January 31, 2017

Statement of the National Taskforce to End Sexual and Domestic Violence in Opposition to the January 2017 Executive Immigration Actions

The National Taskforce to End Sexual and Domestic Violence (“NTF”), comprised of national leadership organizations advocating on behalf of sexual and domestic violence victims and women’s rights, strongly opposes President Trump’s January executive orders relating to immigrants and refugees. These executive orders endanger the safety of victims of sexual assault, domestic violence, and human trafficking, their families, and communities at large, further isolate victims, and erect barriers to established legal protections for victims.

**Limiting Refugee Admissions: Barring Refugees and Visa Holders Based on Country of Origin or Religion Will Leave Those Fleeing Gender-Based Violence Without Protection**

The executive order suspending and limiting refugee admissions blocks countless women and children from obtaining the refuge they need to avoid and escape violence, including trafficking, rape, and other forms of gender-based violence. The order claims that one aim of barring refugees and individuals from majority-Muslim nations is to reduce violence against women. We object to this counterproductive claim, as the order actually harms those that it professes to protect. During conflict, when women and children attempt to remain in their country or settle in refugee camps, they are particularly vulnerable to sexual assault, trafficking, and unwanted pregnancies. For example, a significant percentage of Syrian refugees are women fleeing with their children due to violence perpetrated against them.\(^1\) It is well documented that at the hands of ISIS, women and children have suffered from widespread gender-based violence, including kidnapping, systematic rape, enslavement, trafficking, stoning, beheading, and sexual harassment and assault.\(^2\)

Furthermore, targeting seven designated Muslim-majority countries by denying entry for individuals from Somalia, Libya, Yemen, Iran, Iraq, Syria, and Sudan not only harms those left stranded outside the U.S., it also sends the message that victims, including U.S. citizens and their children with backgrounds from Muslim-majority countries do not merit protection from abuse.

We are concerned that the executive order attempts to exclude a variety of people on the basis of their religious beliefs in order to legitimate the ban on the admission of Muslim people. We denounce any and all attempts to pit groups against each other on the basis of race, sex, religious beliefs, gender identity or sexual orientation.

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**Interior Enforcement: The Executive Orders Undermine Critical Tools for Community Safety and Threaten Access to Vital Services**

Punishing jurisdictions that provide “sanctuary” to immigrants is short-sighted and ineffective. The order’s demand that local police engage in immigration enforcement activities undermines community trust and will force vulnerable victims deeper into the shadows. Most violent and property crimes in the U.S. are committed by native-born citizens—not immigrants. Immigrant victims already fear contacting the police, and this order only exacerbates this fear. Abusers and traffickers use their victims’ fear of deportation—their own, their children’s or other family members’—as a tool to silence and trap them. As a result, perpetrators will be able to continue to harm others, both immigrant and U.S. Citizen victims alike.

Additionally, withholding funds to sanctuary cities will cut off vital programs and services that support the survival and health of our most vulnerable populations, U.S Citizens and immigrants alike, including: people who are homeless, people with mental illness, people living with HIV/AIDS, victims of domestic and sexual violence, and others. The order will jeopardize victims; is not grounded in evidence; will jeopardize victims of sexual and domestic violence; and will undermine basic services like housing, health care, education, and other critical services that support the well-being of our broader communities.

**Interior Enforcement: The Order’s Enforcement Priorities Will Harm Victims of Trafficking, Sexual Assault, and Domestic Violence**

The executive order directing that fines and penalties be collected from those facilitating the presence of those who are unlawfully present will potentially put victims at risk by discouraging humanitarian assistance to those who have been harmed. The order is so broad that providing shelter or transportation for victims of domestic violence, sexual assault or trafficking may subject victim services providers to penalty. In addition, prioritizing the removal of those who have not even been convicted of a crime will jeopardize the safety of victims who have not had the opportunity for the court system to evaluate and rule on mitigating or exonerating circumstances. Immigrant victims, who are vulnerable, due to language and cultural barriers, to being arrested and prosecuted for crimes directly connected to their victimization will be prioritized for deportation before they can access services and established protections, e.g., legal protections under the Violence Against Women Act or other humanitarian immigration relief.

**Interior Enforcement: Weakening Privacy Act Protections Will Endanger Victims**

Victims who are seeking immigration relief to establish their independence from their perpetrators face heightened danger from their perpetrators. The executive order directs federal agencies to exclude immigrants from the protections of the Privacy Act, which will jeopardize

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the confidentiality of victims of sexual and domestic violence and human trafficking and expose them to increased risk of harm from their perpetrators.

**Border Security: Rescinding Parole Authority Will Harm Victims**

Due to lengthy processing times for immigration protections for victims under the Violence Against Women Act, victims and their children often face several-year long waits for reunification. Eliminating uniform policies and procedures that allow dependents or parents to be paroled into the United States for reunification while victims’ cases are processed exacerbates trauma and exposes family members to harm abroad.

**Pending Executive Actions**

The NTF opposes any actions that will reduce access to protections and critical supports for immigrants seeking safety or in the United States. Proposals rescinding Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals (DACA), rescinding access to employment authorization for spouses of non-immigrant visa-holders, and limiting access to economic supports such as means-tested public benefits will increase the vulnerability of hundreds of thousands of individuals to abuse and exploitation. Abusive partners, opportunistic predators, and manipulative employers often target undocumented individuals for exploitation, as they know threats to have them deported will help keep victims silent. For those who do have legal immigration status, including those who are dependent on their spouses’ non-immigrant visas, access to economic supports is often critical to escape and recover from abuse. Increasing barriers to those economic supports, including the disqualification for employment authorization, or requiring reimbursement from abusive sponsors, will keep victims trapped without recourse.

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