

For some, GED key to avoiding deportation

by **Daniel González** - Aug. 11, 2012 11:01 PM
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President Barack Obama's plan to allow young undocumented immigrants to stay and work in the U.S. temporarily is expected to draw a massive response when it takes effect Wednesday.

But hundreds of thousands of otherwise eligible participants nationwide won't be able to apply because they lack high-school diplomas.

As a result, undocumented immigrants in Arizona and other states are rushing to get equivalency diplomas, or GEDs, to avoid missing out on an opportunity to climb out from under years of living in fear of deportation.

"Oh my God. It's going to drastically change my life. It's going to be a better future for us," said Phoenix resident Griselda Yazmin Lopez, 22.

An undocumented immigrant from Mexico, she dropped out of high school after she had the first of her two U.S.-born children. Last week, she began taking steps to get her GED.

For many, however, getting a GED won't be easy. The five-part, seven-hour test is difficult, and preparing to successfully pass the exam can take months. And in Arizona, illegal immigrants are barred under state law from taking GED preparation classes offered free of charge to all other students through the state's adult-education program.

That has left them scrambling for other options to prepare for the GED, including paying for online classes and checking out books at the public library to study for the test on their own.

"That's a problem because a lot of students who dropped out of high school are realizing how important a high-school diploma is," said Carmen Cornejo of the Arizona Dream Act Coalition, a group advising immigrants on how to apply for the "deferred action" plan.

Cornejo said she has received dozens of calls from immigrants who want to apply for deferred action but don't have high-school diplomas.

"I tell them you need to go to the public library to get study-books yourself. You need to look for ways to take the test and pass. I tell them to be proactive," Cornejo said.

The same scenario is playing out in other states, said Margie McHugh, co-director of the Migration Policy Institute's National Center on Immigrant Integration Policy. The institute is a nonpartisan research center in Washington, D.C.

Many states in recent years have slashed GED preparation programs to help close budget deficits, she said. That has limited the options of young undocumented immigrants seeking help to pass the test, she said.

Nearly 28 percent of the estimated 1.26 million undocumented immigrants now eligible to request deferred action don't have a high-school diploma or are not enrolled in school, according to the Migration Policy Institute.

Gabriela Diaz, 23, is an undocumented immigrant from Mexico who lacks a high-school diploma. Diaz, who said her parents brought her illegally to the U.S. when she was 3 months old, left high school three credits shy of graduating. She said the deferred-action program has given her the incentive to get her GED because she doesn't want to be deported.

"I have to do it as soon as possible," said Diaz, who lives in northwest Phoenix with her fiance, Samuel Johnson, a U.S. citizen, and their son, Jaden, 11/2.

Thousands would benefit

The large percentage of undocumented immigrants without high-school diplomas contrasts with the common portrayal of so-called "dreamers" -- young immigrants brought to the U.S. illegally as minors who became high-school valedictorians and high-achieving college graduates.

They are named after the Dream Act, a bill that would allow young undocumented immigrants to work toward citizenship by attending college or serving in the military. The bill has failed to pass Congress, which prompted Obama in June to administratively order the deferred-action policy as a stopgap measure. Critics have called the program a "backdoor amnesty."

The program will essentially allow undocumented immigrants to request deferred action from being deported for two years. If approved, they will be given the chance to apply for work permits, but they still won't have any legal status in the U.S.

On Wednesday, U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services, the federal agency responsible for administering immigration benefits, will begin accepting requests for deferred action. The cost to file a request is \$465.

To be eligible, applicants must be younger than 31 and have entered the U.S. before they were 16. They also must have lived in the U.S. continuously for five years and must not pose a public-safety or national-security threat. They cannot have a felony or significant misdemeanor record or more than two misdemeanor convictions.

In addition, they must be currently enrolled in school or have graduated from high school or have earned a GED.

Last week, Department of Homeland Security officials also announced they would accept requests for deferred action from undocumented immigrants enrolled in GED programs, but they did not specify the type of program.

Based on U.S census data, the Migration Policy Institute estimates there are 1.76 million undocumented immigrants who could benefit from the program. Close to three-fourths are between the ages of 15 and 30 who could apply right away, and the rest are between the ages of 5 and 14 who would be eligible to apply in the future.

In Arizona, there are 80,000 undocumented immigrants who could benefit, the sixth-highest number of any state.

Since the program was announced on June 15, immigration lawyers have been swamped with calls from undocumented immigrants interested in applying, said Regina Jefferies, who chairs the Arizona chapter of the American Immigration Lawyers Association.

"There is huge interest," Jefferies said.

A significant number of eligible immigrants, 350,000 nationally, don't have high-school diplomas or are not enrolled in school, according to the institute.

There are many reasons so many undocumented immigrants who might otherwise qualify for deferred action don't have high-school diplomas, said McHugh of the Migration Policy Institute.

