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Young immigrants face a future back in the shadows

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Karina Alvarez drove to her teaching job Tuesday morning knowing the clock was running out on her work permit.

News alerts over the weekend said President Donald Trump planned to end the Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals program that provided renewable two-year work permits to hundreds of thousands of young immigrants.

The 28-year-old bilingual education teacher at Edgewood ISD said she'd known from the day Trump was elected that she likely would lose the card that let her drive legally, get a job and, for the first time in her life, go north of the Border Patrol checkpoint that had kept her trapped between the Rio Grande and mile marker 27 on Interstate 35.

"I knew that this day was going to come. DACA is just like a little Band-Aid on the bigger problem," Alvarez said. "That's why I said I'm not going to get a new car. I'm not going to get a house. Because I know that my status is not permanent. I know I might not have this career for long. So let's just rent and see what happens."

Trump's decision to phase out the program means that nearly 800,000 young undocumented immigrants in the U.S. who have been allowed to work legally after paying a registration fee and undergoing a background check will lose their jobs over the next two years unless Congress comes up with a permanent fix. The DACA protection for most of them will begin to expire in March.

In announcing the end to DACA, Attorney General Jeff Sessions said the initiative by former President Barack Obama was unconstitutional and "denied jobs to hundreds of thousands of Americans. Ending DACA "makes us safer and more secure."

In a written statement, Trump said: "I do not favor punishing children, most of whom are now adults, for the actions of their parents. But we must also recognize that we are nation of opportunity because we are a nation of laws."

More than 120,000 DACA recipients live in Texas, with an estimated 13,000 eligible for the program in Bexar County.

Figures show the DACA-eligible population nationwide contributes as much as \$3 billion in federal, state and local taxes annually, according to the New American Economy, a group that supports immigration reform.

Supporters of the program say DACA recipients will be forced underground, no longer contributing as much to taxes or the economy and unable to maintain medical insurance, passing on to other taxpayers the cost for care.

More broadly, the president's critics say it's inhumane to end a program that offered stability for young immigrants who've been in the U.S. most of their lives.

They point out that while critics of DACA have said it encourages illegal immigration, it's being halted during a time of record-low apprehensions by Border Patrol agents.

"There were a lot of really troubling remarks made in Jeff Sessions' speech that seemed like a continuation of campaign rhetoric seen in the last election rather than things actually related to the DACA program," said Sally Kinoshita, deputy director at the Immigrant Legal Resource Center.

In a tweet Tuesday morning, Trump put the onus on Congress to pass a bill that would replace DACA.

Later that day, he seemed to change tack, tweeting: "Congress now has 6 months to legalize DACA (something the Obama Administration was unable to do). If they can't, I will revisit this issue!"

In the face of that uncertainty about their future in the U.S., many DACA recipients are planning for the worst.

Alvarez began creating what activists call a "deportation defense plan" a month ago. That includes gathering proof of the time spent in the U.S. and notification she's hired an attorney, which can slow the deportation process and ensure her lawyer knows where she's detained.

It also means making a contingency plan in case she's deported, including giving a friend or family member power of attorney, making copies of her car and apartment keys and important documents to leave with people she trusts, and finding someone who can take care of her 7-year-old son indefinitely.

"It's really, really hard, because when I sat there and was writing my friends' names, I remember my friend saying, 'Well, it's not going to be for forever,'" Alvarez said. "I'm thinking, who can provide security for him while I'm gone? I don't know how long it will be. It's just very, very hard to have those thoughts."

Carla Martinez, a 23-year-old graduate of the University of Texas at San Antonio who in June started a job at a New Braunfels engineering firm, began frantic planning not just for herself, but for two younger siblings, who also have DACA protection.

When she learned about the DACA announcement five years ago, she was working illegally in a fast food restaurant north of Austin. The news that she could go to college and work in a professional field hit Martinez so hard she sat in the bathroom and cried.

