

Illegal immigrant students' hopes dashed with DREAM Act's failure in U.S.

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Body

The opportunity for thousands of young immigrants to become legalized faded away when Republicans in the U.S. Senate blocked the DREAM Act from being attached to a defense spending bill.

But DREAM Act supporters, such as 21-year-old Michael Nazario, an illegal immigrant from Mexico who was brought here by his parents when he was 7, say they are not giving up.

"We haven't lost," said Nazario, who wants to enlist in the Marine Corps. "We have to use our anger and our sadness to keep fighting, because the fight is not over. "

The DREAM Act was six votes short of the 60 votes needed to attach it to the defense bill Tuesday. Not one Republican voted to attach the bill.

U.S. Sen. Harry Reid, a Democrat from Nevada, earlier this month attached the DREAM Act as an amendment to the defense spending authorization bill. The DREAM Act is now expected to be put up for a vote as a stand-alone bill before Congress goes into a recess Oct. 1.

Nazario witnessed the voting results at the U.S. Senate floor in Washington D.C. and is meeting with other DREAM Act supporters to strategize a plan to gain Republican support for the bill.

"I have to admit I'm sad and I'm disappointed in our politicians because they are not making the right choice for this country, but we will keep fighting until we get the DREAM Act passed," Nazario said.

Meanwhile, dozens of DREAM Act supporters gathered outside Sen. John McCain's office, where they have been camping out since Sept. 16, to view the voting results.

Erika Andiola, who graduated from Arizona State University in 2009 with a degree in psychology and is in the country illegally, said she and members of the Arizona DREAM Act Coalition plan to continue urging Republicans to vote in favor of the legislation.

"We still have hope. It's not the end," Andiola said.

Demonstrators opposing the passage of the DREAM Act were also present to witness the voting results.

Brandy Baron, a member of the Latino Legal Immigrants Tea Party Patriots, was among the demonstrators. She said she worries illegal immigrants that qualify under the DREAM Act would take away jobs from Americans.

"It's wrong to put more people in our country applying for jobs that we don't have and that our people should be getting," Baron said. "My children deserve jobs first not their children. "

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Baron said she also worries that illegal immigrants who enlist in the United States military under the DREAM Act will not be able to defend the United States.

"If the time comes where we go to war with a country like Mexico, are they going to be able to shoot those people?" she said. "I want to know that the people in my military are going to be able to get the job done and not have them worry about shooting their relatives. "

A Rasmussen Reports poll released Sept. 21 found that most voters support allowing illegal immigrants an opportunity to become U.S. citizens through the DREAM Act, but also said the bill would encourage more illegal immigration.

Support for illegal immigrants who qualify for the DREAM Act was about 78 percent for those looking to serve in the U.S. military while half of voters said children brought here illegally should get a chance at citizenship if they complete two years of post-secondary education.

Rasmussen conducted the poll of what it called "likely voters" Sept. 16-17. The poll's margin of error was plus or minus 3 percentage points.

Nazario said he wants to join the U.S. Marine Corps to fight for and defend the only country he's ever practically known, but his legal status forbids him from enlisting.

"I have been waiting for a chance to serve this country," he said. "I consider this my home, and all I'm trying to do is give back to the U.S. through my service. "

Federal laws prohibit anyone who is in the country illegally to enlist in the military, but the DREAM Act would overturn that. The legislation would allow illegal immigrants who meet certain requirements the ability to enlist in the military or attend college for two years and be put on a path toward citizenship.

Nazario and members of the Arizona DREAM Act Coalition have tried to get McCain to vote in favor of the bill by attending his town hall meetings, camping outside his Phoenix office and rallying at the Capitol Monday.

McCain co-sponsored the DREAM Act in 2007, 2005 and 2003 but recently criticized Democratic leaders for attaching the DREAM Act to the defense bill that authorizes spending for national security programs.

An estimated 2.1 million undocumented children and young adults in the U.S. would be affected by the DREAM Act, including 114,000 in Arizona, according to a report released in July by the Migration Policy Institute, a nonpartisan research group.

The report also notes that there are about 360,000 undocumented immigrants in the U.S. who are of military age and would qualify for citizenship under the DREAM Act, creating a significant number of potential recruits if the DREAM Act passes.

Illegal immigrants would qualify for the DREAM Act if they have a clean criminal record and a diploma from a U.S. high school. They also would be required to show that they entered the U.S. before age of 16 and remained in the U.S. for at least five years before enactment of the law.

Republican state Rep. John Kavanagh, a military veteran, said he opposes the DREAM Act because he doesn't believe attending college for two years is an adequate requirement to become a citizen. But he could support allowing some illegal immigrants to serve in the military under the right conditions.

"I don't have a problem with giving them the option of enlisting in the military because they were brought here as children," Kavanagh said. "It's the adults who came here illegally that I have a problem with, because they shouldn't be here in the first place. "

Republican state Sen. Frank Antenori, also a military veteran, said he's against the DREAM ACT, though he said the military service requirement would be "an admirable way" for illegal immigrants to gain citizenship. The way he

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sees it, illegal immigrants should be required to serve eight years in the military instead of two years in order to qualify.

"They've demonstrated the tenants of citizenship that are required to become U.S. citizens," Antenori said.

But William Gheen, president of Americans for Legal Immigration, a group advocating for tougher immigration laws, said allowing undocumented immigrants who qualify for the DREAM Act to enlist in the military presents potential dangers to the United States.

"It would be a violation of America's national security," Gheen said. "America can't risk to allow illegal aliens access to advanced, American military weaponry and training. "

Antenori said having illegal immigrants complete two years of post-secondary education is not a justified reason to legalize them.

"They haven't demonstrated that they are willing to lay their lives on the line for the United States, and they haven't denounced any relationships from which they previously came from," he said.

Anna Gains, founder and chairwoman of American Citizens United, an Arizona group that supports tougher laws against illegal immigration, said she supports the enlistment of illegal immigrants who would qualify under the DREAM Act because they would have to prove their loyalty to the nation through their service in the military. However, she said she is against the education provision of the bill.

"We have a lot of Americans now that are struggling and are unemployed, and here we are rewarding these students who came here illegally by giving them an education and allowing them to become citizens," Gaines said.

The DREAM Act has been attached to several bills during the past decade. In 2007, it was attached to the defense spending authorization bill, but ultimately was rejected.

Nazario said he hopes enough senators will vote for the DREAM Act if it is put up for a vote before Oct. 1 so that he will be able to join the Marine Corps and pursue a career in engineering or architecture.

"For now this is my battle; I have to prove that I'm no different than they are," he said. "We both want to be better people, and the only thing different is that I'm undocumented. "

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