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Protecting Dreamers and Mixed-Status Families in the 119th Congress

“Legislators have a moral and patriotic duty to improve our legal immigration system, including the opportunities available for family reunification and preservation. A society is only as strong as its families, and family unity is a fundamental right. For the good of the country, Congress must find a way to overcome partisan divisions and enact immigration reform that includes an earned legalization program for longtime undocumented residents.”

-Bishop Mark Seitz, Chairman of the USCCB’s Committee on Migration (June 2024)

Action Requested

As the 119th Congress moves forward, legislators should protect and support Dreamers, especially DACA beneficiaries and those who are part of mixed-status families. Any legislation put forward in the coming months should respect the inviolable dignity of these and other immigrants, taking into consideration their profound contributions to our nation and its communities.

Background

The term “Dreamers” is generally used to refer to undocumented people who came to the United States as children. The total number of Dreamers in the country is difficult to determine, but most estimates exceed three million people. For the vast majority of Dreamers, the United States is the only country they’ve ever known and the one they consider home.

What is DACA?

The Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals, or DACA, program was created by the U.S. Department of Homeland Security (DHS) in 2012. It provides work authorization and protection from deportation to certain Dreamers for a renewable period of two years. It does not provide a pathway to citizenship or permanent lawful status. To be eligible, a Dreamer must have come to the United States before his or her sixteenth birthday and have continuously resided in the country since June 15, 2007; other requirements apply, including paying a fee and not having engaged in certain criminal activity. Over 800,000 people have benefited from DACA in total, with roughly 500,000 active beneficiaries today.

What is the current status of DACA?

DACA’s history has been marked by numerous legal and administrative challenges. In July of 2021, the U.S. District Court for the Southern District of Texas held that DACA was unlawful. The court issued an injunction preventing the continued implementation of DACA. However, the court has permitted DHS to process renewal requests for those already receiving protection under the program. The program was further litigated in light of DHS’ regulatory action to “preserve and fortify” DACA in 2022. However, the lower court once again reached the conclusion that DACA was unlawful. On January 17, 2025, the Fifth Circuit issued a decision largely affirming that ruling. The Supreme Court

may be called upon to review the case. For the time being, DACA renewal applications continue to be processed, but the future of the program and those relying on it hangs in the balance.

Why should Dreamers be protected and supported?

Dreamers exemplify many of the same positive qualities that characterize the broader immigrant population in the United States. They are valued members of American communities and contribute to crucial sectors of the economy. Many are academic standouts, and some have even served in the military. They have become pastors, doctors, teachers, farmers, and police officers.

Nearly half of Dreamers are estimated to work in industries facing several labor shortages in the last few years, including construction, manufacturing, food services, transportation, and healthcare. During the COVID-19 pandemic, Americans for Prosperity found that over 30,000 Dreamers responded to the crisis as nurses, physician's assistants, or other health professionals. Those that would have been covered by the proposed Dream Act of 2023 contribute \$45 billion to the economy each year through their wages and an additional \$13 billion in federal, state, and local taxes.

Subjecting these individuals to removal would also negatively impact their U.S.-citizen family members (including thousands of spouses and children), uprooting entire families to countries that are completely unfamiliar to them or forcing husbands, wives, mothers, fathers, and children apart. According to Fwd.us, nearly all (88%) DACA beneficiaries live in mixed-status families, with about a fifth married to U.S. citizens and more than 300,000 U.S.-citizen children living with at least one parent who benefits from the program. Because a society is only as strong as its families, it is just as important to consider the potential adverse consequences of policies on mixed-status families as it is families entirely comprised of native-born persons.

USCCB Position

The U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops (USCCB) has long called for the legal protection of Dreamers, repeatedly supporting bills such as the DREAM Act and other bipartisan measures. It remains the USCCB's position that Dreamers require permanent legal protection, with a pathway to citizenship, enacted by Congress. Only Congress is empowered to provide such relief, and a legislative solution is long overdue. The continued uncertainty associated with the DACA program is untenable and unjust, depriving hardworking people the ability to be fully recognized members of our society, inclusive of all the rights and responsibilities that accompany such recognition.

Additionally, Congress should not limit eligibility for mixed-status families in such a way that prevents them from accessing the same support as other families. For example, current eligibility requirements for the Child Tax Credit that only require the benefitting child to have a Social Security Number should be preserved. This is consistent with the goals of such programs, which exist to empower families and to prevent them from falling into poverty.

Additional Information

- Catholic Elements of Immigration Reform, bit.ly/4gRgc1F
- USCCB Letter Addressing Reconciliation, bit.ly/4ic5Fi9
- USCCB Press Release on Keeping Families Together, bit.ly/3QrhQf9