

Blog Post: King County (WA) Sheriff's Office's U and T Visa Program Manager

Zoraida Arias is the U-Visa/T-Visa Program Manager for the King County (WA) Sheriff's Office. This is a newly created position under the leadership of LEITF member Sheriff Mitzi Johanknecht, and Zoraida has been instrumental in helping the KCSO expand its work to assist vulnerable populations. Zoraida has used her extensive experience working with both immigrant and refugee communities to help the KCSO continue achieving its goal of providing assistance to all King County residents, regardless of their immigration status.

"This is my dream job," Zoraida says. "Having the opportunity to serve my community, especially the immigrant and refugee community, is something I am passionate about. My own lived experiences growing up really influenced my decision in pursuing a career in human rights, specifically in this field of work. When I learned of this opportunity, I knew it would be the right fit for me."

Zoraida joined the KCSO in November 2019 and since then she has been able to expand the U-Visa/T-Visa Program to meet the needs of the community.

The U-Visa/T-Visa program currently provides the following services:

- Process U-Visa and T-Visa certification requests for victims of qualifying crimes who reported the incident to the King County Sheriff's Office.
- Intake services for victims who would like to submit a U-Visa/T-Visa certification request while they seek legal representation.
- Refer victims to agencies that provide legal representation on U-Visa/T-Visa or other immigration matters.
- Provide outreach and education to the community regarding U-Visa/T-Visa certifications.

In addition to expanding the U-Visa/T-Visa Program, and engaging in community outreach, Zoraida is currently working on recommending and implementing projects that align with King County Code 2.15: Citizen and Immigration Status to enhance trust and fairness for King County immigrant communities. These projects include increasing the KCSO's language access for community members, translation of websites and outreach materials, and updating policies to demonstrate current work that directly impacts immigrant and refugee communities.

Zoraida came to the KCSO with experience working with both government and nonprofit

agencies and a fresh perspective on how to build connections toward a common goal. "I see in KCSO an organization that is open to change and focused on helping vulnerable populations who might not always have trust in law enforcement. This truly inspires me to show community members that the KCSO is listening and willing to make the changes necessary to continue building trust."

In regard to operating during the COVID-19 pandemic, Zoraida notes, "Despite the challenges faced during this pandemic, the KCSO is working to leverage technology so that processing U and T Visas continues, without delays. Although I cannot meet in person right now, I am actively engaging with individuals over Skype or through phone conversations. We have been able to provide prompt responses for all requests."

Zoraida also works to educate the community on significant changes in federal policy. Recently, U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services (USCIS) changed its practice and began to issue denials for paperwork considered incomplete due to spaces left blank on forms. Although a form might be accurate, as in the case of a person who has no middle name and therefore leaves that space blank, USCIS would now consider this blank space as a basis for denial. Zoraida contacted concerned U Visa applicants to explain the change in practice and updated KCSO procedures on completion of supplemental B forms, to avoid unnecessary rejection of the applications.

Zoraida has worked hard to make a positive impact in the community. "I am pleased with the expansion of our program. Through community engagement and trainings, we now have an increased number of local and state agencies, direct victims, as well as community based organizations and immigration agencies that reach out to us for assistance. We have created outreach materials for our community members and translated them into thirteen different languages. I am excited for the future of this program and the KCSO's continued commitment to our immigrant community."

