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Ending DACA will deprive young people of their liberty

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The present administration's decision to end the Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals (DACA) initiative contradicts our ideals and risks our future.

As Americans, we are knitted together by common values. We believe people have a right to life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness. We believe in fairness and hard work. Our moral and religious traditions teach us that we do not blame the child for the sins of the father. But ending DACA will deprive young people of their liberty, and it will punish them for their parents' choices.

DACA recipients, often called DREAMers, did not come here of their own accord. Many were brought by their parents at an age so young that they no longer remember the country from which they came. (The median DREAMer was six years old when he or she arrived; almost a third were three or younger.)

These men and women grew up as Americans. They went to American schools; they pledged allegiance to the American flag. They absorbed American culture and values. Their friends are American.

See them or meet them, and they are like any other young people — listening to much the same music, watching the same TV, using the same jargon. In every way that matters, they are Americans.

To be eligible for DACA status, DREAMers either must still be in school or must have received the equivalent of a high school degree. More than 90 percent are employed; many are studying and working at the same time.

They pay taxes to both state and federal government. Compared to those who were born in the U.S., DREAMers are almost twice as likely to start a business. Some serve honorably in the military; they are prepared to make the ultimate sacrifice for the United States, even as its government seeks to reject them. None have been convicted of serious crimes.

DREAMers are teachers and caregivers and scientists and first responders. Indeed, DREAMer first responders rescued fellow Texans after Hurricane Irma this summer, putting themselves at risk for their neighbors. Every day they contribute to our nation and play an irreplaceable role in our communities.

DACA status affords these young people a temporary, renewable reprieve from deportation. It also makes them eligible for work permits. DACA was revolutionary: it allowed them, at last, to safely participate in American life, free from fear.

On Sept. 5, Attorney General Jeff Sessions announced the federal government would immediately cease granting DACA status to new applicants, and would refuse to renew any existing DACA status set to lapse on or after March 6, 2018. Instead of appreciating DREAMers' remarkable perseverance and valuable contributions, this administration has chosen to reject them, cruelly and needlessly, and harm our communities.

Deporting DREAMers would tear families and friendships apart, separating children from their siblings and parents and peers. Overnight, young people who have grown up as Americans would be forced to live in another country — one where they may have no idea of the language or culture.

Moreover, mass deportations would be an economic disaster. Researchers at the conservative Cato Institute estimate that deporting 750,000 DREAMers would cost taxpayers \$60 billion; in the coming decade, their absence would create an additional \$280 billion drag on the economy. The liberal Center for American Progress predicts even bigger losses: \$433 billion over the next 10 years. (Virginia alone would see a \$6.8 billion impact.)

Congress still has a narrow window in which to change course. I am proud to have joined almost 200 of my colleagues, Democrats and Republicans, in cosponsoring H.R. 3440, The DREAM Act of 2017.

The DREAM Act would grant lawful permanent resident status to DREAMers, enabling them to remain in the country they love and call home; after eight years, they could apply for citizenship. I will fight relentlessly to make this legislation law before the arbitrary March 6 deadline exposes innocent young people to unjust and senseless suffering.

We are a nation of immigrants. Some of our ancestors came willingly, and some did not. Some came legally, and some did not — but today, we share a common American identity. DREAMers are now a part of that rich fabric. Though they came here by their parents' choice, they are now Americans, giving back to the country they love.

Independent polling show that almost 90 percent of American voters believe DREAMers should be allowed to remain here; 82 percent believe they should be able to earn citizenship. Revoking their current status would be cruel and shortsighted — a change unworthy of our history and unwanted by our people. All of us have a shared responsibility to reject such efforts — to uphold the ideals that made our nation great in the first place.