

## The American dream(ers)

September 8, 2017

Former Alabama Senator and current U.S. Attorney General Jefferson Beauregard Sessions III announced that the Trump administration will terminate DACA, the Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals program. DACA was a compromise initiative conceived by the Obama administration in 2012 after Congress failed to pass the so-called Development, Relief and Education for Alien Minors (DREAM) Act, first introduced in 2001, which would have offered those who had arrived illegally as children the chance of permanent legal residency. Nicknamed “Dreamers,” those persons applying for DACA status are vetted for any criminal history or threat to national security and must be students or have completed school or military service. If they pass vetting, action to deport them is deferred for two years, with a chance to renew, and they become eligible for basics like a driving license, college enrollment or a work permit.

Sessions took the opportunity of his announcement to slander DACA’s nearly 800,000 recipients in language with barely concealed racist undertones. Tellingly, his speech included two classic lies supporting the Breitbart nativist narrative. Sessions claimed DACA led “to a surge of unaccompanied minors on the southern border” that yielded terrible humanitarian consequences. He also stated that DACA “denied jobs to hundreds of thousands of Americans by allowing those same jobs to go to illegal aliens.”

A study published in “International Migration,” a peer-reviewed academic journal, found that the surge in unaccompanied minors actually began in 2008; DACA was announced in 2012. The study cited a number of factors that contributed to the surge — including rampant gang violence in Central America, as well as drug cartels’ efforts to target and recruit children in Mexico — but DACA was not cited as one of the reasons for the surge. Studies aside, the fact is undocumented children who arrived in the U.S. following DACA’s implementation in 2012 would not qualify for the program; under its terms, DACA was available solely to those individuals who “have continuously resided in the United States since June 15, 2007” and “were physically present in the United States on June 15, 2012.” Accordingly the “surge” allegation is demonstrably false.

The claim about jobs going to illegal aliens is similarly unfounded. While it makes for a good theme to stoke animus towards immigrants, there is no actual evidence that DACA recipients have taken jobs from any Americans, let alone “hundreds of thousands.” In contrast, there is evidence that killing DACA will damage the economy. About 30,000 people will lose their jobs each month as their DACA status expires, reducing the national gross domestic product by \$280 billion to \$433 billion over 10 years. The Cato Institute estimates DACA’s demise will cost employers \$2 billion and the federal government \$60 billion during that period. Trump’s decision to end DACA is a bad deal financially for the U.S.

Numbers alone do not tell the whole story of the negative impact of ending DACA. Jesus Contreras came to this country as a young boy and grew up in Houston. Under DACA, Jesus earned his paramedic certification last year; recently he worked six days straight rescuing people

from the flooding across the city. Alonso Guillen, another Dreamer who was born in Piedras Negras, Mexico, and moved to Lufkin, Texas, as a teenager, drove more than 100 miles with his previously undocumented friend, Thomas Carreon, to help out in the rescue efforts. Alonso and Thomas were killed when their rescue boat crashed into a partially submerged bridge in the Houston area.

The Trump administration's actions bar any new applications for DACA relief after Sept. 5, 2017, and any applications for renewal after March 5, 2018. There are several legislative proposals in Congress to extend a path to citizenship to persons brought to the U.S. as children, including the DREAM Act, that enjoy broad bipartisan support, but members of Congress often lack the will to face the inevitable backlash from misinformed and fearful voters, and the wrath of xenophobic ideologues.

In giving support to the proposed RAISE Act (a thinly veiled racist effort to screen out immigrants without jobs or higher education) in his DACA statement, Trump stated, "... we want those coming into the country to be able to support themselves financially, to contribute to our economy, and to love our country and the values it stands for." When Trump and Sessions demonize immigrants in order to justify deporting them, remember people like Jesus, Alonso and Thomas. They represent the best America has to offer, whether documented or not.

By the way, Alonso's mother is still in Mexico, working through the documentation process. She applied for a humanitarian visa so that she could come to Houston and bury her son, but was turned back at the border by Homeland Security. Now that Trump has turned away from his duty towards the Dreamers, we hope Congress can help restore America's once-proud tradition of embracing diversity with wisdom and compassion.