

My parents followed all the rules. Now I could be forced to self-deport at 21

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The arrival of first semester finals is a stressful time for any college student. That's especially true if you're pre-med, when every exam feels like it will make or break your future. But in my case, it does. My grades don't just determine whether I get into medical school. They determine whether I get to stay in the United States.

My immigration story is shocking to a lot of people, because my parents did everything to avoid this situation. They're both software engineers who were hired by Arizona firms. So shortly after we moved here when I was 6 years old, they filed for permanent residency for them and me and my sister.

Yet nearly a decade later, we're still waiting. The immigration system is so backed up with green card applications that more than 250,000 children have been left in limbo with their parents, according to estimates by the Cato Institute. We're called "Documented Dreamers," and this delay can have devastating consequences for us. My parents can continue to renew their skilled worker visas, but I "age out" of my current visa when I turn 21. At that point, I have to self-deport.

I'm a 19-year-old sophomore at the University of Arizona, and I can't stop worrying about my 21st birthday. My only other option is to secure a student visa, but that requires me to go straight to medical school.

The green card backlog is so severe that roughly 5 million applicants are stuck in the system. But Indians have the worst odds. Visas are capped annually per country, which means people from populous nations have much longer waits. More than 100,000 children will lose their legal status over the next two decades, and four out of five are Indian.

I can't imagine leaving the only place I've called home. I grew up in Arizona and feel just as American as my friends. In fact, I never even knew about my immigration status until halfway through high school.

When applying to college, I was crushed to discover that I was actually an "international" student. I don't qualify for in-state tuition, so my annual tuition is \$54,000. I can't get federal financial aid, either, so I've been lucky to get some help from a Global Wildcat scholarship for international students. I'm also not allowed to work, so I've never been able to get a part-time job like the rest of my friends. I really wanted to sell books at Barnes & Noble this summer so I could earn my own spending money and take some of the pressure off my parents.

All of us Documented Dreamers feel constantly sick with uncertainty. We were supposed to be permanent residents — even citizens — by now. Instead, our families could be blown up in a few short years. It's unfair to our parents, who worked so hard to give us a better life. But it's also not fair to my fellow Arizonans. I'm studying to be a pediatrician at a time when we're facing massive doctor shortages. Arizonans shouldn't have to lose a generation of bright kids that they helped educate and who contribute billions in fiscal benefits.

That's why I'm urging Arizona's congressional delegation to take action: There are more than 400,000 unused green cards that could be redistributed to families like mine. That provision is in the Build Back Better Act that will go before the Senate this month. Our leaders should also support America's CHILDREN Act, which allows kids who have lived here legally for 10 years and graduated from an American university to apply for permanent residency.

We've been waiting our whole lives to realize our dreams. Don't take the opportunity from us now.