

Statesman

Commentary: Republican failures threaten American dream for immigrants

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Thirty-year-old Sam, recently married and working as an engineer for a Fortune 500 company in Austin, is living the American dream. Almost.

Sent to the U.S. from Mexico by his parents to seek a better future, Sam has lived half his life here. It's his home. He arrived on a visa, but the visa ended. He lived in South Texas with an aunt, went to school, earned bachelor's and master's degrees in electrical engineering with money from his family and a teaching assistant job. He moved to Austin in 2014, pays taxes, and benefits the community and economy.

Sam wants to be a citizen, but he is in limbo because the Republican-led Congress has failed for years to enact immigration reform. Now, Sam and others who came to the U. S. as children — and who have built a life here — face an even more uncertain future. President Donald Trump on Sept. 5 ordered a six month phase out of an Obama-era program aimed at keeping young illegal immigrants from being deported. Trump's action kicks the issue back to a reluctant Congress for a solution.

“It's stressful,” Sam said recently. “But I knew it was coming when (Trump) was elected.” Trump had made a campaign promise to his extremist anti-immigrant supporters to end the program and deport illegal immigrants. So, despite expressing sympathy for the young immigrants, he put politics ahead of people.

Like hundreds of thousands of young people brought or sent to the U.S. by parents, mostly from Mexico, Sam signed up for a federal program called Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals (DACA). President Barack Obama created DACA by executive order in 2012 after Congress failed several times to pass legislation, called the DREAM Act, that would have given young immigrants a path to citizenship.

DACA has permitted nearly 800,000 young immigrants, called “dreamers,” to attend school and work without the constant threat of deportation hanging over them. The program allowed qualified dreamers to get two-year renewable work permits. Sam's permit ends in a year. Many dreamers are now soldiers, teachers, doctors and engineers. About 97 percent of them have jobs or are in school, according to a survey by the Center for American Progress.

But facts don't phase Republican extremists who have spread falsehoods to oppose DACA and dreamers. One argument is that DACA has brought more illegal immigration. Not true. Under DACA rules, only persons who were under 16 and living continuously in the U.S. since mid-2007 could apply.

Another argument is that ending DACA reduces crime. To obtain work permits, dreamers have received significant background checks, unlike some of Trump's own appointees. A dreamer who commits a felony can get deported.

A third argument is that immigrants take American jobs. Economic research has shown otherwise. A report last year by the National Academies of Science, Engineering and Medicine found immigrants caused little or no adverse impacts on wages or employment of native-born workers. In fact, studies show immigrants stimulate the economy and create new jobs. A report published by the libertarian Cato Institute estimated that ending DACA and deporting the dreamers would cost the U.S. economy \$283 billion over 10 years.

Linkedin recently sent out a message stating there are 37,000 job openings in the Austin region, from cooks and construction workers to engineers. Dreamers certainly don't appear to be taking away jobs in the Austin area.

Opinion polls show most people support legislation to protect dreamers from deportation. A recent NBC News poll found 64 percent supported DACA. Now it is imperative that Congress does the right thing by dreamers, like Sam, who seek only to be productive American citizens.