

SAO Profile in Passion – Elvira Quiala, Paralegal, M.O.V.E.S.

For more than four decades, Elvira Quiala has been a steady source of compassion, strength, and dedication at the Miami-Dade State Attorney's Office. Today she serves as a paralegal in the Mobile Operations Victim Emergency Services (M.O.V.E.S.) Program within the Domestic Violence Unit, but her journey to this work began long before she ever stepped into the SAO.

Elvira was born in Guantánamo, Cuba. At just 10 years old, she, her mother, and her three sisters left Cuba for Spain, where they lived for five months before finally reuniting with her father in Miami. He had claimed the family years earlier, and it took seven long years before they were permitted to join him in the United States.

As a child, Elvira loved the arts and never worried much about what she might one day become. After graduating from Edison Senior High School, she worked at State Farm and then as a secretary for MacTown, a program serving children with special needs. A family friend who worked at the State Attorney's Office encouraged her to apply, and at just 18 years old, Elvira began her SAO career as a secretary. She later worked as a receptionist, then in County Court, and continued advancing wherever she was needed. She eventually moved to the Felony Division before applying to the M.O.V.E.S. Program in 2004. Her sister, Martha Peña, also works at the SAO.

Elvira remembers well the early days of the innovative program. “When M.O.V.E.S. first started, it was run by Denise Moon, who helped secure the grant. That was in 1998, and it was part-time after 5 p.m. I worked my full-time day shift at the SAO and then M.O.V.E.S. at night. The beeper would go off, and you would have to go out on a case.” Eventually, the workload became too much, and she stepped away from the evening shift. But when the full-time M.O.V.E.S. position opened, she applied—and earned it.

“We in law enforcement know that domestic violence is the invisible crime hidden behind a home’s closed doors. Elvira Quiala, working as a true-life saver in our M.O.V.E.S. program, directly confronts the pain and violence of these crimes at a crucial time, moments after the police have intervened,” says State Attorney Katherine Fernandez Rundle. “The work can be emotionally draining, so it takes a special person to compile the evidence for our criminal case while also providing the strength and direction to help survivors move forward. Elvira’s commitment to ending domestic violence, dealing with it on a one-on-one basis, gives our victims a chance to escape the personal hell that domestic violence creates.”

M.O.V.E.S., Mobile Operations Victim Emergency Services, provides immediate assistance to victims of domestic violence. Paralegals respond directly to arrest scenes or police stations to take sworn statements, assess victims’ needs, help develop safety plans, and connect individuals to community resources. The team is on-call Monday through Friday from 5 p.m. to 5 a.m., and 24 hours on weekends and holidays. Early intervention not only supports victims at their most vulnerable moments but also strengthens cases for prosecution by capturing clear, timely accounts before fear or pressure causes victims to recant.

“We see them when they’re bruised and afraid,” Elvira says. “That’s when they let their guard down and tell us what really happened. Since we’re there, we can connect them to the resources they need.”

Her work is deeply personal. “It breaks my heart to see our victims,” she says. “I want to help and protect them. I give 110% to make them feel safe and comfortable. Many don’t trust the system, the police, or the government—especially our immigrant victims. I try to establish trust and show them respect. They don’t know the system; they just need someone to guide them.”

The challenges are real. Alcohol, drugs, financial strain, and infidelity appear in most cases. About 90% of victims eventually change their minds or request modifications to no-contact orders—often out of fear or financial dependence. “It’s sad when someone initially doesn’t want to proceed, and later it turns into a felony or even a murder. The cycle of violence is a process, and we know how hard it is.”

But the rewards keep her going. One DV victim, whom Elvira helped more than 20 years ago, still keeps in contact. Now living out of town, she once told Elvira, “My life changed the day I met you.” Elvira was just a secretary assigned to her case at the time. The woman had nearly died at the hands of her partner.

Many victims have written letters thanking her over the years. “I don’t do my work for recognition,” she says. “But it is rewarding to help someone regain control of their life. I like to see that I made a difference.”

Today, Elvira is one of five M.O.V.E.S. paralegals, and her team is known for its compassion and collaboration. After 43 years at the SAO, she still loves her job. “I love helping. I love making a difference. I love what I do.”