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Area lawmakers react to Trump decision to rescind DACA

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Members of the U.S. Senate and U.S. House of Representatives representing Fayette, Greene, Washington and Westmoreland counties have weighed in on President Donald Trump's choice to begin rescinding the government program that protects hundreds of thousands of young immigrants who were brought into the country illegally as children.

Former President Barack Obama's Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals (DACA) program has provided nearly 800,000 young immigrants a reprieve from deportation and the opportunity to work legally in the U.S. with renewable two-year work permits.

Attorney General Jeff Sessions announced the plan Tuesday and noted that the Trump administration will stop considering new applications for legal status dated after Tuesday, but will allow any DACA recipients, known as Dreamers, with a permit set to expire before March 5, 2018, the opportunity to apply for a two-year renewal if they apply by Oct. 5.

The Trump administration gave Congress a six-month window to preserve DACA through legislation, should it choose to do so.

In statements issued following the Trump administration's announcement, Republican lawmakers roundly criticized President Obama's creation of the DACA program through executive action.

Sen. Pat Toomey, Rep. Tim Murphy, R-Upper St. Clair and Rep. Bill Shuster, R-Hollidaysburg, supported President Trump's decision to begin dismantling DACA, arguing that President Obama did not have legal authority to create the program.

Toomey called President Trump's decision to end this program, while giving Congress six months to come up with a legislative solution, "the right step."

"Congress needs to pass legislation to accommodate these young people while simultaneously addressing the other challenges within our deeply broken immigration system, including stopping dangerous sanctuary cities, strengthening border security, and cracking down on companies that hire people who are here illegally," Toomey said.

Murphy, who in 2014 voted to freeze DACA, hailed Tuesday's announcement as "proactive in nature," pointing to the Encourage New Legalized Immigrants to Start Training Act (ENLIST Act) as an example of a legislative solution regarding immigration policy. The ENLIST Act would allow undocumented immigrants initially entering the U.S. at an age younger than 15 to earn legal status through military service.

Although Shuster said President Trump had made the “correct decision” to begin rescinding DACA and “allow Congress to legislate,” Shuster was noncommittal about what Congress should do about DACA in the six-month window Trump has given lawmakers to act.

“The real issue at hand is there are millions of individuals in the United States illegally. Congress needs to address the cause, not just the symptom, and curb illegal immigration,” Shuster said. “The DACA debate is an important reminder that increasing border security and enforcing immigration laws have to be top priorities for the 115th Congress.”

Democratic Sen. Bob Casey harshly criticized Tuesday’s announcement as “an insult to America and our values” in a statement Tuesday.

“They have been law-abiding residents who have learned English, paid taxes and secured jobs that allow them to support themselves and their families,” Casey said of Dreamers.

The undoing of DACA will harm America’s economy, Casey said, noting a January analysis from the Cato Institute, a libertarian policy research organization, projecting that the deportation of DACA recipients would cost more than \$60 billion and would result in a \$280 billion reduction in economic growth over the next decade.

Casey also noted an April analysis by the nonpartisan Institute on Taxation and Economic Policy estimating that the 1.3 million young people enrolled in or eligible for DACA pay \$2 billion each year in state and local taxes.

“Congress should move immediately to pass the bipartisan Development, Relief, and Education for Alien Minors (DREAM) Act, which would allow the Dreamers to become permanent residents if they meet the very stringent qualifications outlined in the bill,” Casey said.

Versions of the DREAM Act have languished in Congress since it was introduced in 2001. In July, Sens. Dick Durbin, D-Ill., and Lindsey Graham, R-S.C., introduced a new version that would grant permanent resident status on a conditional basis for certain long-term residents who entered the U.S. as children.

Pennsylvania was one of 15 states, in addition to the District of Columbia, that on Wednesday filed a lawsuit in New York challenging the Trump administration’s phaseout of DACA and asking a judge to conclude that the president’s action involving DACA is unconstitutional, the Associated Press reported.