



Lives in the balance: The human impact of failing to designate TPS for Venezuela

YULEY

Yuley's son, now 5-years-old, was born with a serious heart condition. She tried desperately to get him the help he needed in Venezuela, talking to everyone she could in the country's highly-politicized healthcare system. All she was able to obtain for her son were a few painkillers. Eventually, in a closed-door meeting with a politically-appointed hospital director, she was told that she must wait for the inevitable death of her child. She was warned not to go anywhere else, as the Venezuela system was good enough and it was simply that her child was beyond help.

Yuley refused to give up, and despite facing massive risks, managed to get her son to the United States to get him the life-saving medical care he needed. Her son is now thriving and expected to grow into adulthood, as long as he can maintain access to the care he needs.

Yuley's asylum case in the United States has been pending for years. "TPS would make my life easier, especially with the security of work as a single mom with high medical bills, and groceries, gas etc.," she says.

Yuley wants TPS decision makers to know, "If someone

migrates here from their country, it's because of a need. It hurts us to be here, we miss our families."

Asked what would happen if she and her son were forced to return to Venezuela, Yuley says, "I don't even want to think about it. I would fight to be here and for my son to be here. The same way I fought to come here, I would fight to stay here."

RENIER

Renier and his family came to the United States seeking safety from the Maduro regime and humanitarian crisis in Venezuela. Life in Venezuela was "very difficult," Renier says. His six-year-old son has a serious heart condition requiring regular treatment and his life was in danger. In Venezuela, "you can't get medicine. There's no transportation or gasoline for emergencies."

In the United States, life has stabilized for Renier and his family. Renier says, "Here, I have what I need for my child." In Venezuela, Renier was an electrical engineer and his wife was a preschool teacher. Now, as his asylum case pends, Renier is working as an independent contractor on smart technology for homes. He says his

two children love school and speaking English and are settling into their new community.

Renier acknowledges the uncertainty of his situation and hopes his family will be able to remain safe in America. Renier says that having to return to Venezuela “would be like a death sentence for my family. There is no security, no access to anything there.”

ISABELLA

Isabella arrived in the United States from Venezuela several years ago with her husband and son, seeking asylum. Isabella and her family had been forced to flee Venezuela after her husband, who was politically active, began to receive death threats for his work trying to expose corruption. They left almost everything behind, arriving in the United States with just two suitcases.

Isabella’s life since arriving in the U.S. has been difficult. After a recent episode of domestic abuse landed her in the hospital, she separated from her husband. She worries about her ongoing asylum case if she tries to take any action against him at this time. “It’s complicated and dangerous,” she says. “If I get divorced, I’m at risk.”

Her primary focus is on her seven-year-old son, and she talks about him with great pride. “My son is doing great, he’s happy. He’s a student, he gets excellent grades, he plays soccer. He’s in love with this country as I am.”

Temporary Protected Status, Isabella says, “would be a blessing for me, my son, others waiting for asylum.” She adds, “It’s so hard to be here in limbo. You’re working hard, paying taxes, but you don’t know if you’ll be able to stay. [TPS] would be freedom for people.”

Isabella is currently working as a chef at a restaurant in Florida. She emphasizes how hard recently-fled Venezuelans like herself are working in the United States. “Sometimes, when you get to a low point,” she says, “the greatest things come out. We are here working very hard... People are working two, three jobs. We don’t have another chance. Our chance is America. We don’t have another place to go.”

If Isabella had the opportunity to speak directly to Congress or the administration about the decision regarding TPS for Venezuela, she would say this: “I have no family in Venezuela, nowhere to go, everyone has left. We’ve seen a lot of people die, a lot of people struggling,

our country crushed, our country lost everything. I saw my family dissolve because we had to separate. My grandma passed away and I couldn’t go to her.”

“There are many people in the U.S. from Venezuela and we can make this country a better place. We are immigrants but we know this country was built by immigrants. We have a lot to offer, we feel this country as home. Now I just have my hands to work, my brain to think about my future and my son, and my heart to stand up every day and work harder and harder. If I can do anything for this country, I would with no regrets.”

MATEO

Mateo was forced to flee Venezuela to seek asylum in the United States after suffering an arbitrary arrest under the Maduro regime. Mateo says that life in Venezuela was “terrifying.” He recalls waiting in lines at the supermarket for 24 hours for a small bag of rice. His former city was subject to sporadic electricity and blackouts.

Mateo, who is living with HIV, says the lack of medication in Venezuela put his health at serious risk. There were at least 6-month waits for the most basic medical tests. “Here, everything is different,” Mateo says. “I have my medicine, my doctors, a checkup every three months.” As he speaks, it is clear Mateo is intensely grateful and almost overwhelmed at being able to see a doctor every time he needs. “If I have any problem, he will help me. In Venezuela that’s impossible, absolutely impossible.”

Mateo says he has lived “two lives” over the past years in Venezuela and the United States. His asylum case has been pending for over a year and its outcome—his future—remains unknown. Asked what would happen if he was forced to return to Venezuela, Mateo says he thinks he might die. “Here I feel safe, I have food, transportation, everything is absolutely different. I’m okay, I’m alright, I’m happy.”

ELIZABETH

Elizabeth originally arrived in the United States with her family on a tourist visa. They planned on staying for only a short time, hoping the situation in Venezuela would improve. Her husband had been kidnapped years

before, but was eventually able to come home again. Her daughter had also experienced an attempted kidnapping in Venezuela before the family left.

When their tourist visas expired, the family was able to remain in the U.S. on another temporary visa after opening a small business dedicated to exploring the seabed for the remains of ships and airplanes. In April 2019, Elizabeth's husband received an assignment for the company in Venezuela. The job involved going to an island controlled by Maduro's military. Her husband was detained after arriving and then forcibly disappeared.

"It has been 107 days that he has been gone," Elizabeth says. "I want my husband back and to know where he is and why they took him. I don't understand."

Now, with him gone, Elizabeth is providing for her three children and elderly mother-in-law by herself. "I work as a hotel housekeeper, then after I clean offices. I also clean individual houses. I live to work for my family." She continues, "The little time I spend not working and home, I am tired and sleep on the floor on a mattress. I am always exhausted. It is very hard, very hard."

Following the forced disappearance of her husband, Elizabeth began receiving threats herself and applied

for asylum in the United States. Asked what TPS would mean for her and her family, Elizabeth says: "Wow, what can I tell you? Any way I can stay in the U.S. would be a huge help for me and all Venezuelans here. Like I said before, I live to work and TPS would help me with that and my life in the U.S. That would be everything. People think that we came here to have an easy life but we are sad to leave our countries and it is very hard. I want it [TPS]. We [Venezuelans] need it, any kind of help. To be far from home, your country, your friends, family, being an immigrant, is hard."

When asked what would happen if she was forced to return to Venezuela, Elizabeth remarks, "That is not an option. We can't return. Point blank. This is real, our situation, we cannot return. We have nothing left in Venezuela, they took everything."

"We just need the basics," Elizabeth concludes, "to have food, a home, happiness, go to a park without fear of being pursued or killed. We don't live here because we felt like it, we came here because we had to seek help. We are trying to do everything we can to do things right. We are good people, good workers. We deserve the opportunity to show you who we are."

Names have been changed to protect individuals and their families.