

Thousands of US immigrants line up for new work permit program

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Tens of thousands of young undocumented immigrants lined up Wednesday to begin their applications for a program that could allow them to temporarily remain in the United States and be granted work permits. President Obama authorized the Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals (DACA) policy by executive order last June, and the Department of Homeland Security began accepting applications on Wednesday.

In Chicago, people began lining up Tuesday evening at Navy Pier to take part in an application workshop, and the crowd had grown to more than 10,000 people by Wednesday. In Los Angeles, lines began forming at 5 a.m. Wednesday outside the offices of an immigrants rights organization. Thousands of others lined up in Los Angeles, Miami, Boston, Houston and other cities with large immigrant populations.

Some 1.7 million young immigrants are estimated to be among those who could qualify for the initiative. In addition to obtaining permits allowing them to work legally in the US, those approved could also obtain driver's licenses, Social Security cards, and qualify for other social programs.

Obama implemented DACA after the DREAM Act, which would have put some young undocumented immigrants on a path to citizenship, stalled in Congress. Applicants who are approved will not be granted a green card (permanent residency) or be in line for US citizenship. DACA does not provide amnesty, and successful applicants will have to re-apply every two years. Those who are rejected for the program cannot appeal the decision.

Coming three months before the presidential election, implementation of the initiative—providing limited rights to a narrow section of immigrants—is at best a cynical gesture in an effort to court Latino voters. At worst, the information gathered in the application process could be used against immigrants and their families. The Obama

administration has pursued an aggressive anti-immigrant agenda, rounding up immigrants in wide-scale sweeps and deporting them in record number, and this policy will not end with DACA.

In order to have a chance of obtaining the limited rights afforded under DACA, applicants must meet a strict list of requirements. They must be younger than 31 as of June 15, 2012, and have arrived in the US before the age of 16. They must have lived continuously in the US since June 15, 2007. They must be in school, have a high school diploma or GED, or be an honorably discharged veteran. They cannot have been convicted of a felony, a significant misdemeanor, or three of more other misdemeanors. Only about 15 percent of the estimated 11 million undocumented immigrants in the US meet these criteria.

As DACA was created by executive order, the program is to be funded solely by applicants' fees. Each applicant must pay \$465, a very large—if not prohibitive—amount for a young person who has not been able to obtain a work permit or qualify for government student grants or loans. Applicants are cautioned not to leave the country pending decision on their cases. If an individual is approved and wants to travel internationally, he or she will need to apply for permission to re-enter the country, a process that will cost another \$360.

In addition to the burdensome requirements and costs, many immigrants and their advocates are fearful that a process that claims to provide opportunities may expose their families and themselves to the risk of deportation. Young people worry that authorities will use the information they submit on applications to track down relatives who are undocumented and do not qualify for the program.

Applicants must provide documents to prove their identity, which could include passports, birth certificates, school transcripts, medical and other records. Sworn affidavits, signed under penalty of perjury, can also be

provided to prove identity. Anyone determined to have committed fraud can be referred immediately to immigration authorities and deported.

An immigrants rights group in Central California has been warning farmworkers and their children not to apply for DACA. “Immigration agents could haul them off that same day,” Manuel Cunha, president of the Nisei Farmers League, told CBS News. “Even if they don’t, if this policy is disbanded, now ICE [Immigration and Customs Enforcement] has the addresses of all the families. Why would you want to squeal on your parents?”

The assurances of the Department of Homeland Security that they “in general” will not use applicants’ information to track down other family members must be viewed with utmost skepticism coming from an agency that has pursued a vicious policy against immigrants under the Obama administration’s first term.

Operation “Cross Check,” a nationwide sweep by the ICE agency, has resulted in more than 7,400 arrests. While the government claims to be targeting immigrants wanted for serious criminal offenses, immigrant advocates argue that the sweeps are being used as a general deportation tool to round up the large number of immigrants coming to the US in search of work.

The Obama White House has utilized and expanded the Secure Communities immigration enforcement program, piloted in 2008 under the Bush administration. “S-Comm” seeks to integrate federal, state and local police agencies in an effort to ramp up deportation, utilizing biometric and other technologies to compile a massive database of immigrants.

Obama has pursued an aggressive, militarized policy on the US-Mexico border. He boasted in a May 2011 speech: “We now have more boots on the ground on the southwest border than at any time in our history. The Border Patrol has 20,000 agents—more than twice as many as there were in 2004, a buildup that began under President Bush and that we have continued.”

By conservative estimates, over the past 10 years, some 2,000 men, women, children and elderly have died attempting to cross into the US. Due to the militarization of the border, including the construction of high-tech barriers, checkpoints and other security enhancements, people seeking a way into the US have been rerouted to remote stretches of scorching desert, succumbing to heat stroke and dehydration.

In June, the US Supreme Court unanimously upheld the key provision of an anti-immigrant law in the state of Arizona, SB 1070, that requires police officers to check

the immigration status of anyone they stop if they have “reasonable suspicion” that the individual is an immigrant. In arguments before the high court, the Obama administration limited its challenge to the law solely to whether federal statutes preempt state initiatives in the area of immigration law and enforcement, ignoring the most pressing issues of democratic rights posed by the Arizona legislation.

In relation to the new Obama administration policy on young undocumented immigrants, Arizona Governor Jan Brewer, a Republican, has issued an executive order to state agencies that immigrants who obtain work authorizations under DACA be denied driver’s licenses and other public benefits. An estimated 80,000 Arizonans may qualify for the program.

For their part, Democratic politicians are seeking to capitalize on Obama’s new initiative in the lead-up to the November elections. Rahm Emanuel, Obama’s former chief of staff and now mayor of Chicago, showed up at the Navy Pier to address the young immigrants who were lining up to apply for the new program. “Don’t let anybody tell you on a day like today that who sits in that Oval Office does not matter,” he told the crowd.

Emanuel also announced that the city had raised \$275,000 from private donors for a college scholarship funds for successful DACA applicants. Considering that the College Board’s most recent survey shows a “moderate” college budget for an in-state US public college for the 2011-2012 academic year averaged \$21,447, this would cover about a dozen students for one year.



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