

Illegal Immigrants Flock to Youth Program

Tens of thousands of young illegal immigrants across the country applied to a program that could allow them to remain in the country and work legally.

By Miriam Jordan, Ben Kesling

Armed with foreign birth certificates, school records and proof they have grown up in the U.S., tens of thousands of young illegal immigrants across the country applied Wednesday to a program that could allow them to remain in the country and work legally.

In Chicago, more than 10,000 people thronged Navy Pier to take part in an application workshop held by the Illinois Coalition for Immigrant and Refugee Rights. In Los Angeles, lines began forming at 5 a.m. outside the offices of another organization where more than 100 volunteers, including attorneys, were on hand to help applicants fill out forms.

“I’m ready for my life to change,” said Luis Garcia, 27 years old, of Mexico, who had been standing more than two hours in a line that wrapped around the block of the Coalition for Humane Immigrant Rights of Los Angeles.

Crescencio Calderon, the 21-year-old son of a gardener arrived at sunrise. “So many opportunities are going to open up now,” said the Mexican college student, who boasts a 3.95 grade point average and hopes to study law.

Nearly two million immigrants could benefit from the Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals program, which began accepting applications Wednesday. The program, announced by President Barack Obama on June 15, is the biggest development in immigration policy since 1986, when President Ronald Reagan convinced Congress to pass an amnesty that benefited three million undocumented immigrants. Beneficiaries of DACA will get a Social Security number. However, they won’t get a green card—permanent legal residency that would put them on the path to U.S. citizenship. DACA participants have to reapply every two years.

Some critics of illegal immigration say the program is tantamount to amnesty and will mean more competition for scarce jobs. Others say the president is pandering to Latino voters in an election year.

To qualify, immigrants must show they arrived in the U.S. before they turned 16, are 30 or younger and have lived continuously in the country for at least five years. They also must be enrolled in school in the U.S., have graduated from high school here or served in the U.S. military. The application fee is \$465.

Immigrants have been scrambling to secure the documents they require. The consulates of Mexico and some Central American countries saw demand surge for passports and other identification. Los Angeles Unified School District’s student-records office was barraged with requests for transcripts.

On Wednesday, vendors selling fruit and hot dogs did brisk business outside CHIRLA's offices where applicants waited. Inside, the organization offered complete service, from computers to photo booths and fingerprinting. Volunteer Alma Maldonado said the organization had scheduled 600 appointments for application assistance but hundreds more people had shown up.

In Chicago, thousands packed a ballroom lined with computers, where applicants could download forms from the website of U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services, the federal agency overseeing the effort.

It is likely to take several months to process each application, which will be reviewed by adjudicators at four agency centers that have added staff to handle the program.

"People want to come forward," said Lawrence Benito, head of the Illinois immigrant coalition, which organized the Chicago workshop.

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