Among the reasons are the difficulty they had catching up after attending schools in other countries and lacking the English skills to succeed academically in American schools.

"And, undoubtedly for some portion of these young people, the fact that they didn't have legal status probably was part of the reason they left high school and went to work because they didn't see that getting a high-school diploma was going to improve their prospects in the labor market," McHugh said.

Three credits short

That is one of the reasons Phoenix resident Jesus Castillo says he never finished high school.

"You don't see a future, you are not really encouraged to stay in school," said Castillo, 29, who is originally from Mexico City.

Castillo said he was 8 when his mother decided to leave Mexico to get away from his abusive father. He said they crossed the border illegally.

"It's a little blurry, but we came through Nogales," said Castillo, who wears glasses and has a buzz cut. "What I remember is a gate and a fence. We slipped right through it."

Castillo's brother was waiting for them on the Arizona side and drove them to Phoenix, where the brother already lived, Castillo said.

After attending Madison Heights Elementary School, Sunnyslope Elementary School and Royal Palm Middle School, Castillo went to Sunnyslope High School for three years. He said he transferred to Christown Academy his senior year but left three credits short of graduating.

Castillo, who now works painting houses, said he is trying to get his GED so he can apply for deferred action. He started out by going to Rio Salado College to enroll in a GED class but hit a brick wall because he is not a legal resident.

Rio Salado College administers GED classes for the entire Maricopa County Community College District, said Blair Liddicoat, associate dean for community development and adult basic education.

He said GED classes are extremely popular. The classes are offered at 18 locations throughout the county. About 4,500 students took GED classes during the last fiscal year, which ended on June 30, he said. About 2,200 other people are on a waiting list to enroll, which means students sometimes wait as long as two years to get in.

In 2006, voters passed Proposition 300, a law aimed at barring undocumented immigrants from taking adult basic-education courses. Three years ago, the state Legislature cut the entire \$4.5 million funding for the adult basic-education program, said Tom Gariepy, a spokesman for the Maricopa County Community College District.

The adult-education program is now run solely with federal grants.

But undocumented immigrants still can't enroll because in 2009 the Legislature passed House Bill 2008 blocking them from enrolling even in federally funded programs.

Proof of legal residency, however, is not required to take the GED test itself, according to state Education Department officials.

Castillo said a Rio Salado College representative suggested he enroll in an online GED class.

Students do not have to be legal residents to take the online GED class, but the 14-week program costs \$90, plus textbooks, said Delynn Bodine, a Rio Salado College spokeswoman. About 300 students took the online GED class last year, she said.

Castillo said he also went to a bookstore near Metro Center in north Phoenix and bought a massive GED study guide for \$32.

Some non-profit social-service agencies such as Phoenix based-Chicanos Por La Causa also offer GED study classes.

But the classes are full and the waiting list is growing, said Maria Jesus Cervantes, a spokeswoman.

"We have seen an increase in interest," she said. "It was very apparent after the deferred-action announcement."

Griselda Yazmin Lopez, the Phoenix resident who left high school after she had a baby, also has been busy preparing to get her GED so that she can apply for deferred action.

An aunt and uncle who are U.S. citizens sneaked her into the country when she was 2 by passing her off as one of their own children at a border crossing in El Paso, Lopez said.

Lopez said she tried staying in school after her daughter, Yahaira, 4, was born, but school became overwhelming when she delivered a still-born son two years later. She now also has an 18-month-old son, Armando.

On Tuesday, Lopez walked to John F. Kennedy Elementary School to request a copy of her student records, which she needs to sign up for an online GED class. The school is across the street from her home in south Phoenix. Lopez attended the school from kindergarten through third grade.

The school's receptionist told Lopez she would have to go to the Roosevelt School District's student-services office on Seventh Street.

There, Lopez received copies of her student records from both Kennedy and Greenfield Middle School, which she attended through eighth grade.

Margaret Castillo, the student-services receptionist, said 150 people had come to the office in two days to request records to apply for deferred action.

The next day, Lopez went to the Ocotillo Library on Southern Avenue to check out a GED study book. All of the GED books were checked out so Lopez put one on reserve.

A librarian told Lopez about a free 15-week class offered at the Burton Barr Central Library to prepare for the GED test. She planned to sign up this week. But the class turned out to be offered by Rio Salado College, which means students must provide documents that prove they are legal residents.

When asked why she wants to apply for deferred action, Lopez started to cry.

Two years ago, her husband was deported and she is scared the same could happen to her.

"It's like my biggest fear, getting deported. If I get deported, what would I do with my kids?" she said.

Lopez lives with her undocumented parents. She also hopes receiving deferred action would allow her to get a work permit to support her children, she said.

"I want a good job," she said. "I'm doing it for my kids."

Read more: <http://www.azcentral.com/news/articles/20120811obama-immigration-ged-policy.html#ixzz23RaBawxf>