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## Time to end widow's penalty

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Imagine losing your husband to a heart attack or a car crash, and then being told to leave the country.

This is what is happening to a group of immigrant women across the United States, victims of what's called the "widow's penalty." They lost their chance to become legal permanent residents when their husbands died before their immigration papers were approved or because they had not been married two years.

They had lived here legally and were married to U.S. citizens.

The Sun-Times last week told the story of one such woman, Corina Turcinovic, a citizen of France. She was on her way to becoming a permanent legal resident when her husband, as the result of an accident, died. Ordered to leave the country, Turcinovic was headed to the airport when U.S. Rep. Dan Lipinski intervened. He introduced a bill in Congress, still awaiting approval, that would allow her to stay.

Apart from such an extreme measure -- a "private" bill to benefit a single person -- women in Turcinovic's plight have nowhere to turn. But now more than 170 of them have joined a class-action lawsuit, and are calling on Congress to end the widow's penalty. One proposal is co-sponsored by Illinois Sen. Dick Durbin.

Among the other widows is Diana Engstrom of Kosovo, who lives in Bloomington. She met her husband, Todd, when he commanded a special forces team for the United Nations in Kosovo. He later went to work in Iraq as a military contractor and was killed by a rocket-propelled grenade.

And then there is Maria Diaz of Spain, who settled with her American husband, a computer consultant, in Chicago. They were married less than a year when he died of a congenital heart condition.

"My husband loved me. This was a double trauma," says Diaz, who hopes to be allowed to stay in Chicago. "You lose everything, your future."

Congress should act to help those who have already lost so much.

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