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How Trump's immigration plan could impact Buffalo

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WASHINGTON – For "Dreamers," President Trump's immigration proposal looks at first glance like a dream come true. Upward of 1.8 million of them would be able to stay in America, and maybe even become citizens, even though their parents brought them to the United States illegally.

But to hear immigration experts tell it, Trump's proposal is otherwise a nightmare – for cities like Buffalo that depend on immigration to stem population loss, for current immigrants who want to reunite with family, and for farmers and other business people who hope immigration can solve their labor shortages.

"It's great news for one group – the Dreamers – but bad news for lots of other people," said David Dyssegaard Kallick, deputy director and director of immigration research at the Fiscal Policy Institute, a left-leaning Albany think tank. "And it's especially bad news for places like Buffalo, which have depended on refugees and other immigrants to revitalize the economy and the population."

Critiques from the right were equally scathing. Breitbart, the alt-right website that helped fuel Trump's election, took one look at his plan for the Dreamers and labeled him "amnesty Don." Meantime, Alex Nowrasteh of the libertarian Cato Institute wrote: "The amnesty portion of Trump's plan is better than many other Republican options but the cuts in legal immigration are too great."

All that criticism led Nowrasteh and others to predict that Trump's plan, released late last week, will be a non-starter in Congress, which Trump charged with coming up with a plan for the Dreamers before the March 5 deadline he set for ending an Obama-era program that offered upward of 800,000 of them legal protection. Senate Democrats, who already forced a brief government shutdown over the Dreamers, are tying their fate to the passage of government funding legislation that must pass by Feb. 8.

Trump is offering a path to citizenship not only to the people already enrolled in that Obama-era program – called Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals, or DACA – but to young immigrants who never signed up for that program.

"These individuals were brought into the United States at no fault of their own," noted Rep. Chris Collins, a Clarence Republican and strong Trump supporter. "We need to find a legislative solution that gives certainty to these individuals that only know the United States as home."

But the price the president suggests in return for a solution for the Dreamers is the largest cutback in legal immigration in generations. And that, several immigration experts said, is a policy that could backfire on places such as Buffalo.

That's because Buffalo and several other Rust Belt cities have relied on immigrants to stem the population losses they've experienced for decades.

The Buffalo metro area's foreign-born population grew 32.3 percent from 2000 through 2014, Census figures show. New American Economy, a pro-immigration group, calculated that that influx of more than 15,000 immigrants meant the region's population fell only 3.3 percent between those years. Without those immigrants, the Buffalo area's population would have fallen 4.7 percent.

What's more, the wave of immigrants – many of them refugees from troubled countries whom the American government invited here – has helped revitalize Buffalo's far West Side and Black Rock/Riverside. There, according to census estimates, job growth and business growth have exceeded the countywide average in recent years.

Already, though, Trump's cutback to refugee admissions shrunk the number of refugees coming to Buffalo by two-thirds between 2016 and 2017. Under Trump's new proposal, other forms of legal immigration would be reduced by about 288,000 people a year nationwide, or 36 percent, the nonpartisan Migration Policy Institute estimated.

Those combined moves would hit Buffalo hard, immigration experts said.

"In a city where the population is older than the national average, we would be losing part of the potential workforce," said Eva M. Hassett, executive director of the International Institute of Buffalo, which offers refugee resettlement and international outreach programs.

Kallick, who worked on a study finding that the number of immigrant-owned businesses more than doubled in Buffalo between 2000 and 2013, fears that sort of growth will be cut off if immigration is curtailed.

"This change would make a huge difference, especially in places where population growth is such a challenge," he said.

Trump proposes ending a "diversity lottery" that allows thousands to immigrate to America annually, but immigration experts are more concerned that he wants to slash America's longstanding policy of family reunification, which allowed 542,370 immigrants to come to America legally last year.

Current law allows legal immigrants to apply to bring to America not just their closest relatives, but also siblings, parents, grandparents and adult children. Trump, seeking to end what he calls "chain migration," would limit family reunification to spouses and minor children.

Those limits stop all sorts of would-be immigrants, particularly those who come from cultures where people expect to take care of their parents when they age, from wanting to move to America, said Matthew L. Kolken, a prominent Buffalo immigration attorney.

"It creates less of an incentive to relocate here, especially if you can go to a more hospitable country," Kolken said.

Trump's attempt to end "chain migration" even appears to have turned off many Dreamers, who would win legal status in America while the parents who brought them here could be deported.

For that reason, Greisa Martinez Rosas, advocacy director for United We Dream – the largest group representing Dreamers – said: "They have taken immigrant youth hostage, pitting us against our own parents, black immigrants and our communities in exchange for our dignity."

Others, meanwhile, are mystified at the holes in Trump's plan.

A \$25 billion proposal for more border security includes parts of a wall at the Mexican border as well as improvements at the U.S.-Canadian border, but it doesn't say what those improvements would be.

"It's nebulous, just like everything else," said Rep. Brian Higgins, a Buffalo Democrat.

Similarly, Trump has advocated a move to a "skills-based" immigration system – but nothing in his proposal specifies how that would be accomplished.

And the greatest immigration concern of many upstate New York lawmakers – streamlining the system by which farmers get temporary seasonal help from immigrants – goes entirely unaddressed.

Without such changes, "an enforcement-only approach to immigration will exacerbate labor problems on farms in New York and the rural economy would suffer," said Steve Ammerman, spokesman for the New York Farm Bureau. "It is important to remember that national security also requires the country's ability to feed itself."

Given the myriad concerns about Trump's proposal, several sources said they expected it to go nowhere. Instead, they said Congress would try to work out major immigration legislation – which it hasn't passed in 31 years – in just a couple of weeks.

For now, though, the political debate over the issue sounds much like the Twitter war that broke out between Senate Minority Leader Charles E. Schumer, a New York Democrat, and Trump on Friday.

"While @realDonaldTrump finally acknowledged that the Dreamers should be allowed to stay here and become citizens, he uses them as a tool to tear apart our legal immigration system and adopt the wish list that anti-immigration hardliners have advocated for for years," Schumer tweeted.

That prompted Trump to reply: "DACA has been made increasingly difficult by the fact that Cryin' Chuck Schumer took such a beating over the shutdown that he is unable to act on immigration!"

Trump already rejected a bipartisan Senate compromise on the Dreamer issue. But now the House Problem Solvers Caucus, a bipartisan group that tries to find middle-of-the-road solutions, is trying to forge a compromise of its own, said Rep. Tom Reed, a Corning Republican who co-chairs the caucus.

Reed said Congress should be able to solve the issue but he sounded less than pleased about the politics surrounding it.

"I'm frustrated that there are those so politically motivated that they'd rather keep this issue alive than solve it," he said.