

Baltimore's Salvadoran community worries over end to TPS

"My sisters and I, we're terrified," Rosa said. "I have been a homeowner for 14 years now. I have no idea what I'm going to do if I have to get back to El Salvador."

Rosa (not her real name), a Salvadoran who worships at St. Patrick in Fells Point, has lived in Baltimore since 1991. She, her four sisters and a handful of cousins who live in the area have all been recipients of Temporary Protected Status (TPS) since 2001.

She is worried about going back to El Salvador, and thoughts of it keep her up at night.

The U.S. Department of Homeland Security announced Jan. 8 that it will end TPS status for El Salvador nationals in September 2019. More than 200,000 Salvadorans weigh staying in the country illegally or returning to their home country, which, according to Catholic News Service, has been designated "as one of the most dangerous in the world not at war."

Rosa is one of the 20,000 Salvadorans with TPS status who reside in Maryland. She is also a longtime client of Esperanza Center, an agency of Catholic Charities of Baltimore. It provides immigration legal services, at a low cost, to immigrants in Baltimore City and vicinities.

Its Immigration Legal Services will hold free information sessions about TPS and immigration issues Jan. 14, at 10 a.m. at St. Patrick in Fells Point, and at 2 p.m. at Sacred of Heart of Jesus-Sagrado Corazón de Jesús in Highlandtown. Both sessions will be conducted in Spanish.

"Many of these individuals have lived in the state of Maryland for 15 years or more," said William J. McCarthy, executive director of Catholic Charities of Baltimore, in response to the DHS announcement affecting Salvadorans. "They've raised their children here, contributed to our economy, and they're firmly rooted in the U.S. and local faith communities."

Heather Benno, one of the nine attorneys at Esperanza Center, provided background on TPS.

“Basically, it is a protection that the federal government can extend on a country by-country basis,” Benno said. “No country is entitled to Temporary Protected Status. The standard is whether it’ll be safe for nationals of that country to return home.”

Benno added that TPS is “not a permanent visa; it’s no pathway to citizenship, but it does allow somebody to request employment authorization and allows them to live here lawfully.”

According to Benno, TPS was created in the 1990s, when Central American countries such as Nicaragua, Honduras and El Salvador were affected by natural disasters and civil wars. Because it was unsafe for them to return to those countries, the U.S. gave them special immigration protection.

According to CNS, Salvadorans were allowed to apply for TPS protection in 1990, after a “brutal civil war,” and again in 2001, after El Salvador was hit by several major earthquakes.

“The practice has been that, once a group of people has been living in this country for a long time, that there is some recognition that it is definitely unsafe for them to go back to their countries,” Benno said. “They have already established lives here (in the U.S.). They bought homes, had children. There has been reluctance in the past to take something like this away.”

According to Benno, conflict between local law enforcement and organized crime in El Salvador is unsettling.

“There’s an ongoing very violent fight between the government and these organizations (gangs), and many people, just regular families that are just trying to make it, get caught in the middle and suffer violence, or extortion, or rape,” Benno said. “So right now, people there are experiencing civil war-type conditions.”

The DHS announcement came during as the Catholic Church in the U.S. was observing National Migration Week.

Baltimore Archbishop William E. Lori, along with the rest of the U.S. bishops, urged Congress to find a legislative solution for all long-term TPS recipients, “who are an integral part of our communities, including here in the Archdiocese of Baltimore,” he said.

In a **Jan. 9 statement**, he said, “We must work for a solution that does not put innocent lives in danger and does not fragment families.”

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