

POLITICS

Trump Administration Ends DACA Program for Immigrants

Protection for ‘dreamers’ will end unless Congress acts to replace it

By Laura Meckler

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WASHINGTON—President Donald Trump urged lawmakers on Tuesday to pass broad immigration legislation by March as he said he would end a program that shields undocumented immigrants who entered the U.S. as children.

The move ignited an emotional battle in Congress and, in particular, among Republicans, who are divided over the five-year-old program. Congressional leaders in both parties promised to protect these young people from deportation, but the path to achieve that goal was unclear. Under the GOP president’s order, some of these immigrants will begin losing protections in March.

The White House suggested it wanted legislation addressing not just the young people affected by Tuesday’s move but other immigration issues, such as enforcement, border security and limiting future legal immigration. Each piece is controversial on its own, and putting them together has proven elusive over many years of efforts on Capitol Hill.

The president, who has argued that his Democratic predecessor overstepped his authority when he created the program, said Congress must work on a legislative fix.

“Congress now has 6 months to legalize DACA,” he said in a tweet Tuesday evening. He added: “If they can’t, I will revisit this issue!” but it wasn’t clear what he had in mind.

The Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals program covers nearly 800,000 people who were brought to the U.S. as children and meet other qualifications—such as schooling or military service—and are temporarily granted work permits and given safe harbor from deportation.

Any effort to pass immigration legislation must compete with other priority items on a packed congressional calendar. Among them: raising the federal-debt ceiling, funding the government

and paying for Hurricane Harvey relief, plus efforts to rewrite the tax code and shore up the health law's insurance exchanges.

KEY DATES IN TRUMP'S DACA MOVE

- Tuesday, Sept. 5: No new DACA applications filed after this date will be processed
- Oct. 5: Deadline for existing participants to renew their applications if their permits expire before March 5, 2018
- March 5: People with DACA grants will start losing their protections unless Congress intervenes

The decision to end the program, which was created by former President Barack

Obama, was welcomed by advocates for stricter immigration enforcement, including the attorney general of Texas, whose threat to sue the administration over the program added to the pressure on the White House.

The move was widely condemned by Democrats, some Republicans, business executives, immigrant-rights advocates and educational leaders as a cruel step that will hurt people who they said did nothing wrong and are contributing to the nation.

Attorney General Jeff Sessions announced the policy shift, reiterating his long-held belief that Mr. Obama had overstepped his authority. Mr. Obama's administration "deliberately sought to achieve what the legislative branch specifically refused to authorize," he said.

Mr. Sessions said the participants were taking jobs from U.S. citizens, that the program was encouraging more illegal migration and that it was implemented even though Congress had declined to pass the same policy into law.

Administration officials also said that winding the program down over six months was better than having it abruptly terminated by a court.

The reaction was swift. Protesters gathered in front of the White House and at Trump Tower in New York, where nine immigrants protected by the program and three other people were arrested. In Denver, hundreds of people took to the streets to protest the move.

Mr. Obama issued a rare public statement in opposition to his successor. "Whatever concerns or complaints Americans may have about immigration in general, we shouldn't threaten the future of this group of young people who are here through no fault of their own, who pose no threat," he said.

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Several states with liberal leaders threatened lawsuits to contest Mr. Trump's decision, and one legal challenge was already pending in New York. The move was also condemned by Mexican officials, and some predicted it would sour the atmosphere around negotiations over revamping the North American Free Trade Agreement.

Officials said that the permits given to young immigrants under the program, which are good for two years, will remain in force until they expire. Some 150,000 participants whose grants expire before March 5, 2018, will be able to renew their status if they file applications by Oct. 5. Officials said no new applications filed after Tuesday would be processed.

Absent congressional action, program participants will see their permits expire starting in March, meaning they won't be able to work legally and will be eligible for deportation.

Many immigrant advocates expressed concern that the government would use information collected as part of the program's application process to track people down for possible deportation.

On Tuesday, Department of Homeland Security officials said they wouldn't target former program participants and would only use their information if there were a significant law-enforcement or national-security risk. They also reiterated that their priorities in enforcement remain with people with criminal records or previous deportation orders.

People participating in the program were both angry and nervous about their futures.

"Immigrant youth are standing up today and saying in no uncertain terms this is our home, we are here to stay," said Cristina Jimenez, executive director of United We Dream, an advocacy group that represents these people. "We will not be pushed back into the shadows."

In taking the action, Mr. Trump fulfilled a campaign promise to end the program, but the move contradicts assurances he has given since taking office that these people, often dubbed Dreamers, had nothing to worry about.

In his statement, Mr. Trump encouraged action on Capitol Hill to protect program participants, while signaling he would want any legislation to include his own immigration priorities.

Republicans are divided among those who see an urgency to protect these immigrants, those who oppose such action and those who are willing to go along only as part of increased immigration enforcement of some sort.

White House press secretary Sarah Huckabee Sanders suggested the president wouldn't accept legislation protecting these immigrants unless it was paired with other elements of the debate.

House Speaker Paul Ryan (R., Wis.) signaled Tuesday he would try to pass legislation that protects program participants, and possibly take on other immigration issues.

Sen. Lindsey Graham (R., S.C.), a longtime backer of liberalized immigration laws, called this a "defining moment" for the Republican Party and hoped action on the Dream Act, which would provide a path to citizenship for young people brought to the U.S. as children, would be a first step.

"This may be what we needed in Congress to get our act together...a real issue of real live people who need us to act decisively," he said.

Several versions of the Dream Act are pending in Congress. Such legislation was last voted on in 2010, when it passed the House but fell five votes short in the Senate.

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Some Republicans have signaled they are open to such legislation, though some hope to pair it with immigration-enforcement measures.

Democrats and immigrant-rights advocates said they will insist on help for the young people without conditions. Democrats are in the minority in Congress but may have leverage. For instance, they could insist on legislation protecting young immigrants as part of a spending bill required to keep the government open after current funding expires Oct. 1, which is likely to need Democratic votes to pass.

On Tuesday, Rep. Luis Gutiérrez (D., Ill.), a longtime immigrant advocate, pledged to oppose any spending bill without protections for the Dreamers. "If they need our votes, we are bringing 800,000 young immigrants with us," he said.

—Alicia A. Caldwell, Byron Tau and Nancy A. Youssef contributed to this article.

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