

ST. LOUIS POST-DISPATCH

Krewson, aldermen and local business leaders call on Congress to protect St. Louis 'Dreamers'

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September 8, 2017

City business leaders voiced concern on Friday about the dismantling of a program protecting hundreds of thousands of immigrants brought to the U.S. illegally as children, saying that in addition to uprooting members of the community, it could cost the state millions in economic output.

The Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals program was created by an executive order from President Barack Obama in 2012. The administration of President Donald Trump announced this week that it would phase out the program, known colloquially as DACA, over six months. That will send nearly 800,000 people into more tenuous immigration status starting March 5, barring a change in the law from Congress.

“I think it’s reprehensible. I think it’s awful,” St. Louis Mayor Lyda Krewson said Friday. “Is this the kind of country we are? We know these are not the troublemakers in our community.”

For Karlos Ramirez, the executive director of the Hispanic Chamber of Commerce of Metropolitan St. Louis, the issue is deeply personal. Speaking at an event Friday, he shared stories of cousins who came to the U.S. as toddlers and are now fearful of their future.

“They don’t even speak Spanish anymore,” he said. “So to imagine that all of a sudden they have to go back to Mexico? When we don’t even have family there?”

Beyond the emotional blow, Ramirez says Missouri’s economy could take a hit if Congress can’t reach a compromise to prevent deportation of the “Dreamers” while still adhering to the rule of law.

Of 3,500 Dreamers in Missouri, roughly 3,400 of them have applied to be reinstated under DACA, he said, the vast majority of whom are working jobs throughout the state.

The Hispanic Chamber of Commerce of Metropolitan St. Louis cites research from both the left-leaning Center for American Progress and the conservative Cato Institute, which estimate that gradually deporting immigrants protected under DACA could cost the country billions in Gross Domestic Product. The CAP report estimates a \$209 million loss in economic output for Missouri, if workers protected under DACA are gradually deported.

Opponents who saw the program as an abuse of Obama's executive power have cheered the decision, but the impending elimination has continued to spark criticism from elected officials, leaders from Missouri universities and the St. Louis Regional Chamber, which argues that Dreamers are valuable contributors to the region's workforce.

"We understand the frustrations associated with our nation's broken immigration system, and support comprehensive reforms at the federal level to address this issue," said Hart Nelson, the chamber's vice president of public policy. "However, we do not support policies that would penalize young people who were brought to our country as children through no fault of their own."

Krewson said it was time for Congress to "step up to the line."

"I know that they're all afraid of lobbyists and getting voted out of office and all this and all that baloney, but at some point, when do you take a human look at these things and step up to the line and say, these are contributing members of our society, and they're going to have a path to citizenship," Krewson said.

Also on Friday, the St. Louis Board of Aldermen unanimously passed a resolution condemning the decision to end DACA and urging Congress to pass a legislative solution.