

Connecticut to issue driver's licenses to young people under 'deferred action' immigration program

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NEW HAVEN — The state will issue driver's licenses to young people who qualify for a new "deferred action" immigration enforcement program that President Barack Obama announced in August.

The news came at a rally Sunday attended by hundreds of people, many of them immigrants from several countries, and was announced by the co-chairman of a regional clergy group.

But the group, Congregations Organized for a New Connecticut, will continue to pursue changes in the law and try to convince the state to ultimately grant access to a driver's license to all residents, regardless of immigration status, the Rev. James Manship told over 400 people gathered at St. Rose of Lima Church in the Fair Haven section.

Michael Lawlor, undersecretary of criminal justice for Gov. Dannel P. Malloy, later confirmed the move and said the process to determine how it will work is under way.

"It doesn't require an executive order, but it's something that the DMV (Department of Motor Vehicles) can do on its own as a matter of policy," Lawlor said.

"If someone comes in with the new federal document, they will receive an 'unverified' license" that will be legal for driving but will not be "real ID compliant" under federal law and may not be sufficient ID for federal purposes, such as boarding an airplane, Lawlor said.

The new Connecticut policy is consistent with federal law, he said.

"We're excited to announce an initial victory today," Manship, St. Rose's pastor, told the crowd that filled the church hall, including hundreds of parishioners, many of them immigrants.

"Gov. Malloy's administration will put in place a policy that will give access to a Connecticut driver's license to the undocumented youth and young adults who have received deferred action status from the federal government.

"But CONECT will not stop there. We will not leave the thousands of these young people's parents and families and our neighbors behind," Manship said, flanked by Auxiliary Bishop Emeritus the Most Rev. Peter A. Rosazza, three state senators and clergy from as far as Norwalk.

"So CONECT announces today the Safe Driving Campaign," Manship said. "Together with our

legislative allies, we will pursue changes in the law, and our solution is this: to grant ... to all residents of the state, regardless of immigration status, an opportunity to obtain a state of Connecticut driver's license, to register their cars and to properly insure them."

Manship estimated that while the change he announced applies to perhaps 2,000 people, there are likely at least 54,000 undocumented immigrants who would benefit from a broader change.

Those covered by the change Manship announced are people who would be eligible under U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services' deferred action program for childhood arrivals.

Deferred action, which Obama announced in August, "is a discretionary determination to defer removal action of an individual as an act of prosecutorial discretion," according to the White House website.

"Under this process, USCIS will consider requests on a case-by-case basis. While this process does not provide lawful status or a pathway to permanent residence or citizenship, individuals whose cases are deferred will not be removed from the United States for a two year period, subject to renewal, and may also receive employment authorization."

To be eligible for deferred action, residents must have come to the U.S. before their 16th birthday, continuously lived in the U.S. since June 15, 2007, be under age 31 as of June 15, 2012, entered the U.S. without inspection or have had their lawful immigration status expire as of June 15, 2012.

They also must be in school, have obtained their G.E.D. or be an honorably discharged veteran and have not been convicted of a felony or significant misdemeanor, or three or more misdemeanors, "and do not otherwise pose a threat," the website says.

Manship was one of several speakers to suggest that allowing undocumented immigrants to obtain driver's licenses and register and insure their vehicles would be good for the state economy.

"It benefits all of us, immigrant and non-immigrants alike," said the Rev. David Blanchfield, pastor of what he described as the overwhelmingly white and non-immigrant congregation of St. Jerome Church in Norwalk.

In New Mexico, which has a similar law, there's been a 23 percent drop in fatal accidents since the law was enacted, and the percentage of uninsured motorists fell from 32 percent to 9 percent, Blanchfield said.

He estimated that the state revenue from issuing Connecticut driver's licenses to undocumented immigrants would be about \$2 million, plus more people would buy insurance and register vehicles, with the latter providing additional tax revenue for communities.

The rally was peppered with individual stories.

A young East Haven woman, Gateway Community College student and U.S. citizen, who was identified only by her first name, Mayra, drew perhaps the most attention when she told the crowd how her mother, an undocumented immigrant from Mexico, has, like many mothers, long been "the taxi driver of

the family.”

But she was stopped last summer on her way to visit family, and because she doesn't have a license, was held all night, along with Mayra's younger brother and sister.

“Now she has a court date and we don't know what will happen,” Mayra said, adding that she's worried that her mother might be deported. If that happens, her mother wants her children to remain in the U.S. without her.

Undocumented immigrants need to be able to obtain driver's licenses “so that families don't get ripped apart,” Mayra said.

Mayor John DeStefano Jr. joined Manship, along with clergy members from New Haven and Fairfield counties and three state senators: Senate Majority Leader Sen. Martin Looney, D-New Haven, Insurance Committee Co-chairman Sen. Joseph Crisco, D-Woodbridge, and Transportation Committee Co-chairman Sen. Andrew Maynard, D-Stonington.

“I'm here because I believe in America ... as a place where you work hard, accept responsibility for yourself ... and for other people,” said DeStefano.

He told the crowd that “leadership does not come from Washington or Hartford,” but from people. He asked if they were ready to lead, and received a resounding “yes.”

Looney said the legislation that would make driver's licenses available to undocumented immigrants will be introduced soon after the start of the 2013 legislative session, which begins Wednesday.

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