who specifically threatened to have them deported and separated from their children. Representative Schakowsky's bill offers a safety net for women in similar situations to ensure that they are provided with access to the legal protections, social services and benefits they would have if they were in healthy relationships.

The full text of Representative Schakowsky's statement is below, as prepared for delivery:

"I'm proud to be here today with so many advocates who are fighting every day on behalf of immigrants and domestic violence victims. I want to first thank Heartland Alliance's Midwest Immigrant & Human Rights Center for your work on behalf of low-income and impoverished immigrants, refugees, and asylum seekers and for the generous use of your space. And I want to especially recognize the two women who have courageously joined us here to tell their stories about being trapped in abusive relationships and being victims of our flawed legal system. They know from personal experience that there is an urgent need to change the law to save the lives of immigrant women across America."

"Domestic violence affects families and communities throughout our country, but its impact upon immigrant communities is especially devastating. Many women who have immigrated to America do not have control over their own immigration status - their spouse does. And when their spouse turns violent, immigrant women face a decision they should never have to make: They can leave their spouse and face deportation and separation from their children, or they can stay in an abusive relationship in order to protect their immigration status and risk losing their lives in the process."

"These women need help. We must remove the perverse incentive in our laws for women to stay in abusive relationships. And we must erase the double standard that allows women who are American citizens to escape their abusive spouse but uproots immigrant women in America from their families and their communities when they flee an abusive spouse."

"Last Thursday I was joined by 77 original co-sponsors including Chicago Congressmen Rush, Jackson Jr., Gutierrez, and Davis to introduce a bill called the Immigrant Victims of Violence Protection Act, which would offer new protections to immigrant women trapped in abusive relationships. This bill offers immigrant women who leave their abusive spouses the same legal protections they would have had in a healthy relationship."

"Today we will hear from two victims who were helped by organizations in Chicago to escape their abusers with their lives intact. While they were fortunate to have found advocates to guide them through the immigration process, there are others whose spouses still threaten deportation as a punishment. Under current law the Department of Homeland Security could still act on these abusers' threats, and deport these victims of domestic violence. My bill would create a sanctuary for these victims and prevent DHS from seizing them in domestic violence shelters, rape crisis centers, and protection order courts. Any victim who can prove they've been subjected to domestic violence would be protected from deportation under this legislation. The bill would also provide a safety net for battered legal immigrants and their children by allowing them access to health insurance, food, work permits, and other social services essential to their economic well-being. With these increased protections, immigrant women will be empowered to live on their own as legal residents, free from abuse."

"Over the next few months Congress will consider reauthorizing the Violence Against Women Act. Originally passed in 1994, this landmark legislation made significant progress in reducing violence against immigrant women. But there are still many women and children whose lives are in danger today. Many victims of domestic violence, sexual assault, child abuse or trafficking are leaving abusive relationships only to be deported and separated from their families. Others remain economically trapped by abusers or traffickers in life-threatening environments."

"It's critical that Congress provide new protections for immigrants as it considers reauthorizing the Violence Against Women Act. Inclusion of my bill, or any that advances this cause, in the broader VAWA legislation would go a long way toward improving our policy. Women across this country, regardless of their immigration status, should never have to choose to remain in an abusive relationship in order to avoid deportation or separation from their children. In the land of the free, too many immigrant women are being trapped in their own homes, their lives and possibly their children's lives endangered by an abusive spouse. The time to lift the legal barriers keeping immigrant women in abusive relationships is long overdue."