

Dreamers and Why It Is Important to Address Their Future in a Comprehensive, Integrated Way

By Senator Luz Escamilla

Utah State Senate District 1

Conversations regarding our broken immigration system are difficult and uncomfortable, but the most difficult one is likely how to address children who came to this country with their parents as infants or at a very young age and now are undocumented. These young men and women are referred to as Dreamers, and it is indeed an appropriate name describing what they represent. Dreamers who seek a driver's license, to pursue higher education, or who want to join the armed services are up for a rude awakening. Many discover for the first time they are undocumented. There are approximately 2.5 million undocumented youth living in the United States. The realization that their immigration status may prevent them from fully participating in the only country they have ever known and that they could potentially face deportation to a nation with which they have no connection is a traumatic experience for all of them. Many are brilliant students with a bright future who suddenly face the reality of broken dreams and uncertainty.

My experience getting to know and interact with people in this situation has been powerful, eye-opening, and extremely sad.

For many years the plight of these young men and women was ignored but in 2012, after years of heavy advocacy by Dreamers and after decades of lack of congressional action, then President Obama established the Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals (DACA). This program allowed some individuals who entered the country as minors and met certain eligibility requirements to receive a two-year renewable period of deferred action from deportations and to be eligible for a work permit. DACA recipients do not receive an adjustment of their immigration status, but they do get temporary relief from potential deportation actions.

More than 800,000 young man and women have been enrolled in DACA since 2012. These are hardworking and inspiring young men and women that have families and many children who are U.S. citizens. Many of them are the primary provider for their families.

During the 2016 presidential campaign, the eventual winner threatened to eliminate DACA. In response, members of Congress started to bring forward proposals to address this vulnerable group of individuals. DACA participants have done everything that has been asked of them and have disclosed all their information to the federal government. President Donald Trump's threat to end the program placed all participants in real danger of facing deportation. In response, several proposals were introduced in Congress. Since the September 5, 2017 announcement by the White House to elimi-

nate this program, more proposals have been submitted.

The current proposed bills are below. These tend to change rapidly, but one of these could be the future for these group of women and men.

BRIDGE Act (H.R. 496) –

Introduced by Rep. Mike Coffman

Extends DACA for three more years from the date of the Act's enactment

Education requirements

No path to citizenship

Recognizing America's Children (RAC) Act (H.R. 1468)

Introduced by Rep. Carlos Curbelo

Education requirements

Conditional permanent residency, then to legal permanent residency

Provides a process with an estimate 10-year process towards citizenship

2017 Dream Act (S. 1615 & H.R. 3440)

Senate side – Sens. Lindsay Graham and Richard Durbin

House side Rep. Lucille Roybal-Allard

Education Requirements

Conditional permanent residency, then to legal permanent residency

Provides a process with an estimated 13-year path towards citizenship

Hope Act (H.R. 3591)

Introduced by Rep. Luis Gutierrez

Conditional permanent residency, then to legal permanent residency

Provides a process with an estimated 8-year path towards citizenship

SUCCEED Act (S.1852)

Introduced by Sen. Thomas Tillis

Education requirements

Conditional permanent residency, then to legal permanent residency

Provides a process with an estimated 15-year path towards citizenship

There are more detailed differences between the proposed legislation, but the vast majority of them recognize the importance of a path to citizenship, and that is critical. Not allowing these dreamers to fully integrate as US citizens is terrible public policy and will create layers of socioeconomic gaps and a set of second-class individuals in communities across our country. These young men and women are more integrated than any other group of immigrants to our country. Many of them don't speak the language of their country of origin and don't have any ties or memories to these countries. They are as American as apple pie.

It seems that the issue of immigration will not be resolved quickly. We still don't have a silver bullet solution to address the many complexities of this subject. But there is a chance to move in incremental steps towards a comprehensive solution by putting legislation in place that will allow these young men and women to be fully integrated as US citizens and continue to work for their American dream, and the American dream in generations to come.

The idea that children will be penalized and pay for the choice and mistake made by their parents is unheard of and morally wrong.

We can't sit back and be numb to the injustices taking place in our nation. We are a country that was built by immigrants that came here looking for a better life and a better future; those pioneers are not different from the Dreamers of this century.