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Immigrants hoping to qualify for Obama program urged to gather data

Activists advise possible participants to document their histories in the United States and be wary of unscrupulous consultants who are already trying to exploit the undocumented.

By Paloma Esquivel, Los Angeles Times

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Immigrant rights advocates barely had time to digest the Obama administration's announcement last week that it would stop deporting some young immigrants when the questions started flowing in: Am I the right age? Does an arrest disqualify me? Do my parents qualify?

"We've been celebrating all weekend," Los Angeles Mayor Antonio Villaraigosa said Tuesday. "We've now got to get ready. We've got to prepare the documents."

The mayor joined activists and student organizers at a news conference called to highlight the need for young immigrants to begin documenting their history in the United States.

Doing so, he said, will help them prepare strong applications and avoid pitfalls as the policy is implemented.

It's still unclear exactly how the program, which grants temporary relief from deportation to young immigrants who meet certain qualifications, will be administered. Department of Homeland Security officials have said they will announce details in 60 days.

In the meantime, immigrant advocates said, unscrupulous consultants are already trying to take advantage of those who do not have legal status.

Immigration attorney Jessica Dominguez said her office had received calls from older immigrants who were told, incorrectly, that a law had passed that would protect the parents of undocumented students.

"This is very scary for us as a community," she said. "We need to get the word out. We have to be careful."

Victor Nieblas of the American Immigration Lawyers Assn. said major policy shifts such as the one announced Friday leave plenty of room for fraud.

"Here in L.A., the unauthorized practice of law is big business," he said.

The new policy is supposed to be applied immediately to anyone meeting the qualifications who encounters immigration agents. Others need to be patient until clear guidelines are issued, Nieblas said.

According to the rules announced so far, relief will apply to those who are 30 years old or younger. Qualified applicants must have come to the United States before they turned 16 and stayed continuously for at least the last five years. They also must be enrolled in school, have a high school diploma or equivalent degree or be an honorably discharged veteran.

Those convicted of a felony, a significant misdemeanor or three or more misdemeanors are not eligible. In a list of [frequently asked questions](#) about the program, the Department of Homeland Security said significant misdemeanors include burglary, driving under the influence, possession of drugs and offenses involving violence.

Organizers with the Coalition for Humane Immigrant Rights of Los Angeles said they were planning legal workshops, conference calls and other events to help people collect the information they need and avoid being defrauded.

Dominguez said anyone who might qualify should begin gathering documents to prove he or she meets the educational requirements and has been in the United States for the necessary period. School transcripts, in particular, will be helpful, she said.

She also suggested that anyone convicted of a misdemeanor get a certified copy of the court disposition and take it to an immigration lawyer or reputable community organization for advice.

Mario Castillo, 21, said that soon after he heard about the policy change, he went online in search of information. He found Homeland Security Secretary Janet Napolitano's memo outlining the rules and checked to make sure he met each qualification.

The Occidental College student made a mental list of all the documentation his family had kept over the years. He's always been a good student, and his mother kept report cards, diplomas and transcripts.

"OK, I'm good," he thought. "I can prove that I've been here for a long time."

For others, the process could be more difficult. On Tuesday, the message was clear: Start gathering documents. Be patient. And cautious.

www.latimes.com/news/local/la-me-immigration-paperwork-20120620,0,5696006.story