

About 15,000 young immigrants in Florida apply to avoid deportation

Uncertainty of political campaign may have slowed applications

By Eloísa Ruano González, Orlando Sentinel

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About 15,000 young illegal immigrants in Florida have stepped out of the shadows to apply for protection against deportation since federal officials started accepting applications in August.

That's just 15 percent of the 100,000 Floridians the Migration Policy Institute estimated could benefit from the program, which helps people brought into the U.S. illegally as children.

The relatively low application rate so far is probably because of uncertainty created by presidential politics, said Camila Pachon Silva, an immigration attorney with the Orange County Bar Association's Legal Aid Society, which has helped more than 60 people fill out their applications.

"A lot of people were afraid of coming forward," she said.

Some immigrants were concerned that President Barack Obama would lose to Mitt Romney. The Republican nominee said he would not deport those who were approved for the program, but campaign officials said he would not grant more approvals.

Obama initiated the program after Congress did not pass the federal DREAM Act, a path for permanent-resident status for illegal immigrants who came to the U.S. as children. The program, which has no application deadline, blocks deportation of illegal immigrants 30 and younger who pose no security threat.

Nationwide, 309,000 have applied — fewer than 25 percent of the 1.26 million people the Migration Policy Institute thinks are eligible. So far, 53,000 applications have been approved, but U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services could not provide state-by-state numbers.

Gloria Sotelo didn't wait until the election to apply. She mailed her application Oct. 10.

"I still have the mail receipt," the 20-year-old Apopka woman said. "It was scary because you don't know what's going to happen. But you hope for the best."

Sotelo, a native of Mexico, was a year old when her parents brought her into the U.S. illegally. She paid little attention to her immigration status until high school, when friends started focusing on SATs and applying to colleges.

College wasn't an option because she couldn't afford it, Sotelo said. Because of her immigration status, she doesn't qualify for financial aid and isn't able work legally.

"I felt left behind," she said. "I'm here, still in the same spot as high school."

Sotelo, who assists others with deportation-relief applications as a volunteer at Apopka's Hope CommUnity Center, said she hopes immigration officials will make a decision about her application within the next few months. If it's approved, she said, she will find a job and enroll in college, finally catching up to her friends.

It can take several months for immigration officials to process applications, Pachon Silva said. In addition to a long wait, applicants face a \$465 filing fee.

Another obstacle is the long list of documents immigration officials require, said Elizabeth Garcia, who's waiting for a response after submitting her application in October. She mailed her application with a translated birth certificate, photo-identification card, school transcripts and other documents to prove she's eligible.

"Thankfully, my mother kept everything," the 23-year-old Apopka woman said.

Applicants must have entered the U.S. before turning 16, lived in the country for at least the past five years and have no serious criminal record, according to Citizenship and Immigration Services. They also must be enrolled in school or have graduated from high school, obtained a high-school-equivalency diploma or served in the military.

Although it protects immigrants from deportation for two years and allows renewal, the program does not give them full legal residency. It does, however, give them permission to work in the U.S. lawfully.

Pachon Silva said it's a good opportunity for thousands of young illegal immigrants who are waiting for Congress to pass immigration reform. It allows them to "show they're part of this community they've been contributing to."

http://articles.orlandosentinel.com/2012-12-04/news/os-immigration-deportation-relief-applications-20121201_1_young-immigrants-illegal-immigrants-immigration-status