

The U Visa: A Potential Immigration Remedy for Immigrant Workers Facing Labor Abuse¹

What is a U visa?

A “U visa” is a temporary non-immigrant status available to non-citizen victims of certain crimes. Congress created the U visa as part of the Victims of Trafficking and Violence Prevention Act of 2000, in order to strengthen the ability of law enforcement agencies to investigate and prosecute certain crimes against immigrants and to offer protection to victims who fear cooperating with law enforcement due to their immigration status.

What Are the Benefits of a U visa?

U visa holders are eligible for the following benefits:

- Lawful status for up to 4 years;
- Eligibility to adjust status to lawful permanent resident after 3 years;
- Automatic grant of work authorization;
- Derivative visas for qualifying family members.

What are the eligibility requirements for a U visa?

In order to be eligible for a U visa, an immigrant worker must:

- 1) Have suffered substantial physical or mental abuse as a result of having been a victim of a qualifying criminal activity;
- 2) Possess information concerning the qualifying criminal activity;
- 3) Have been helpful, be helpful, or be likely to be helpful in the detection, investigation, or prosecution of the qualifying criminal activity;²
- 4) Show that the qualifying criminal activity violated a local, state, or federal law, or has occurred in the United States.³

What constitutes a qualifying criminal activity?

The U visa statute identifies 28 categories of qualifying criminal activity (QCAs) and any other substantially similar criminal activity as eligible for certification.⁴ Advocates should identify violations of local, state, or federal statutes that may correspond to the qualifying criminal activity when seeking certification. Law enforcement agencies may also certify U visa petitions for attempt, conspiracy, or solicitation of the qualifying criminal activity.

¹ © 2015 The National Employment Project (NELP) originally authored this factsheet in March 2014. The National Immigration Project (NIPNLG), the Southern Poverty Law Center (SPLC), and NELP updated and reissued it in May 2015. Khaled Alrabe and Ellen Kemp at NIPNLG and Eunice Cho at SPLC implemented this update.

² 8 C.F.R. § 214.14(a)(5) defines “investigation or prosecution” of a qualifying crime or criminal activity as referring to “the detection or investigation of a qualifying crime or criminal activity, as well as to the prosecution, conviction, or sentencing of the perpetrator of the qualifying crime or criminal activity.” *Id.* (emphasis added); see also 8 C.F.R. § 214.14(c)(2)(i).

³ 8 USC § 1101(a)(15)(U)(iii), INA 101(a)(15)(U)(iii); see also 8 C.F.R. § 214.14(b)(4).

⁴ 8 USC § 1101(a)(15)(U)(iii), INA 101(a)(15)(U)(iii); see also 8 C.F.R. § 214.14(a)(9).

Qualifying crimes that constitute criminal activity include:

Abduction	Incest	Sexual assault
Abusive sexual contact	Involuntary servitude	Sexual exploitation
Being held hostage	Kidnapping	Slave trade
Blackmail	Manslaughter	Stalking
Domestic violence	Murder	Torture
Extortion	Obstruction of justice	Trafficking
False imprisonment	Peonage	Unlawful criminal restraint
Felonious assault	Perjury	Witness tampering
Female genital mutilation	Prostitution	
Fraud in foreign labor contracting	Rape	

What are some examples of worker abuse that may constitute qualifying criminal activity?

Below is a list of qualifying criminal activity and corresponding fact patterns that have received certification. Please note that statutory requirements and elements of offenses may vary by jurisdiction.

Felonious Assault

- Abusive touching, battery, beating, or use of a weapon by employer resulting in substantial mental or physical harm.

Fraud in Foreign Labor Contracting

- False representations by employers to contracted workers on conditions of employment, housing, fees to labor brokers, food and transportation, ability to work at other places of employment, and other material aspects of the work arrangement.

