

# The Daily Progress

## Opinion/Commentary: I'm a legal immigrant, but I could soon be deported

Renata Yassa

Jan 31, 2021

As a 21-year-old volunteer emergency medical technician, I've stabilized a man's severed leg, resuscitated heart attack victims and been the first to respond to countless health emergencies in my hometown, Christiansburg. When COVID-19 tore through the state, I volunteered as a contact tracer. After I receive my master's degree in public health at Liberty University, I hope to work for the U.S. Centers for Disease Control or the World Health Organization to help prevent future health crises.

But my dreams — and my ability to help the public — may soon be snuffed out. I'm one of about 200,000 “documented Dreamers,” young immigrants who grew up legally in the U.S. but who lose legal status after the age of 21.

I'm one of about 200,000 “documented Dreamers,” young immigrants who grew up legally in the U.S. but who must self deport at age 21. That's because our parents are here on temporary visas that no longer cover us when we become adults. Because our parents brought us here with documentation and maintained legal status, we are excluded from the Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals program as well as President Biden's most recent proposal to fast-track Dreamers for citizenship. These policies offer protections to immigrants brought to America as young children, but their language requires applicants to be undocumented, thereby excluding the children of legal visa holders like me.

In so many ways, I'm like the typical Dreamers you've heard about — my parents brought me here when I was 2 years old, and America is the only home I can remember. I grew up in American schools, surrounded by American culture, and I dream of staying here long term. The only difference is that my parents have always held legal status; and strangely, it's this distinction that bars me from policies that protect traditional Dreamers.

After age 21, I can't gain work authorization, protection from deportation and other benefits from the Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals program. I dreamt of going to medical school — many now accept DACA recipients — but, again, my legal status stood in the way.

It's wonderful that President Biden's day-one immigration proposal urges Congress to let Dreamers apply for permanent residency. But even if he's successful, that likely won't apply to me. My status as an international graduate student (I have Canadian citizenship) temporarily protects me. But it's a short-term fix; after that, my future is not secure.

Even before COVID, immigrants were vital to the American the health-care industry. Foreign-born workers are 38.1% of home health aides, nearly 29% of physicians and 15.8% of registered

nurses, among other key medical roles, according to New American Economy. But COVID-19 has pushed our country's health care system to a crisis point. In rural areas 135 U.S. counties lack a single physician, according to New American Economy. Researchers project a shortfall of 139,000 physicians by 2033, according to the Association of American Medical Colleges, and a deficit of 510,394 registered nurses by 2030, according to Cleveland Clinic Lerner College of Medicine and partner institutions. As a young health-care worker with long-term medical ambitions in a rural community, I'm the kind of person this country desperately needs.

My parents are Canadian citizens originally from Egypt. In January 2001, when my father landed an engineering job in the U.S., he moved our family from Montreal to Scranton, Pennsylvania. In August, his company moved us to Christiansburg. Then Sept. 11 rattled the economy, and my dad was laid off. Unwilling to uproot the family, my parents applied for an E2 visa, which is designed to encourage foreign investment in a U.S. business; they bought a gas station in Christiansburg. In their 19 years in business, they've employed around 500 people, most of them full-time employees. I practically grew up at this gas station, with a bed and TV in the back room when my parents had to work late but couldn't find a sitter.

As the only Egyptian family in Christiansburg, we stood out. Nonetheless, we were integral to our small town. The gas station regulars became our family. They watched me grow up from the little girl toddling between the aisles to the volunteer EMT who spends two weekends a month helping neighbors, responding to emergencies and saving lives around town.

My family story reflects that of so many immigrants invested deeply in the U.S. Middle Eastern and North African immigrants in particular play an important role in starting new businesses that create jobs for Americans. Nearly 20 percent of us are entrepreneurs, with double the entrepreneurship rate of the country's population, according to NAE. We also have some of the highest levels of education, and our studies often focus on the STEM fields. In 2015, we paid \$16.9 billion in taxes and held \$41.5 billion in spending power, much of which goes back to U.S. businesses and the community.

It fills me with sadness and dread to think that after I graduate, I might have to self-deport and leave my family behind. Some documented Dreamers find paths for staying in the country on a temporary basis, but authorization typically lasts only as long as you're employed — any gap could mean deportation. Many documented Dreamers choose to avoid the trouble altogether by finding a home in another country.

No one gains from this. Documented Dreamers lose their connection to family and the only country they consider home. And after a lifelong education in taxpayer-funded schools, America loses our talent just as we reach working age. U.S. industries struggling with worker and skill shortages lose future doctors, scientists, entrepreneurs and innovators. So many documented Dreamers fill important job vacancies in fields like technology, agriculture, health care, and service industries which struggle to find workers even amid an economic downturn. The net economic cost of losing documented Dreamers is estimated to be over \$30 billion, according to the Cato Institute.

President Biden ran on a promise of providing a pathway to citizenship for 2 million Dreamers. I commend this priority and ask that he and Congress follow through with a truly inclusive plan — one that also protects documented Dreamers.