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Contact: Attorney Marc Christopher

**Attorney Statement on Milwaukee Mother and Teacher's Aide Being Forced to Return to El Salvador After 14 Years, Despite Community Support and Ongoing Humanitarian Visa Process**

Today, our friend Ms. Yessenia Ruano—a beloved Milwaukee Public Schools teacher's aide, mother of 10-year-old twin daughters, and survivor of human trafficking—departed the United States to return to El Salvador after 14 years of living, working, and contributing to the Milwaukee community. Her departure comes after Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) denied her emergency request to remain in the country while her T Visa application, based on her status as a trafficking victim, remains pending.

ICE offered no explanation for the denial beyond a vague conclusion that she did not merit a “favorable exercise of discretion.” In the face of this decision and after carefully reviewing her remaining legal options, Ms. Ruano made the heartbreaking choice not to pursue further motions and instead return to El Salvador with her daughters.

Yessenia is returning to a country marked by persistent violence—one where her own brother was brutally murdered by criminal gangs. She leaves behind a supportive community in Milwaukee, where she has lived with dignity and purpose. Her departure has drawn deep concern from educators, advocates, and neighbors alike.

Throughout her time in the United States, Yessenia followed every rule required of her. She lawfully entered the U.S. after receiving a credible fear finding based on the danger she faced in El Salvador. She obtained work authorization and has always complied with the law—raising her daughters, working with children in Milwaukee Public Schools, and supporting her community.

Yessenia has also shown remarkable bravery in making her story public. By speaking out about her experience as a trafficking survivor and immigrant, she inspired countless others and gave a human face to an often-dehumanizing immigration system. Her courage has resonated across the state of Wisconsin, sparking compassion, understanding, and a renewed call for reform.

PO Box 236  
South Milwaukee, WI 53172  
414.751.0051  
888.264.0002 facsimile  
[www.christopher-law.com](http://www.christopher-law.com)

She remains hopeful that one day she will be able to return to the United States through approval of her T Visa. But even under the best circumstances, that process can take five to ten years—or longer.

Yessenia's story is a painful reminder of how broken our immigration system has become. It reveals how survivors of trauma—people fleeing death, violence, and exploitation—can find no pathway to safety, even when they do everything by the law. It highlights the barriers that ordinary families face: years of waiting, legal complexity, and thousands of dollars in legal and application fees.

Yessenia Ruano did not leave the United States in shame—she left in strength. By telling her story, she has educated the public, moved hearts, and helped shape the movement toward a more just and humane immigration system. Her journey is not over. And neither is our fight to ensure others like her do not face the same fate.

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