

Dreamers Deserve a Legislative Fix

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Last Wednesday, a group of activists established an encampment on the National Mall to act as a headquarters for the campaign to pass a permanent legislative solution for the Deferred Action on Childhood Arrivals program (DACA). Almost 1,000 immigrants are planning to stop by the headquarters — called “Dream Act Central” — in the weeks before Christmas to meet with congressional staff and members of Congress to encourage them to find a solution to the current complicated web of immigration restrictions. If there’s any common sense left in D.C., federal lawmakers will find a legislative solution to lift these Americans out of limbo and help them stay in the country they’ve made home.

DACA is an executive action issued by the Obama administration in 2012 that protects immigrants who came to the United States as children from deportation and grants them eligibility to work. Its requirements are stringent: DACA recipients must be enrolled in school, the military, or have received a high school diploma or honorable discharge. Moreover, they must pass a background check from the Department of Homeland Security.

In September, President Trump rescinded DACA and set a March deadline for legislative reform before the program’s protections are fully withdrawn. It’s now mid-December, and DACA recipients — commonly called “Dreamers” — are rightfully worried.

It appears a lot of the anti-DACA and anti-immigration groups have gained sway in policymaking circles by arguing that immigrants rob jobs from “natural born” U.S. citizens. This worry couldn’t be more poorly founded. Far from being a drain for those already in the country, immigrants increase employment options, according to economic theory. Numerous studies by scholars and academics have validated this economic insight.

Consider an immigrant family who moves into a neighborhood. They buy a home or rent an apartment and begin shopping at local grocery stores, going to the movies, and having dinner at restaurants. As the family shops in the area, they increase the revenues that local businesses collect; this means those businesses can expand and hire more people. The corner grocery store may need to hire someone to restock the shelves more often, or a car repair shop might hire another mechanic. The argument that more people — in economic terms more individuals for local businesses to serve — hurts the economic prospects of others defies economic logic.

Economic research has been clear about the benefits of immigration. One study by the Cato Institute’s Ike Brannon and Logan Albright concluded that deporting the approximately 750,000 people protected by DACA would cost more than \$60 billion. They then estimate that the

resulting decrease in economic activity would be about \$280 billion over the next decade or about \$28 billion each year.

DACA recipients in particular are likely to be beneficial for the United States. A survey of Dreamers found they are almost twice as likely to start their own businesses. Many already have. One Dreamer, for instance, runs a tax preparation service. As another immigration expert, Daniel Griswold, declares: “The ‘DACA kids’ are a sure bet for America.” Put simply, failing to keep DACA recipients in the U.S. is more likely to harm our economy than employ legal citizens.

Of course, DACA was by no means a perfect program. Fundamentally, it was a Band-Aid for a bigger problem: an overly complicated immigration process. Actions by the executive branch without support from Congress are too subject to the whim of the next president and so fail as meaningful solutions — as evidenced by Trump’s decision to rescind DACA. Immigration attorneys and activists have long clamored for simplifying the immigration process. As one attorney notes, for some immigrants, the wait to enter the country legally can take as long as 16 years. With this timeline in mind, it’s little surprise that many immigrants choose to enter illegally, rather than fight through the bureaucracy.

One can only hope that the sympathetic stories of the immigrants encamped at Dream Act Central can spur meaningful reform before the March deadline. Fortunately, there have been many proposals for such a solution on both sides of the aisle, providing hope that these Dreamers’ concerns won’t fall on deaf ears. Besides the Democratic-backed Dream Act, Republican-backed legislation includes the Recognizing America’s Children (RAC) Act in the House and SUCCEED Act in the Senate. Congress should take advantage of this momentum to push through a permanent fix for the sake of protecting hardworking Dreamers who have made America home.