

Houston Immigrants Apply for Deferred Action Program

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By James Pinkerton

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Carina Quevedo was six months old when an uncle brought her across the Rio Grande near Brownsville.

Now, after spending two decades in Houston living as an undocumented immigrant, the 21-year-old freshman at the University of Houston-Downtown sees a world of possibilities. She is one of thousands of young immigrants who arrived in the U.S. as children and on Wednesday began applying for relief from potential deportation under an Obama Administration executive order.

"Oh man, it's great because I don't feel scared - I don't have to lie anymore," said Quevedo, adding her father didn't allow her to travel as much as two sisters and a brother born in Houston. "I couldn't go anywhere at all because he was afraid I'd get caught."

Houston immigration attorneys and immigrant groups reported strong interest in the deportation suspension program, open to undocumented immigrants 30 or younger who came to the United States before they turned 16.

"I really think this is the first step in the Dream Act being approved and some amnesty, or comprehensive immigrations reform that will include a workers programs and something that will legalize everybody," said Raed Gonzalez, an immigration attorney representing Quevedo. Other law firms report signing up dozens of clients on Wednesday, the first day for applying for the Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals.

"There's been tremendous interest in this," said immigration attorney Gordon Quan, who said his firm represents more than 50 families. "Parents are crying because they felt so hopeless for their children. They felt guilty they brought them here and they couldn't do anything. "Now the children have hope, because they have a future."

Charles Foster, a veteran Houston immigration attorney who partners with Quan at FosterQuan LLP, said there could be 30,000 to 40,000 young people in the greater Houston area who may qualify for the program.

"Houston is a very open, inclusive, international city," said Foster. "First and foremost what it means is here are people who have been part of our community - they've gone to our schools, graduated, have lived here for many decades - and now we can include them. They can sleep at night and not be afraid of being put into deportation proceeds. They can work legally."

Earlier in the week, lines formed outside the Houston consulates of Mexico, El Salvador and Guatemala as thousands of residents applied for passports and other documents in anticipation for the application process to begin. However, local attorneys and Mexican consular officials said the immigrants are not required to have a passport to apply for the deferred deportation program.

"We had a very good turnout here and at the main office," said Timothy Marsh, manager of Hillcroft avenue office of Manuel Solis, where he said they saw 50 percent more clients Wednesday than usual.

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