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IMMIGRATION

Family says Virginia domestic violence victim didn't seek help due to immigration fears

An organization that supports immigrant victims of gender-based violence said 76% of its clients are afraid to go to the police.

By Freixys Casado • Published September 10, 2025 • Updated on September 10, 2025 at 4:42 pm

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Courtesy of family

Ana Mena Membreno

A young woman died in Fairfax County six days after what her family calls a brutal act of domestic violence. Loved ones say fear about her immigration status kept her from asking for help.

Ana Mena Membreno was 28, originally from El Salvador and had a whole life ahead of her. Early the morning of Aug. 30, police responded to a call on Jefferson Avenue in Falls Church. According to authorities, Mena Membreno's partner called because she wasn't breathing.

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Her sister, Raquel Sánchez Membreno, [told our sister station Telemundo 44](#) about her shock upon seeing her in the hospital.

"When I saw her, she was on oxygen, on wires, on medication, on a lot of medication," she said in Spanish.

While Mena Membreno spent days in critical condition, detectives found evidence of an assault and arrested Robert Leo Howald, 35, on charges of strangulation and malicious wounding. He was held without bail.

"On Thursday, when they did the last exam, they told us she died of cerebral arrest. I refused and refused, saying no, they should do another exam," Sánchez said.

Mena Membreno was intelligent, hardworking and protective, her sister said.

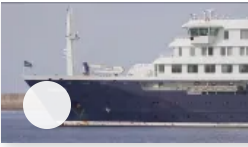
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"She loved my son. She told me, 'If they do something to my child, I'll go.' I told her, 'No, don't worry,'" Sánchez said.

Now her only hope is for justice.

"If this person did what they did, they have to pay. Maybe they won't give my sister back, but I can prevent it from happening to someone else," she said.

A close friend of the family told Telemundo 44 that Mena Membreno never sought help because of her immigration status. It's a fear that, according to the Tahirih Justice Center, many immigrants face in silence.

"Our clients right now have to evaluate the benefits of calling the police. The most important thing right now is that many are in a situation where they have to decide if this situation poses a high risk of immigration obtaining information about them," Crystal Fleming, the group's managing attorney, said.

The organization that supports immigrant victims of gender-based violence said 76% of its clients are afraid to go to the police.

The victim's sister sends this message: "If they can ask for help before the tragedy happens, they should ask for help because this must stop."

The Tahirih Justice Center runs a domestic violence help line and offers help regardless of immigration status.

If you or someone you know is experiencing domestic violence, contact the National Domestic Violence Hotline by calling 1-800-799-SAFE (7233), visiting www.thehotline.org or texting LOVEIS to 22522.