Involuntary Servitude/Peonage/Labor Trafficking

- Threats of physical, psychological, financial or reputational restraint or harm by employer that compels an individual to continue work;
- Threats to contact local law enforcement or immigration authorities by employer in order to compel continued work;
- Confiscation or withholding of identity documents, passports, or other travel documents by employer;
- Supporting facts could include: wage theft; inadequate food, housing, medical care or clothing; lengthy hours; verbal or physical abuse; restricted contact with others; use of locks and fences to restrict workers' mobility (see also false imprisonment/unlawful criminal restraint).⁵

Obstruction of Justice/Perjury/Witness Tampering

- Evidence of visa fraud, false statements in seeking certification for labor, misuse of visas by employer; fraudulent wage and hour records;
- Instructions to lie to law enforcement investigations by employer;
- Intimidation of workers who seek to comply with law enforcement investigations or affirmative complaints against an employer, including threats to contact local law enforcement or immigration authorities.⁶

Abusive Sexual Contact/Rape/Sexual Assault/Sexual Exploitation

- Unwelcome sexual contact, rape, assault, or exploitation by co-workers, employers, or clients.

⁵ Involuntary servitude includes a condition of servitude induced by any scheme "intended to cause a person to believe that, if the person did not enter into or continue in such condition, that person or another person would suffer serious harm or physical restraint; . . . or the abuse or threatened abuse of the legal process." 22 U.S.C. § 7102(6). See also 18 U.S.C. §§ 1589(c)(1)-(2) (definition of serious harm and abuse of the law or legal process).

⁶ 8 C.F.R. § 214.14(a)(14)(ii) specifies that a petitioner may be considered a victim of the crimes of witness tampering, obstruction of justice, or perjury if s/he has been directly and proximately harmed by the perpetrator, and if there are reasonable grounds to conclude that the perpetrator committed the crime as a means to avoid or frustrate investigation or prosecution for other criminal activity, or to further abuse, undue control, or exploitation through manipulation of the legal system.

What government agencies have the authority to certify a U Visa petition?

Federal, state, or local law enforcement agencies, prosecutors, and judges may certify a U visa petition. U visa regulations specify that labor agencies such as the Equal Employment Opportunity Commission and the Department of Labor, which have criminal investigative jurisdiction in their respective areas of expertise, are valid certifying agencies.⁷ Federal judges have also certified U visa petitions in the context of labor abuse.⁸

Several labor enforcement agencies have released certification protocol for U visas. These agencies include the U.S. Department of Labor (US DOL), the Equal Employment Opportunity Commission (EEOC), the National Labor Relations Board (NLRB), as well as the New York Department of Labor (NY DOL), the California Department of Fair Housing and Employment (CA DFEH), the California Division of Labor Standards Enforcement (CA DLSE), and the Illinois Department of Labor (IDOL). In addition, local, state, and federal law enforcement agencies, prosecutors, and judges have certified U visa petitions for workplace-related crimes. Copies of agency protocols are available at <http://www.just-pay.org> and nipnl.org/WorkplaceCrimes.html.

On April 2, 2015, the Wage and Hour Division (WHD) of the Department of Labor began certifying three additional crimes: extortion, fraud in foreign labor contracting and “forced labor”⁹. Additionally, the WHD has also begun certifying T-visas, a temporary non-immigrant status available to non-citizen victims of human trafficking, in the context of employment and related allegations of violation of law enforced by WHD. T-visas have historically been underutilized relative to U-visas and may be a viable alternative to individuals seeking U-visas in certain context. Individuals may apply for both T- and U-visa certifications simultaneously with the WHD. For information about DOL’s implementation of the T-visa certification process please see Field Assistance Bulletin No. 2011-I – Addendum, Department of Labor, Wage and Hour Division April 2, 2015.

⁷ 8 C.F.R. § 214.14(a)(2).

⁸ See, e.g., *Garcia v. Audubon Cmty. Mgmt.*, No. 08-1291, 2008 WL 1774584 (E.D. La. Apr. 15, 2008).

⁹ Forced labor is not one of the qualifying criminal activities specifically enumerated in the U visa statute. The Department of Labor has stated that forced labor is “generally recognized as a crime that is ‘similar’ to the crimes of trafficking, involuntary servitude and peonage.” Field Assistance Bulletin No. 2011-I – Addendum, Department of Labor, Wage and Hour Division April 2, 2015. Under 8 C.F.R. § 214.14(a), crimes that are ‘similar activities’ to enumerated QCAs, meaning that “the nature and elements of the offenses are substantially similar to the statutorily enumerated list of criminal activities,” qualify for U visa certification.

