

For Young Immigrants, Turmoil Over a Romney Stance

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Body

An immigration **stance** that Mitt **Romney** took with little fanfare this month has created **turmoil** for many **young immigrants** living in the country illegally, lawyers and **immigrant** advocates say.

Mr. **Romney** said that if elected president, he would end the program that offers hundreds of thousands of those **immigrants** two-year reprieves from deportation, which the Obama administration began in August.

Mr. **Romney**'s statements have prompted many **young** people to hold back from applying, worried that if he won the presidency, those who applied and were not approved by the time he took office could be pursued by immigration authorities.

His position "has created a lot of confusion and a lot of anxiety," said Cheryl Little, the executive director of Americans for **Immigrant** Justice, a legal aid group based in Miami that has assisted hundreds of **young immigrants** applying for reprieves.

Mr. **Romney** has said that he would honor any reprieves already approved by the government, and that he would not order the deportation of **immigrants** who did not get deferrals.

Even so, his position on the reprieves has heightened already existing doubts about how he would handle the program, said Gregory Chen, the director of advocacy for the American Immigration Lawyers Association, which has monitored it closely. "For **young** people who have been living in the shadows for years, coming forward now to the authorities is a big act of faith," Mr. Chen said. "They are concerned their information could be used at a later date against them."

Also, at least 800,000 **young** people, according to estimates by **immigrant** organizations, will be unable to apply in time to be approved before the inauguration in January because of document requirements and filing fees. They are now facing the possibility that if Mr. **Romney** prevailed, they could miss out on the deportation deferrals and the work permits that come with them.

By independent estimates, as many as 1.2 million illegal **immigrants** are currently eligible for President Obama's deportation reprieves. Since Aug. 15, when the program began, 179,794 **immigrants** have applied, according to official figures published on Oct. 12. But only 4,591 deferrals have been approved, despite what lawyers praise as unusually fast work by the federal agency in charge, Citizenship and Immigration Services.

Alberto Martinez, an adviser to Mr. **Romney**, said the candidate's goal was to eliminate "perpetual uncertainty" for **young immigrants**. Since the deferrals are based only on a presidential action and do not provide any path to legal immigration status, he said, "it is just another stage of limbo for these **young** people."

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In the general campaign, Mr. Romney has moderated his immigration positions as he tries to appeal to Latino voters, hoping to chip away at Mr. Obama's big lead among that group. In the presidential debate on Tuesday, Mr. Romney endorsed proposals giving legal status to young immigrants who have been in the country illegally since they were children.

"The kids of those that came here illegally, those kids I think should have a pathway to become a permanent resident of the United States," Mr. Romney said.

Without providing much detail, Mr. Romney said he would work with Congress on "real, permanent immigration reform" to give legal status to young immigrants. He has said that illegal immigrants who serve in the military should get permanent residency.

But Mr. Romney has criticized the temporary reprieves, which Mr. Obama created in June by executive action, as a political "stopgap measure."

For young people who have grown up without documents, the deferrals and permits allow them to work legally and, in some states, obtain driver's licenses and attend college at in-state tuition rates. In a recent poll by the Pew Hispanic Center, 86 percent of registered Latino voters said they approved of the program.

To qualify for the program, immigrants must be under 31, have come to America before they were 16 and have lived here for at least five years. They must also be current students or high school graduates. Since there is no filing deadline and no appeal if an application is denied, administration officials have urged young people to take their time to get it right. Many immigrants have also struggled to gather the papers they need and to raise the \$465 filing fee.

Leading Republicans who are concerned about the party's standing with Latino voters have differed on Mr. Romney's position on the deferrals. In a recent interview on Spanish-language radio, Jeb Bush, the former governor of Florida, lauded Mr. Romney's plan for broader legislation. But he said, "I think it makes all the sense in the world to maintain what exists right now."

But Senator Marco Rubio of Florida said at an event on Tuesday that he agreed with Mr. Romney. "We are not going to give out new permits because we are going to replace the system with a new one," Mr. Rubio said. "And I think that is very promising."

Mr. Romney's statements have prompted some immigrants to rush to apply, hoping they could still gain approval before January. Many more are hanging back, lawyers said.

And then there is Claudia Trejo, 18, one of those who could miss the chance to apply. Born in Mexico and raised in Denver, she said she had been living in this country illegally since arriving with her parents when she was 10. Both she and her 16-year-old sister qualify for deferrals. They want to apply together so that neither would be left unprotected from deportation.

But their parents, also here illegally, do not have the money for two \$465 filing fees. Ms. Trejo has been working odd jobs to raise the cash, hoping to apply at the end of the year. "Honestly, the only thing I am waiting on is the money to apply," she said.

Ms. Trejo graduated from high school in May but cannot afford the out-of-state tuition rates she must pay to go to college in Colorado. With a deferral, she said, she could get a driver's license and a regular job, and a chance to earn her tuition.

"I just want to go to college as soon as possible," Ms. Trejo said. "The things Romney is saying are devastating."

But groups opposing amnesty for illegal immigrants praised Mr. Romney's stance on the deferrals. "We have been hopeful he would immediately stop them," said Roy Beck, the president of NumbersUSA, which advocates reduced immigration. He contends that Mr. Obama exceeded his authority with the mass deferrals, and his organization has supported a federal lawsuit in Texas to try to stop the program.

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In the final weeks of the presidential campaign, Mr. **Romney** wants to hold on to Republicans who supported his early calls for tough immigration enforcement. He also hopes to draw some Latinos, who are likely to cast crucial ballots in at least three battleground states: Colorado, Florida and Nevada.

"We understand the power our communities have," said Maria Fernanda Cabello, a leader in Texas of the United We Dream Network, a national youth organization, who said she received one of the earliest deferrals. Although she cannot vote, Ms. Cabello, 21, said she had been busy organizing Latino citizens to do so. "We urge both candidates to continue this program," she said, "and we will be mobilizing."

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