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Advocates Struggle to Reach Immigrants Eligible for Deferred Action

By [KIRK SEMPLE](#)

The two women had spent a couple of afternoons wandering a heavily Chinese neighborhood in Brooklyn on a seemingly straightforward quest: to find young, undocumented immigrants and enroll them in a federal program that lets them stay in the country for at least two years and work legally.

But after they canvassed bakeries and restaurants, Internet cafes and bubble tea shops, and buttonholed scores of workers and customers, who were mostly suspicious if not downright hostile, the challenge of their mission had begun to weigh on them.

“Chipping away at the ice,” sighed Susan Pan, the legal fellow at [Atlas: DIY](#), an advocacy group for immigrant youths, as she and her colleague, Wendy Tsang, paused to drink a restorative cup of milk tea. “Trust is extremely critical.”

Across the country, immigrant advocates have been confronting similar challenges amid a renewed push to sign up immigrants for the program, known as [deferred action](#).

The effort has acquired a sense of urgency as comprehensive immigration legislation has stalled in Congress, dimming the possibility that lawmakers — at least in the near term — might provide a path to citizenship for those here illegally.

The program, President Obama’s signature immigration initiative, is open to certain immigrants who were brought to the United States as children. Recipients of the reprieve are protected from deportation, allowed to work and, in many states, to obtain a driver’s license; they can renew their status after two years.

“It’s the only game in town right now for undocumented immigrants, and we need to do everything to maximize participation in the program,” said Steven Choi, executive director of the [New York Immigration Coalition](#), a leading advocacy group in New York City.

When the program [started](#) in August 2012, tens of thousands lined up to apply. But after the first few months, the number of new applications plummeted. By some estimates, about half of the eligible immigrants have not applied, with participation particularly low in some immigrant-rich states like New York and Florida and among some large immigrant groups, including the Chinese, Dominicans and Filipinos.

Advocates and government officials view the program — and the challenge of boosting participation rates — as a test run for the far more complicated process that would come with

legislation that included a pathway to citizenship for the estimated 11.7 million immigrants who are in the country illegally.

The [Migration Policy Institute](#), a nonpartisan research group in Washington, estimated that about 1.1 million people were eligible for deferred action. As of Aug. 31, about 567,500 people — or 52 percent — had applied and been accepted for consideration, and nearly 455,500 had been approved, with most of the remaining applications still under review, according to federal statistics.

But the participation rate has varied wildly depending on the immigrant group: It was at 66 percent among Mexicans, 59 percent among Hondurans and 55 percent among Brazilians, while only 16 percent of Filipinos, 14 percent of Dominicans and fewer than 9 percent of Chinese have signed up, according to a [study](#) published in August by the institute.

Among states with large immigrant populations, participation was also uneven. In North Carolina, 74 percent of those eligible had signed up, and in Georgia, 63 percent. But the rate was only 35 percent in Florida and 34 percent in New York.

Analysts have offered several possible reasons for the regional variations, including differences in the enforcement of immigration laws, the availability of public transportation and the corresponding need for a driver's license.

But the range in application rates among immigrant groups has been harder to figure out, they said.

The initiative was quickly embraced by many Latinos who were already heavily invested in the so-called Dreamer movement — the push for legal status and educational benefits for immigrants without papers who were brought to the country as children. Much of the movement's leadership is Latino, giving comfort to other Latino immigrants to come forward and reveal their immigration status.

But in populations with less visible leadership among the undocumented, that step has been more daunting.

“The Chinese weren't the first people to line up at the door on Aug. 15,” said Mae Lee, executive director of the [Chinese Progressive Association](#) in New York.

At deferred action clinics early on, some legal service providers were asked by non-Latino youths if the initiative was only for Mexicans.

In addition, outreach efforts to some immigrant populations have been limited, in part because of a lack of money. Meanwhile, the populations that have had the highest participation rates, most notably the Mexicans, have had not only an elaborate network of activist groups but also proactive consulates that help their nationals apply.

Cultural inhibitions might also explain in part why some groups have been reluctant to come forward in larger numbers.

Within some Asian immigrant populations, particularly the Chinese, there was a well-nourished sense of shame associated with being undocumented, advocates said.

“In the Chinese community it is so rarely discussed and there is such a community culture of silence about this,” said Betty Hung, policy director for [Advancing Justice - LA](#), a Los Angeles-based legal and civil rights advocacy group for Asian-Americans and Pacific Islanders.

A similar reservation affected the Filipino population. “People have tried to figure out a way not to talk about it,” said Gregory A. Cendana, executive director of the [Asian Pacific American Labor Alliance](#), based in Washington.

Advocates acknowledge that many of the early participants needed little encouragement to participate in the deferral program, even if it was a challenge for some to [assemble](#) their applications, pay the application fee and overcome fears about revealing their status to the authorities.

But the remaining eligible immigrants are harder to reach. They are people who are more likely to have dropped out of school in favor of work, have a poor command of English and have little contact with advocacy groups, analysts said.

The most ambitious effort to reach them got underway in New York City, where the City Council underwrote the effort with an [\\$18 million allocation](#) over two years.

Under the aegis of the Department of Youth and Community Services, a coalition of immigrant advocacy groups, including Atlas: DIY, was designing an approach to finding qualified immigrant youths and bringing them into the fold.

“This came about because we were all disappointed with the uptake,” Jeanne B. Mullgrav, the department’s commissioner, said in an interview. Applicants for deferred action must meet several conditions, including proving they are enrolled in school, graduated from high school or received an equivalent G.E.D. certificate, or had been honorably discharged from the military. In New York City, an estimated 70,000 immigrants who have yet to sign up either already qualify for the program or lack only the educational requirement, said Melanie Reyes, a consultant for the New York Immigration Coalition.

Much of the City Council money was being used to add 11,000 seats to adult education classes to help those who are otherwise eligible meet the requirements. The money was also paying for outreach efforts and legal services.

Ms. Mullgrav said her team was urging the groups trying to reach immigrants “to really be as creative as possible, whether it’s talking to taxi drivers, going into hair salons or waiting for people to come out of Western Union.”

One group, [Make the Road New York](#), has used its funds to hire a young deferred action recipient to talk to potential applicants at day laborer sites, churches and other locations.

Others are coordinating with soccer leagues, or planning to use social media and YouTube to get out the word.

“These are folks who don’t want to be found, they’re living underground,” Mr. Choi said. “If you’re not trying to reach them, they’re not going to be reached.”

<http://www.nytimes.com/2013/12/09/nyregion/advocates-struggle-to-reach-immigrants-eligible-for-deferred-action.html>