

'We want to contribute to the community': The fight over tuition waivers for immigrants

WLRN Public Media | By Valerie Crowder

Published February 3, 2025 at 6:00 AM EST



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AP

Cynthia Moreno, 32, hangs a sign across the street from an U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) office, June 15, 2022, in Miramar on the 10th anniversary of the DACA program created by President Barack Obama.

Growing up, Dedé Flores always wanted to become a doctor.

"And I always did really well in school because I wanted to go to college," said Flores, who asked to not use her real name to protect the identities of her undocumented immigrant family members. "I wanted to help people."



She was brought by her mother from Nicaragua to South Florida as a child, in the hope of a better life.

Today, her dream is a reality. Flores eventually got her bachelor's degree in biology and finished medical school — thanks to a state law that allows undocumented immigrants to get in-state tuition rates for public colleges and universities.

But now Republicans want to shut down that law as part of a contentious overhaul of the state's immigration laws.

Last school year, about 6,500 undocumented immigrant students benefited from the program, according to an analysis from the Florida Policy Institute. "If it wasn't for in-state tuition, I would have never become a doctor," Flores told WLRN.

The GOP-controlled legislature passed a measure last week that would do away with out-of-state tuition waivers for undocumented students — which would force them to pay double what they're currently spending.

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That proposal wouldn't affect those who are allowed to live and work in the state temporarily under the federal Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals program (DACA), but it would make it harder for all other undocumented immigrant students who grew up in the state to afford college.

"These are people that value education. These are people that want to contribute to the economy. These are people that want to contribute to their community," said Flores. "And I think that by getting rid of in-state tuition, you're really getting rid of a lot of talent and a lot of future professionals that can help improve Florida – and Miami."

Democrats in the legislature were united in their opposition to the bill, largely because of the in-state tuition provision. "I completely disagree with that," said Rep. Kevin Chambliss (D-Homestead), referring to the proposal. "Those graduates have done more good for the state of Florida than harm."



Florida Senate

State Rep. Kevin Chambliss (D-Homestead)

Meanwhile, Gov. Ron DeSantis is expected to use his veto power to prevent the legislation from taking effect, primarily over disagreements surrounding other parts of the bill. But he's also thrown his support behind a proposal that would go even further and eliminate in-state tuition for DACA recipients who are here lawfully.

Democratic state Senate Minority Leader Jason Pizzo says he wants students who benefit from the program to understand that nothing has changed, despite the rhetoric and headlines.

"They should feel comfortable to know that nothing has changed," he said. "And until they hear from me, and I'll be very candid and open and public about it, and so will my colleagues, on both sides of the aisle – there is no disruption to in-state tuition waivers right now."

It's possible that lawmakers will work to protect undocumented immigrant students who are currently enrolled from losing their in-state tuition when they meet for the regular lawmaking session, which convenes in early March, Pizzo said.

"These are people that want to contribute to the to their community ... you're really getting rid of a lot of talent and a lot of future professionals that can help improve Florida."

Nicaraguan immigrant Dedé Flores

Republican state Sen. Alexis Calatayud (R-Miami) joined Democrats in voting against the measure because of the provision that would require undocumented students to pay twice as much for their education.

"Affordable, accessible education gives every child, regardless of their lot in life, a shot at the American dream and an opportunity to realize their highest potential," Calatayud said while debating the measure on the Senate floor. "I'm passionately empathetic to the thousands of people brought to our great state to no fault of their own."

Impact on families

While DeSantis and Republican legislative leaders battle over how to tackle illegal immigration in the state, immigrants without permanent legal status are grappling with what the proposed changes could mean for their futures.



Valerie Crowder
/
WLRN

Tiffany Hankins, director of policy and politics for the Florida Immigrant Coalition, traveled to the state Capitol from Miami on Tuesday, Jan. 28, 2025, to lobby against legislation that would eliminate in-state tuition for undocumented students.

"The Florida Legislature, along with the governor, is right now in a nasty game of playing politics, which is catching a lot of the attention – but the impact is on families and real people's lives," said Tiffany Hankins, director of policy and politics for the Florida Immigrant Coalition.

And the possibility of losing in-state tuition isn't the only concern that the state's undocumented immigrants have about the legislation, Hankins said.

The Republican-sponsored legislation also seeks to help President Donald Trump carry out his executive orders — such as the removal of hospitals, places of worship, and schools from the list of undocumented immigrant "safe spaces." For instance, it would require all public employees at the state and local level, and all government contractors, to cooperate with federal immigration authorities in their efforts to deport people who are here unlawfully.

"We're very concerned about this trend to really target and go after these sites of our community that have previously been outside of political debate."

Hankins says it's important for undocumented immigrants to know that they have constitutional protections against unwarranted searches and seizures – they also don't have to say anything to the police if they're questioned.

Hankins says that undocumented immigrants who want more information about their rights or their legal status should talk to an attorney or call her organization's [hotline](#) for guidance.

"We want to make sure that people have accurate information and aren't having to change the shape of their lives based on rumor and hearsay or uncertainty in the legal landscape."

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Tiffany Hankins, director of policy and politics for the Florida Immigrant Coalition.

But it's not just those who lack legal status who could feel the effects of these proposed measures — life could change dramatically for their loved ones too, Hankins explained.

"The impact goes far beyond the individuals who are being targeted," she said. "It's whole families that are potentially going to be torn apart by the enforcement of these laws."

For Dedé Flores, that's one of her biggest concerns about Trump's executive orders and

Republican state lawmakers' efforts to crack down on illegal immigration.

Flores and her younger brother, who's now an engineer, are allowed to live and work in the U.S. temporarily under the DACA program. But their mother and her uncle don't have legal status.

"To me, my family is the most important thing," she said. "In the back of my mind, it's always like, 'What's going to happen to them? Is my mom going to be separated from us?'"

If that ever happened, she would have to consider leaving the place where she was able to make her dreams of becoming a doctor come true, Flores said.

"I love Miami," she said. "This is what I call my home."

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