"Fast forward five years and I'm watching the decision ... in my new, full-time job as the news is being given and how sad I feel, and just overwhelmed with sadness that this was actually happening," she said. "(I'm) thinking about, 'OK what's the next step now? I need to pass my (professional engineering) certification exam. I need to get a second job. I need to make sure my

sister gets a (DACA) renewal' — because both my brother and my sister, I do their new renewals — 'I need to get hers in. I need to get my brother's in. I need to start saving up.'

"Most of all, updating my supervisor and my hiring manager. So it's been hard. Thinking about six months from now, what can or cannot happen. What might happen. One of these days telling my supervisor or my hiring manager I can no longer work here."

Both Martinez and Alvarez said they wanted to speak with reporters in part to dispel what they say are misconceptions about DACA recipients.

Martinez is frustrated with comments she's seen online and on TV suggesting that DACA recipients are the beneficiaries of government largess. They aren't eligible for most federal benefits, and even with DACA, Martinez found it hard to obtain financial assistance.

"That didn't happen because I got free tuition, free money," she said of her engineering degree. "That happened because my parents paid out of pocket every penny. I worked two jobs every summer."

Another common misconception, according to supporters of the program, is that DACA recipients are choosing the two-year work permit in lieu of pursuing permanent legal status.

For many DACA applicants, the announcement of the program was the first time they learned they had a chance to work legally, and so it was the first time they consulted an immigration lawyer, Kinoshita said.

Those who do have the option to get visas are likely pursuing them, she said, but wait times can drag on for years and decades, and U.S. immigration laws severely limit who is eligible for legal status.

"There are millions of people in the United States, including hundreds of thousands of DACA (recipients), for whom there's no avenue," she said.

"I have nowhere to go to," said Alvarez, who left a small ranching community in the Mexican Gulf Coast state of Veracruz when she was 4 years old. "The home that I once knew is not there anymore. The joy and the happiness and the memories will not be there, and that is a scary thought, because ... there's drug cartels there that organize the community there, and the community knows, and so I know if I go back, it would be pretty dangerous. And especially exposing my son, who doesn't speak fluent Spanish, and he's fair skinned. He's white complected. So that would make him a target."

Out of the shadows

Alvarez said she didn't know she was undocumented until the start of her senior year of high school. She and her friends were planning activities for the year, and one rite of passage was going to school and registering for classes without her parents.

She was turned away for not having a Social Security number. Alvarez said she was upset, but the implications of her immigration status weren't clear until later, when she had to decide where she'd go to college.

She wanted to go to Texas A&M University, but even though she lived in the U.S., Alvarez faced a barrier getting there.

About 27 miles north of Laredo on Interstate 35 is a Border Patrol checkpoint. If she was caught at the checkpoint, Alvarez would face deportation. If she made it to College Station, it might be a long time before she could safely visit her family again.

“My family had to sit me down and had to really put the cards on the table and say, ‘If you find a way to get there, because you speak good English, you also run the risk of if they want to stop everybody and ask for identification, you might never, ever have an opportunity to adjust your status ... and then also the fact that you might never see us again,’ ” she said.

She decided to go to Texas A&M International University in Laredo, but Alvarez said she was frustrated to find an immigrant community that was scattered and afraid to organize.

DACA allowed her to work, and after graduation, she spent 21/2 years as a speech therapist in Laredo before moving to San Antonio in 2015. The Trump administration is allowing anyone whose DACA work permit expires by March 5 to renew it for two years in the next month. Alvarez’s expires in September 2018.

In San Antonio, Alvarez said, she’s found an active community of immigrant advocates who have helped her feel comfortable speaking out and whom she’s joined in giving know-your-rights presentations and other outreach efforts. She called her activism “therapeutic” and she hopes to expand that work to Laredo.

Alvarez said she also tries to be a role model for her students. She doesn’t ask about their status, but because they’re enrolled in her bilingual education class, she assumes many have backgrounds similar to hers. She said it’s important they know that like her they can go to college. She said her students marvel at her grad school textbooks and their tiny typeface.

