

Immigrants on bubble breathe sigh of relief Change in policy regarding young illegal residents removes fear of deportation.

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Body

A major shift in immigration policy by President Barack Obama's administration offered relief Friday for some living here illegally, lessening worries they could be deported from a country they consider their homeland.

"I can't believe it finally happened," said Olga Cenobio, 21, who graduated from Southwestern Illinois College in Belleville last month. "It's like a small thing, but the beginning of a big thing for me."

That big thing was Obama's announcement Friday that illegal immigrants who came to the U.S. as children will be able to apply for work permits and avoid deportation.

For Cenobio, it means continuing her education and applying for jobs without fear of someone finding out she is here illegally and reporting her.

Cenobio, who lives in Freeburg, came to the U.S. from Mexico with her mother and older brother when she was 11. Cenobio's mother wanted a better life for her children, and Cenobio is sure she has that here.

"This is my friends, my family, my everything," Cenebio said.

The president's election-year policy change, which could affect as many as 800,000 people, brought immediate broad support from Hispanics and pro-immigration groups but was criticized by Republican leaders who said it circumvents the legislative process and is not a long-term fix to a complex problem.

Obama made it clear in his White House Rose Garden announcement that the executive order was not the permanent solution to immigration. Rather, this immediate change, he said, will "lift the shadow of deportation from these young people."

The policy achieves some of the goals of the long-debated DREAM Act but stops short of the key measure: Paving the way to becoming a citizen.

"Let's be clear, this is not amnesty, this is not immunity, this is not a path to citizenship, this is not a permanent fix," Obama said. "This is the right thing to do."

Others here illegally see the move as a sign of hope tempered with trepidation because it's not a law. Future administrations could reverse the policy change.

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"I'm still not a citizen. I still can't vote, I still can't travel outside the United States," said Tania Unzueta, 28, of Chicago, whose parents brought her from Mexico at age 10. "I don't think we can underestimate the value of having a job permit. That's a big deal. But the reality is that this is something temporary."

St. Louis immigration attorney James Hacking III said the announcement is Obama's attempt to make him look softer on immigration and appease Hispanic voters whose enthusiasm for the president has dropped, in part, because of his inability to win congressional support for a broad overhaul of immigration law. They also are critical of the Obama administration's aggressive **deportation** policy. In 2011, Immigration and Customs Enforcement deported a record 396,906 people and is expected to deport about 400,000 this year.

"It really doesn't **change** the lives of many people," Hacking said. "When you read all the hurdles that are in place, that really helps a minuscule number of people. And it is only good for as long as he's in office. The next president could revoke it."

Under the administration's plan, **illegal immigrants** will be immune from **deportation** if they were brought to the United States before they turned 16 and are **younger** than 30, have been in the country for at least five continuous years, have no criminal history, graduated from a U.S. high school or earned a GED, or served in the military. They can apply for a work permit that will be good for two years with no limits on how many times it can be renewed. The exact details of how the program will work, including how much **immigrants** will have to pay to apply and what proof they will need, still are being worked out.

The step, to be carried out by the Department of Homeland Security, comes one week before Obama plans to address the National Association of Latino Elected and Appointed Officials' annual conference in Orlando, Fla. Republican presidential challenger Mitt Romney is to speak to the group on Thursday.

Republicans, including Romney, say they want tighter border security measures before they will consider **changes** in immigration law. Romney opposes offering legal status to **illegal immigrants** who attend college but has said he would do so for those who serve in the armed forces.

The new Obama policy resembles an alternative to the Dream Act proposed by Republican Sen. Marco Rubio of Florida, a potential vice presidential running mate for Mitt Romney.

Rubio criticized Obama's move.

"Today's announcement will be welcome news for many of these kids desperate for an answer, but it is a short-term answer to a long-term problem," Rubio said in a statement.

Sarah Steelman, one of the Missouri Republicans hoping to replace Democratic Sen. Claire McCaskill, said the president's action was "appalling."

"It is noteworthy that he must rely on executive power because the duly elected representatives of the American people oppose such a move," Steelman said.

Added U.S. Rep. Todd Akin, a Republican also vying for McCaskill's job: "Now, **illegal immigrants** who enter America at any time can declare that they came as children, and because we have no way to verify their claim, they are allowed to stay. Obama's election pandering has created a powerful incentive for people to immigrate illegally to America."

But Democratic Party leaders were quick to praise Obama's efforts, including Sen. Dick Durbin of Illinois. He called the decision "an historic humanitarian moment" and compared it with the decision two decades ago to give political asylum to Cuban refugees fleeing the Communist island. "This is at least a reflection of that moment in history." Vanessa Crawford Aragon, executive director of Missouri **Immigrant** and Refugee Advocates called the policy "a huge immediate **relief**" for those who were brought here as children.

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"There are all kinds of young people that have been undocumented in this country through no action of their own and been faced with the possibility of being returned to their country of origin where they do not know the language, or have any family or friends," Aragon said. "This is a really big deal for thousands of families staring down the specter of (deportation)."

Obama in his speech referred to young immigrants who are American in "every way except on paper." That might describe Kuwait native Alaa Mukahhal, 25, of Chicago, whose parents brought her here at age 6 from Jordan, after fleeing Kuwait during the first Iraq War.

She was raised here and earned an architecture degree at the University of Illinois at Champaign-Urbana.

She nonetheless has been facing deportation proceedings, which she hopes will be ended by Obama's announcement. The prospect of never facing that danger again, she said, is "very exciting."

The administration announcement comes ahead of an expected Supreme Court decision on Arizona's tough 2010 immigration law that, among other things, requires police to ask for immigration papers from anyone they stop or arrest and suspect is in the country illegally. The Obama administration has challenged the law.

"It makes no sense to expel talented young people who are for all intents and purposes, Americans. - President Barack Obama

Key timing

Obama's move may appease Hispanic voters as he prepares to address Latino leaders.

GOP response Republicans say circumventing Congress will make a long-term answer harder to find.

Part of a DREAM Policy change partially meets "DREAM Act" goals but is not a path to citizenship.

Potential reversal Future administrations could reverse the president's decision.

Graphic

Photo by Associated Press At the University of Texas-Pan American, Maria Ibarra, 19, and Candido Renteria, 24, hug with joy Friday after President Barack Obama announced he would ease enforcement of immigration laws. Both students are originally from Mexico. Photo by Johnny Andrews • jandrews@post-dispatch.com Olga Cenobio (right) visits with a family friend, Lanie Heidenreich, on Friday in Freeburg. "I can't believe it finally happened."

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