

Why So Many Illegal Immigrants Hide Away in US Churches

A single mother of four has taken sanctuary in a Connecticut church after federal authorities ordered her deported to her native Guatemala as part of U.S. President Donald Trump's crackdown on unauthorized immigrants.

Nury Chavarria, who moved to the United States in 1993 to seek asylum from political turmoil and violence at home, had been ordered by immigration officials to leave for Guatemala by Thursday, said Sidd Sinha, an attorney at Formica Williams, the New Haven, Connecticut law firm representing her, by phone on Friday.

Instead the 43-year-old housekeeper took sanctuary at Iglesia De Dios Pentecostal in New Haven.

Churches have historically offered sanctuary to refugees, making them immune from arrest. While that no longer has legal effect, the U.S. Immigration Customs Enforcement spokesman Khaalid Walls said in a statement on Friday that the agency avoids making arrests at "sensitive locations" such as places of worship, schools and hospitals without prior approval from a supervisor.

"We have opened the doors of our congregation to serve Ms. Chavarria as a sanctuary church," Pastor Héctor Otero of the church said at a press conference on Thursday.

Chavarria is a single mother of four children aged 9 to 21, who have birthright citizenship. Her eldest has cerebral palsy.

Chavarria was allowed to voluntarily depart after a review of

her case in 1998, but has stayed on illegally since 1999, Walls said. She has been granted stays of removal on humanitarian grounds as she has raised her children.

Connecticut Governor Dannel Malloy, who met with Chavarria at the church on Thursday, tweeted on Friday, “#NuryChavarria is a mother and has no criminal record. She is welcome in our state.”

New Haven is one of hundreds of U.S. cities, counties and states that have declared themselves sanctuaries that refuse to cooperate with Trump’s efforts to deport millions of immigrants.

In the first months after his election in November, arrests have risen, but actual deportations have fallen by 12 percent compared with the same period under President Barack Obama.

The two Democratic U.S. senators representing Connecticut, Chris Murphy and Richard Blumenthal, have written letters to Immigration Customs Enforcement urging a review of Chavarria’s latest application for a stay of removal.

At a press conference on Friday at the church where Chavarria was staying, Blumenthal called her situation “a symptom of Trump’s cold and callous immigration policies that lack all sense of reason and rationality.”

New York immigration attorney Glen Raj said by phone that U.S. immigration agencies are very rarely persuaded by communities and state governments to revoke a deportation order.

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