FEDERAL CERTIFYING AGENCIES WITH EXISTING POLICIES

Certifying Labor Agency	QCAs Certified	Other Requirements	Requests for Certification
U.S. Department of Labor	<p>Involuntary servitude, peonage, trafficking, obstruction of justice, witness tampering, extortion, fraud in foreign labor contracting¹⁰, and forced labor.¹¹</p> <p>The DOL will also certify any additional QCAs where an applicant already qualifies for a QCA listed above.</p>	<p>-Authority to certify is limited to Wage and Hour Division (WHD).</p> <p>-Considers whether QCA arises in context of employment and related allegation of violation of law enforced by DOL WHD.</p> <p>-In-person interview of applicant required. Advocate may accompany applicant.</p>	<p>-Request for certification, detailed description of facts and relevant case law/statutes should be submitted to one of five Regional U Visa Coordinators. Advocates may consider including a draft of Form I-918B.</p>
National Labor Relations Board	All QCAs specified by statute.	-QCA must be related to an unfair labor practice under investigation by NLRB.	-NLRB regional offices should contact Assistant General Counsel Aaron Karsh, aaron.karsh@nrlrb.org, and Deputy Assistant General Counsel David Kelly, david.kelly@nrlrb.org if approached with request for certification. Advocates may consider including a draft of Form I-918B.
U.S. Equal Employment Opportunity Commission	All QCAs specified by statute.	<p>-QCA must be related to unlawful employment discrimination investigated by EEOC.</p> <p>-Interview of applicant required.</p>	-Request for certification, including Form I-918B, detailed description of facts and relevant case law/statutes should be submitted to EEOC Regional Attorney.

¹⁰ The DOL has indicated that it will consider U visa certifications for fraud in foreign labor contracting where the fraudulent activity took place within and/or outside the United States.

¹¹ See footnote 9.

STATE CERTIFYING AGENCIES WITH EXISTING POLICIES

Certifying Labor Agency	QCAs Certified	Other Requirements	Requests for Certification
California Department of Fair Employment and Housing	All QCAs specified by statute.	-DFEH must conduct an investigation into a FEHA or Ralph Act claim.	- Advocates may consider submitting a request for certification including details of the QCA, knowledge of incident, and helpfulness of the victim and a draft of Form I-918B. Advocates may contact Mary Bonilla at mbonilla@ca.dfeh.org.
California Division of Labor Standards Enforcement	All QCAs specified by statute.	-QCA must be detected or investigated in the course of DLSE's enforcement efforts.	-Request for certification, including draft I-918B, DLSE case status and case number, and description of QCA and helpfulness of victim.
Illinois Department of Labor	All QCAs specified by statute.	-IDOL must have jurisdiction to investigate charge or is conducting an ongoing investigation.	-Oral or written request to IDOL employee; draft I-918B, and cover letter describing request.
New York Department of Labor	All QCAs specified by statute.	-NY DOL must have jurisdiction to investigate case (allegation of NY state labor law violation). -Petitioner must be a victim of a QCA.	-Request for certification, including I-918B, NY DOL claim number and names of staff involved in claim, and other relevant information should be submitted to NY Labor Commissioner.

How do you petition for a U visa?

In order to successfully petition for a U visa, the applicant must first obtain certification from a law enforcement agency stating that he or she is a victim and has been, is currently, or likely to be helpful in the detection, investigation, or prosecution of a qualifying criminal activity. The certification form, Form I-918 Supplement B, must be signed by a supervisory agent from the certifying agency.

After obtaining certification, the applicant must then submit a complete U visa petition to U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services (USCIS), which has authority to grant the U visa. The petition should include:

- Form I-918 "Petition for U Nonimmigrant Status"
- Form I-918B "U Nonimmigrant Status Certification"
- Supplemental evidence: personal statement, other evidence of abuse/injury
- Copy of identity page of applicant's passport (or request for waiver)
- Form I-192 Waiver "Application for Advance Permission to Enter as Non-Immigrant" (when applicable, with fee of \$585 or a request for a fee waiver)
- Form G-28 "Notice of Entry as Appearance of Attorney or Accredited Representative"
- Form I-918A "Petition for Qualifying Family Members of U-I Recipient"

How can U visas affect immigrant worker organizing?

