



Our view: Congress must address immigration

September 12, 2017

On Sept. 5, President Donald Trump moved to end the Deferred Action on Childhood Arrivals program, known as DACA. The new plan, announced by U.S. Attorney Jeff Sessions, gives Congress six weeks to come up with a legislative fix for the program.

President Obama instituted the program by executive order in June 2012 after Congress failed to pass the DREAM Act, which would have created a path to citizenship for immigrants who came to the United States with their families as children.

DACA has been controversial from the start, and it's a politically charged topic that people from both sides of the issue feel passionately about. We are not going to weigh in on which president we think is right. In fact, we believe that creating policy by executive order is not the way our government should function. It's Congress's job to create laws and policy, and we'd like to see them find a way to work together and pass legislation that offers a better way for people to gain legal citizenship here.

Under the new policy announced by Sessions, the Department of Homeland Security will no longer accept new DACA applications and will stop accepting renewal requests Oct. 5. As a result, there are many hardworking, employed and taxpaying DACA recipients, including hundreds here in Routt County, who followed the rules of the program and now face an uncertain future.

Here in Steamboat, the faces of DACA include small business owners, high school students and college students. Sheila Henderson, executive director of Integrated Community, reported last week that she was contacted by over 200 people living in Steamboat Springs who were worried about what the DACA decision meant to them.

Many of these individuals only know what it's like to live in the United States. They came here as young children, and the countries they immigrated from are completely foreign to them.

As DACA is debated, it's important to know the facts about the program and who benefited and to attempt to understand who these people are.

The vast majority of DACA holders are now adults who arrived in the U.S. before they were 16. According to national surveys, 54 percent of DACA holders were younger than 7 when they came to our country.

There was a reported surge of unaccompanied minors illegally crossing the Mexican border and coming into the U.S. around the time DACA was created in 2012. Some blame DACA for this while others tie this rise to violence in the countries these minors were fleeing. We won't debate the impetus for this surge but we do know that those minors who came to the U.S. from 2012 to 2015 are not eligible for DACA under the program's restrictions.

According to the Cato Institute, a libertarian think tank headquartered in Washington, D.C., the average DACA recipient is 22 years old, employed and earns about \$17 an hour. The majority are still students, and 17 percent are pursuing an advanced degree. DACA participants earn an average of \$34,000 annually, and the Cato Institute estimates they contribute \$215 billion to the economy.

It also should be noted that DACA participants pay their own application processing fees, so the program has low administrative costs. And the cost to the U.S. government to deport DACA recipients is estimated at \$7.5 billion.

The facts surrounding DACA should provide incentive for Congress to work hard to find a permanent solution that ensures children who came here illegally with their parents remain safe from deportation while they earn an education and attain skills that allow them to be contributing members of society.

President Trump has called on Congress to "legalize DACA," and we echo that call to action. We were heartened to learn that Colorado Senators Cory Gardner, a Republican, and Michael Bennet, a Democrat, have pledged to find a permanent solution for DACA. It's great to see our state taking the bipartisan lead, and we hope others in Congress will join them.

As a nation of immigrants that has prospered from a "melting pot" mentality, it's time our elected officials in Washington, D.C., work to create an improved immigration system that allows immigrants the opportunity to earn the privilege of citizenship through a more streamlined process. And in our opinion, reinstating DACA through Congressional action is part of that.