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Advocates warn immigrants of scams

Federal plan would defer deportation for young immigrants

By John Fritze, The Baltimore Sun

8:44 PM EDT, July 8, 2012

WASHINGTON —Immigrant advocates are warning people who plan to apply for a work permit under a new federal immigration policy to beware of scammers and hold off on taking any formal action until more details emerge about how the program will work.

The policy shift, which President Barack Obama announced June 15, will allow some immigrants who are illegally in the U.S. to apply for work papers. But advocates say the Department of Homeland Security faces difficult questions in implementing the plan and is still months away from doing so.

The groups, including Casa de Maryland and the American Immigration Lawyers Association, are also reaching out to Hispanic neighborhoods to warn of con artists who pose as lawyers offering to help immigrants navigate regulations — for a fee. The problem has become pervasive in immigrant communities across the country.

"There's just no end to the capacity of these folks to profiteer off these situations," said Kim Propeack with Casa de Maryland, an advocacy group that has heard from hundreds of immigrants about the new policy.

The Obama administration policy permits immigrants who came to the United States before age 16 and who have stayed in the country for the past five years to apply for a two-year, renewable deferral from deportation. To qualify, they must have no criminal record and be enrolled in school, have a high school diploma or have served in the U.S military.

About 1.4 million people could benefit from the policy, according to estimates from the nonpartisan Pew Research Center. The number of people in Maryland who may apply is less clear. Immigrant advocacy groups say more than 30,000 would have been eligible under the federal DREAM Act, a similar proposal that died in Congress in 2010.

Republican lawmakers have criticized the Obama proposal as an end-run around Congress and a political move intended to court Hispanic voters, who will be particularly important in swing states like Florida, Nevada and Virginia. Rep. Roscoe G. Bartlett, a Republican representing Western Maryland, has predicted that Obama's plan "would encourage more illegal immigration."

Presumed GOP presidential nominee Mitt Romney, who also is courting Hispanic voters, has been vaguer. Romney does support providing a path to citizenship for immigrants who served in the military.

The new policy leaves U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services — an agency of the Homeland Security Department — scrambling to develop guidelines for implementing the broad goals Obama outlined. Officials must determine what sort of documentation will be required to prove, for instance, when an immigrant entered the country and also how aggressively the agency will verify those documents.

The agency also must decide if it will keep applications confidential or whether, in some cases, it will turn them over to U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement.

A spokeswoman at the agency did not respond to a request for comment.

"It's just a very short planning period to put the capabilities into place and to get the information out and to get people to understand what's going to be required," said Doris Meissner, a senior fellow at the Immigration Policy Center. She served in the 1990s as a commissioner of what was then called the Immigration and Naturalization Service. "There will be all kinds of misinformation, and there will be people who are trying to exploit this."

Meissner's advice for immigrants who are considering applying?

"Sit tight and wait," she said.

Propeack and other advocates said immigrants should start to collect paperwork, such as high school diplomas, to document the requirements that will likely be needed. But, she said, people should be wary about hiring anyone at this point who promises to help them apply.

Last year, a federal court closed a Baltimore business that was well-known in the city's Hispanic community, after the Federal Trade Commission accused its owners of providing shoddy immigration legal services to hundreds of Latinos for services they were not authorized to perform, such as filing documents required for U.S. residency.

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