The successful grant of a U visa may support organizing by providing relief to immigrant leaders willing to call attention to workplace abuse, and by strengthening investigation and enforcement of labor laws. Employment authorization gained through a U visa may also provide plaintiffs with eligibility for damages in private lawsuits.

However, the highly individualized nature of U visa relief may pose challenges in broader organizing contexts where all workers may not have encountered similar treatment by an abusive employer.

Legislative proposals, including the Protect Our Workers from Exploitation and Retaliation Act (POWER Act) could provide key labor protections for immigrants who face retaliation by employers. Specifically, the POWER Act would expand U visa protections to workers involved in civil workplace claims and who fear or have received threats of force, physical restraint, or harm in retaliation by employers.

Additional resources on U visas:

- To join a national **working group dedicated to labor-related U visa advocacy**, workplaceUvisa@yahoogroups.com, please contact Ellen Kemp at ellen@nipnl.org.

Relevant statutory and regulatory provisions:

- Victims of Trafficking and Violence Protection Act of 2000, Pub. L. No. 106-386, div. A § 1513(a), 114 Stat. 1464, 1533 (2000) (detailing Congress's findings and purpose for U visa statute);
- New Classification for Victims of Criminal Activity; Eligibility for "U" Nonimmigrant status; Interim Rule, 72 Fed. Reg. 53,014 (Sept. 17, 2007) (to be codified at 8 C.F.R. pts. 103, 212, 214, 248, 274a, and 299).
- Alien Victims of Certain Qualifying Criminal Activity, 8 C.F.R. § 214.14.
- Agency certification protocol, including the U.S. DOL, EEOC, NLRB, CA DFEH, CA DLSE, IL DOL, and NYDOL are located at the National Wage and Hour Clearinghouse, <http://www.just-pay.org> and at <http://nipnl.org/WorkplaceCrimes.html>

U visa practice guides:

- Eunice Cho, U VISAS FOR VICTIMS OF WORKPLACE CRIME: A PRACTICE MANUAL (2014), available at <http://www.nelp.org/page/-/Justice/2014/U-Visas-for-Victims-of-Workplace-Crime-Practice-Manual-NELP.pdf?nocdn=1>.
- Eunice Cho, Giselle Hass, and Leticia Saucedo, *A New Understanding of Substantial Abuse: Evaluating Harm in U Visa Petitions for Immigrant Victims of Workplace Crime*, 29 GEO. IMMIGR. L. J. (forthcoming 2015).
- Sameera Hafiz, et al., *U Visa Certification Tool Kit for Judges and Magistrates* (2010), available at: <http://iwp.legalmomentum.org/immigration/u-visa/tools>.
- Sally Kinoshita, Susan Bowyer, and Catherine Ward-Seitz, *THE U VISA: OBTAINING STATUS FOR IMMIGRANT VICTIMS OF CRIME* (2010). To order, visit: www.ilrc.org.
- Susana Martinez, et al., *Help for Undocumented Victims of Crime*, 44 CLEARINGHOUSE REV. 129 (2010).
- Leticia M. Saucedo, *A New "U": Organizing Victims and Protecting Immigrant Workers*, 42 U. RICH. L. REV. 891 (2008).
- Suzanne B. Seltzer, et al., *IMMIGRATION RELIEF FOR CRIME VICTIMS: THE U VISA MANUAL* (2010), available at: <http://www.nsvrc.org>.
- Andrew Turner, et al., *Case of First Impression: Federal Judge in Civil Case May Certify U Visa Applications of Undocumented Immigrant Human Trafficking Victims*, 43 CLEARINGHOUSE REV. 510 (2009).

For more information on U visas for victims of labor abuse, please contact:

Eunice Cho, Southern Poverty Law Center | eunice.cho@splcenter.org | 404-221-5842

Rebecca Smith, National Employment Law Project | rsmith@nelp.org | 206-324-4000

Ellen Kemp, National Immigration Project of the National Lawyers Guild | ellen@nipnl.org | 617-227-9727