“They’re like, ‘Oh we can’t read that yet, but we will,’ ” Alvarez said. “So most of the kids already have college in their minds as second-graders. And so you see that spark.”

Becoming an engineer

Martinez said that despite being one of five children in a family that struggled to make ends meet, she’s been “extremely blessed.” The most recent example: She received her DACA renewal in late August, meaning she’ll be able to work for the next two years.

She was smuggled into the U.S. on an international bridge into Texas at age 7. Her family settled in Austin, then moved to Pflugerville when she was in middle school.

Martinez said that in high school, she pushed herself, taking advanced placement classes and working as much as she could to save money for college while her parents took on multiple jobs, even though she had little hope of being able to apply her skills in the workforce.

That changed the summer before her senior year of high school, when DACA was launched. With the work permit it provided, Martinez would be able to use whatever college degree she pursued.

She couldn’t initially afford the \$495 registration fee, but Martinez left for school at UTSA and scraped by with help from her parents until she could pay for the work permit during her sophomore year that allowed her to find better-paying jobs.

She got internships, which paid well enough that she no longer had to choose between buying groceries and buying books, and last year raised enough money to be the first DACA recipient at the university to study abroad.

She said it only recently became clear to her how unusual it is for an undocumented woman to enter the engineering field.

“I felt like I took the full potential that DACA offered,” she said. “I was able to get a driver’s license, to go to college to study abroad, to get a full-time job.”

Now Martinez is trying to figure out what she’ll do in two years when her permit expires. So is her employer, M&S Engineering in New Braunfels. The company has floated the idea of sponsoring her for a work visa, but Martinez likely won’t qualify.

Her supervisor, Brady Kosub, said he first met Martinez when she applied for an internship during college. He asked her to apply for a full-time job when she graduated.

When the company decided to hire Martinez, Kosub said, he’d never heard of DACA, but she was “leaps and bounds” above other recent graduates. Her internships, including one at the San Antonio Water System, made her a perfect fit for the position.

“If she can’t remain an employee of this company, then that’s going to hurt this company,” Kosub said.

“I worry about what’s going to happen,” he added. “That has to speak somewhat to there being some problems with our immigration system.”

Treated like ‘hot potato’

Because DACA recipients mostly are in school and aren’t concentrated in particular industries, unlike other immigrant groups, they’re not likely to have a serious impact on the wages of U.S. citizens, said Ike Brannon, a visiting fellow with the libertarian Cato Institute and president of the consulting firm Capital Policy Analytics.

On top of that, Brannon said, a low unemployment rate leaves him unconvinced DACA creates much of a barrier to U.S. citizens trying to find jobs.

“It’s kind of weird to be worried about foreigners taking our jobs when the unemployment rate is 4.3 percent,” he said. “What’s going to happen is these guys will end up working in the underground economy, A: earning a lot less than they would be and B: they’ll end up displacing unskilled Americans. If we’re really worried about unskilled Americans, the last thing we want to do is take a bunch of skilled, motivated foreigners and make them work in unskilled jobs.”

While Sessions in his speech focused on consequences of DACA, other Trump administration officials toed the line the president laid out in his Tuesday morning tweet.

During a conference call with reporters Tuesday, top officials said acting Homeland Security Secretary Elaine C. Duke decided to cancel the program not because of its impact on the economy or public safety, but because the Obama administration exceeded its authority in launching DACA.

The officials said the decision was made after Sessions issued an opinion that DACA likely would not survive a legal challenge threatened by the state of Texas.

“By giving Congress a chance to act on this, that is our most desired outcome,” said one homeland security official who insisted on anonymity. “As a career law enforcement officer, I’m enforcing the laws on books. Should Congress want to have some resolution to this, that is the best course of action.”

Martinez said that leaves her feeling like “a hot potato being tossed around.”

“That’s my future. 800,000 of us, that’s our future,” she said. “It’s definitely frustrating feeling that way, feeling like my life is just a puppet, and my problem has been handed off to someone else.”