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Immigration activists gear up for Aug. 15 opening of 2-year work permit process

Federal directive open to young people brought to the U.S. illegally could affect tens of thousands in Illinois

By Antonio Olivo, Chicago Tribune reporter

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In two weeks, somewhere around 1 million people who were brought into the country illegally as children can begin applying for temporary permission to live and work in the U.S. under an Obama administration directive aimed at so-called DREAM Act students.

On Tuesday, immigrant advocates in Chicago began gearing up for the Aug. 15 launch of the application process by announcing a DREAM Relief Day event on the same day at Navy Pier, where attorneys and other volunteers will be available to help those eligible apply for the two-year work permits.

The process, announced in June over heated objections from some lawmakers and others who seek tougher immigration enforcement, is open to people born after June 15, 1981, who were brought into the U.S. before they turned 16 and have lived here continuously for at least five years.

Applicants also must be in school, or show proof that they have graduated high school, have earned a GED diploma or have been honorably discharged from U.S. military duty. People who have been convicted of a felony or a "serious misdemeanor" that resulted in jail time or significant fines are not eligible to apply, according to federal officials.

U.S. Rep. Luis Gutierrez, D-Chicago, said the initiative could help lead to the sweeping federal immigration changes that advocates have sought unsuccessfully for years — including the federal DREAM Act, which would create a pathway to citizenship for many young immigrants.

"This is very significant," Gutierrez said during a news conference held by the Illinois Coalition for Immigrant and Refugee Rights, which also launched an informational website geared toward applicants: <http://www.dreamrelief.org>

In Illinois, an estimated 75,000 people stand to be affected by the new policy, Gutierrez said.

Jose Alejandro Rios, 22, plans to be among those at Navy Pier on Aug. 15. An engineering student at Elgin Community College who was recently accepted into the University of Illinois at Chicago, Rios seeks to become an orthopedic surgeon.

That goal would be more likely with permission to work his way through college.

"This is a step forward in my dream," he said.

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