

# RIVARD REPORT

## With DACA Deadline Past, ‘Dreamers’ Look to Congress for Their Future

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On Thursday, an important deadline passed for the so-called Dreamers, the undocumented immigrants participating in the Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals (DACA) program. It was the last chance to renew enrollment as the program continues its six-month wind-down.

The fear of being removed from their communities became palpable for nearly 80,000 young undocumented immigrants after President Donald Trump announced last month that the Obama-era program, which awards two-year work permits to individuals who were brought to the United States illegally as children, will end in March 2018.

Thursday’s deadline only applied to DACA recipients whose permits expired before March 5, according to the U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services (USCIS) website. DACA recipients who qualify for renewal and receive approval will be clear for another two years, but those unable to renew could face deportation as early as March 6.

In Texas, DACA currently protects more than 120,000 recipients from deportation, according to USCIS figures.

Protests took place Thursday all over the country, including in San Antonio. More than 30 activists and Dreamers gathered outside the local office of U.S. Rep. Will Hurd (R-Texas) on the Texas A&M-San Antonio campus. Protesters demanded a “clean” Dream Act, or one that would codify DACA, but not heighten enforcement and funding for a border wall or additional immigration curbs.

Jessica Azua, 26, is a member of the activist group Texas Organizing Project and a Texas A&M-San Antonio graduate. She joined the protest because she faces an uncertain future now that she has applied for DACA status for the last time. “Every day, every hour, and every minute means more stress and anxiety for Dreamers like me,” she told the *Rivard Report* in Spanish. “Congress must take action now.”

Azua credits DACA with allowing her to pursue her educational goals. “They can take away DACA, but they will not take away my education,” she said.

Many local colleges and universities have pledged to protect the rights of DACA recipients pursuing college degrees and professional careers.

St. Mary’s University, the University of Texas at San Antonio, and the Alamo Colleges have created Dreamer resource pages on their websites. The St. Mary’s page lists campus and community resources for legal, academic, emotional, and spiritual support, and assures Dreamers that they have the backing of the Catholic Church.

“St. Mary’s University is committed to upholding the values of our Catholic identity and Marianist charism. Leading among these values are the embrace of unity in diversity, the importance of family, and care for those who are vulnerable. One of the many manifestations of living these values lies in the University’s care for and support of our undocumented students,” the page reads.

The presidents of Trinity University and Our Lady of the Lake University published letters pledging support to the DACA community and urging passage of the Dream Act of 2017. A&M-San Antonio and Palo Alto College, which is part of the Alamo Colleges District, hosted DACA renewal clinics ahead of the Oct. 5 deadline.

While President Obama’s use of an executive order to create DACA has been criticized, Trump’s move to end it has seen little, if any, institutional support. Across the nation, elected, religious, business, and academic leaders called for Congress to replace the program with a bipartisan bill to create a more secure future for Dreamers. Even the libertarian Cato Institute has voiced concern about the economic impact of the rescission.

Hurd, whose sprawling district includes a large constituency along the Texas-Mexico border, was in Washington, D.C., on Thursday, said staff members, and reiterated his views from a statement made earlier in the year.

“Our immigration system is broken and this is why I have been working with my colleagues as a member of a DACA Working Group to provide a permanent, legislative solution for children brought here through no fault of their own,” Hurd stated. “As I’ve said before, we should create immigration policies that strengthen our economy and keep Americans safe, which is why I am currently working to ensure that people who have only known America as their home can stay and continue contributing to our Nation’s culture, economy and history.”

Azua wants more than verbal support. “Hurd already said he’s sympathetic to the DACA recipients and the Dreamers ... We need him to take action.”

The Trump administration’s decision to end DACA may have intensified turmoil in immigrant communities across the nation, but it also revved up activism.

Read More:[DACA RECIPIENTS “KNOW NO HOME BUT OURS”](#)

Growing up in the the Rio Grande Valley, Joaida Tornes Cabrera and her family took care to avoid situations that could reveal their undocumented status. Beginning college, she wondered how she would get to St. Mary’s because it was located on the other side of a border patrol checkpoint. “That’s when my dynamic sort of changed,” she said.

Tornes made it to St. Mary’s and found that many of her peers shared similar anxieties. Her DACA permit expires in 2019, so she feels compelled to speak out with her campus chapter of Define American, an immigrant advocacy group.

While the university would not disclose the exact number of DACA recipients enrolled, there is wide awareness of their presence on campus, Tornes said. There has been no significant backlash against Dreamers or the immigrant community on campus, she added, and campus spokesperson Andrew Festa agreed.

Define American is one way for students to find organized support.

“We’re here to educate other people about why a Dream Act should be passed,” Tornes said. Rather than focus on what would happen if Congress does not act, the Define American chapter is trying to rectify what its members believe is a broken narrative about who Dreamers are and what they do in the U.S., she said.

Define American, which now has chapters on college campuses across the country, was founded by José Antonio Vargas, the award-winning journalist who revealed his undocumented status in a *New York Times Magazine* article in 2011. The “confessional,” as he called it, launched him into a new phase of his career, he told a group of education reporters in Atlanta on Tuesday.

In his work with Define American, Vargas uses journalism, documentary filmmaking, and grassroots organizing to combat misinformation about the immigrant population.

He said a common misconception is that immigrants who lack legal status are taking benefits from taxpayers without contributing themselves. “Undocumented workers are keeping Social Security solvent,” Vargas said.

DACA recipients alone yield \$2 billion in local and state taxes, according to the Institute of Taxation and Economic Policy. Meanwhile, they are working and pursuing higher education, which will strengthen the economy as their wages increase. “For a lot of us, education was the reason our parents left their home country,” Tornes said.

Perception also dampens the political will to bring about meaningful immigration reform. During the presidential campaign, Trump used terms such as “illegal, criminal, and alien” to describe immigrants, Vargas said. “That’s not an accident.”

“A lot of the subtext of this issue is [the demographic shift],” Vargas said. “You cannot separate how you talk about immigration from issues of race.”

While Azua and Tornes were able to take advantage of the protections DACA offers, others were not. It took 29-year-old Kathryn Pearl 10 years to graduate from college because when she began pursuing higher education in 2006, DACA did not exist.

“I had to save all the money I had, and I wasn’t eligible for DACA,” Pearl said. “At the time there was no college scholarships available for undocumented students.”

When DACA was implemented in 2012, Pearl couldn’t apply for the program because she was pursuing legal citizenship through a family member. She became a legal citizen in 2015 and graduated from Texas A&M-San Antonio in the spring of 2016.

“If DACA had existed when I started college in 2006, it would have totally changed my life. I would have finished in less than 10 years. I would have been employed and not had to deal with so much anxiety and depression.”