

Trump immigration demands complicate DACA replacement

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Advocates and lawmakers in Arizona say the path to a bill protecting DREAMers got more difficult this week, when the White House issued a list of immigration policy priorities that it said must be part of any DACA legislation.

In a letter to House and Senate leaders Sunday, President Donald Trump said he will not support any legislation that does not include funding for a border wall, increased immigration enforcement in the interior, an end to “chain migration” and other requirements.

One state lawmaker said Thursday that she was “absolutely horrified” when she saw Trump’s demands while an analyst in Washington said the “incredibly unreasonable” list is “just a way to sabotage negotiation” on any bill to replace the Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals program.

Rep. Raul Grijalva, D-Tucson, called Trump’s negotiation posture “extortion.” He called on House Democrats to ignore the rhetoric and work toward a permanent solution like the DREAM Act, by separating the issues of a pathway to citizenship for 800,000 DACA recipients from border security and stricter enforcement.

“It’s holding 800,000 young people hostage so that he can get his political agenda on immigration done,” Grijalva said Thursday of the president’s statement. “I think it’s sad and very unpresidential, but him going back on his word and lying doesn’t seem to be a problem with this president.”

Robert Neustadt, the director of Latin American Studies at Northern Arizona University and an activist for immigrant rights, said he is hoping and advocating for a “clean” DREAM Act.

“In other words, we believe that Dreamers should be given the right to work, the right to drive, protection from deportation and a path to legal residency and citizenship,” Neustadt said in an email. “Dreamers cannot and should not be used as a bargaining chip. Their immigration relief should not be linked to a border enforcement surge.”

Neustadt, who is a member of the group called Keep Flagstaff Together, said the group is happy to talk to anyone regardless of their DACA status and research whether they can help offer legal relief.

Lori Poloni-Staudinger, the founder and executive director of Together We Will Northern Arizona, said her group will continue to fundraise to pay for legal aid as well as a bail and bond fund specifically for undocumented people arrested in Flagstaff.

But Arizona Republican Reps. Paul Gosar of Prescott and Andy Biggs of Gilbert hailed Trump's action, commending him for following through on stricter enforcement of immigration policies, something that was central to his campaign.

"I applaud @POTUS for keeping his immigration promises to the American people," Gosar said in a Tweet Monday. "We must secure our borders, and he is going to do just that."

Biggs said he thinks most Americans and most of Congress agree – but acknowledged that one of the "major hindrances" for the administration will be getting past the 60 votes needed in the Senate to head off a filibuster on the proposals.

"I am confident that, if enacted by Congress, these actions would secure our open borders and reduce incentives for illegal immigrants to remain in or enter the United States," Biggs said in a statement Tuesday. "The American people are tired of these flip flops, and we must give them the results they deserve – before any other reforms are enacted."

The "immigration principles and policies" laid out by Trump list more than 70 items in three broad areas. The first, border security, includes building a wall and making it easier to repatriate unaccompanied children, asylum seekers and other immigrants. Interior enforcement includes cracking down on sanctuary cities, hiring 10,000 immigration officers and requiring use of e-Verify when hiring. The final category, establishing a merit-based immigration system, calls for giving preference to skilled and financially stable immigrants, among other changes.

Arizona Rep. Isela Blanc, D-Tempe, during a conference call Thursday on how children of DACA recipients could be affected by loss of the program, said she was "absolutely horrified" by Trump's proposal. She called it a response to the growing Hispanic population in the U.S. and a way of "redefining what this White House wants this America to be.... Which is more white."

"This administration is attacking families, is breaking apart families, creating fear and hurting children," Blanc said. "We have children who are in fear for their parents, wondering if their mom or their dad will be home when they arrive from school."

"We have to start asking ourselves, 'Is that the America we want to live in and are those demands appropriate?' Absolutely not," she said.

DACA is an Obama-era program that allowed immigrants who were brought here illegally as children to be protected from deportation for two years at a time and get work permits – but it did not change their citizenship status.

Critics have called it an executive overreach, and Attorney General Jeff Sessions announced in September that the Trump administration would end the program on March 5. No new DACA applications are being accepted, and people whose coverage lapses after March 5 could be subject to deportation.

Sessions and Trump said the six-month “winding down” of the program would give Congress time to act on a replacement plan. But David Bier, an immigration analyst at the CATO Institute, said the latest Trump demands are “poisoning the well” and undermining any chance for bipartisan negotiation on a replacement bill.

“There’s no negotiation that’s going to happen around these principles – this is just a way to sabotage negotiation,” Bier said Thursday. “If you look at the major points of emphasis here they’re really just non-negotiable items.”

Bier, noting Trump’s apparent willingness last month to work with Democrats on a DACA deal separate from issues like a border wall, said the latest demands indicate that whoever wrote the letter “does not have the same interests at heart as the president does.”

Petra Falcon, of the Latino voter outreach organization Promise Arizona, said any policy change must include a path to citizenship for immigrants but that it would be wrong to barter that against a wall, border security and tougher interior enforcement.

“To mix the two issues together is wrong,” Falcon said Thursday. “Immigrants who come to this country to provide for their families are being used as scapegoats for our security issues, for our drug-trafficking problem.”