

# TUCSON WEEKLY

## Children's Crusade

Danyelle Khmara

September 7, 2017

The Obama administration's Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals program changed Fernando Najera's world. For starters, he's no longer afraid of being deported to a country he left when he was 3 years old.

"That in itself is a real big blessing for a community of people who have had to live in the shadows because of that fear," he said. "It's renewed my faith in God."

Although Najera was in the top 10 percent of his high school class, he didn't know if college was a possibility until DACA came through. Because of DACA, he could get a job and a scholarship, and he's now a junior at the University of Arizona, double-majoring in law and political science.

"To me, it's not so much the freedom that every other American has, but it's also served as a message that everything is going to fall into place," he said. "You've got to fight a little bit, be patient, but God has everything in control."

But now Najera faces the unknown after Attorney General Jeff Sessions announced that the Trump administration would rescind the DACA program, leaving him and roughly 800,000 other participants in the program wondering what's next.

"We are people of compassion and we are people of law, but there is nothing compassionate about the failure to enforce immigration law," Sessions said Tuesday morning at the press conference announcing the decision, which Trump had teased for several weeks.

Sessions said that the program would "wind down" over the next six months, allowing Congress time to come up with an alternative to the DACA program.

Created by the Obama administration in 2012, the executive action applies to undocumented children of immigrants who were brought into the country at a young age, have lived in the U.S. for at least five years and don't have a criminal record. DACA allows them to live their lives without fear of deportation, to work legally, obtain a driver's license and pay in-state tuition to college.

Arizona Congressman Raúl Grijalva said that an extension to DACA is one of many critical issues the executive branch has been leveraging in exchange for border-wall funding—a ransom that opponents are not willing to pay.

"We need to codify Obama's executive order into law now and move on," Grijalva said during a roundtable discussion on Aug. 31, adding that the "faces and humanity of these young people" have garnered support.

According to a recent NBC News/SurveyMonkey poll, nearly two-thirds of Americans support DACA. Arizona Congresswoman Martha McSally joined with nine other Republican lawmakers to sign a Sept. 1 letter to House Speaker Paul Ryan, asking that Congress create legislation to keep DREAMers in the country and allow them to continue being unhindered members of society.

The letter noted that while the legislators don't agree with how Obama created the program, "DACA recipients have contributed to both the U.S. economy and our society."

"Since being approved for DACA status, an overwhelming majority of these individuals have enrolled in school or found employment," the letter reads. "Most have also increased their average earnings and many have served in the military, opened businesses or purchased homes."

With all the contributions Dreamers are making and will undoubtedly continue to make, the Cato Institute estimates that eliminating DACA and deporting all Dreamers would cost the U.S. economy \$283 billion over 10 years.

The Republican lawmakers' letter also points out that DACA recipients willingly gave the federal government their personal information, adding "it would be wrong to back on our word and subject these individuals for deportation."

The letter ended saying Congress has a responsibility "to address this problem legislatively," and they are "willing and ready to find a solution no matter what action is taken by President Trump in the coming days."

In the past, McSally voted for policies that would hurt DACA, including a January 2015 bill to block its continuation. And in March 2016, she voted to challenge the legality of the executive action that created DACA.

More recently McSally has supported the DACA population, becoming a cosponsor in April for Recognizing America's Children Act, or RAC, legislation backed by 18 Republicans that would allow DREAMers a pathways to legal status.

Introduced by Florida Republican Rep. Carlos Curbelo, in March, RAC would allow a five-year conditional status to Dreamers. Provided that DREAMers don't break any laws, don't use public assistance, pay back taxes with interest and are continually either employed, in school, in the military or receive an honorable discharge, they would qualify for a five-year permanent residency at the end of the conditional-status period.

"We may have to walk the plank together and have a compromised solution," McSally told the Tucson Weekly. "Different elements on both sides want different things, but there's a way for us to find some common ground to address these issues because these kids need some certainty, and we've got to solve this legislatively."

DREAMers, immigration lawyers, activists and allies rallied last week in front of Tucson City Hall.

"We continue to hear these threats against DACA," Jessica Rodriguez, a member of human-rights group Living United for Change in Arizona, told the crowd. "This is not going to stop. We're going to continue to take the streets. We're going to continue to call on our officials. We are not going to stop."

Immigration attorney Mo Goldman told attendees to focus their energy toward local elected officials.

"Call out representatives like Rep. McSally, who has said that she supports the DACAmented community and the DREAMers," he said. "She's been out there. She said it, and she needs to be held accountable. She needs to be on the phone talking to the White House."

Najera says ending DACA would be catastrophic. He's less worried about himself and more concerned that about the impact on the other 800,000 people who would have their lives upended. But he added that the impact goes beyond immigrants protected by DACA.

"It's about all of us," he said. "There's 11 million of us who need help, who are living in shadows, who are living without access to human necessities like healthcare, like working rights, all of these things that should be a given to anybody in a country like ours."