

New U.S. immigration program can help farmworkers

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TULARE, California (AP) — Much of the attention on a new [U.S.](#) immigration program that started Wednesday has focused on the hundreds of thousands of students who are in the country illegally and now have the chance at work permits and deferred deportation. But just as many young workers, especially farmworkers, could benefit as well.

"The stereotype about the young people who are eligible is that they're college students and academic superstars that speak English perfectly. And that is, of course, not true for all of them," said Ed Kissam, a labor policy researcher.

One may be 23-year-old Juan Carlos Martin, who was smuggled through a U.S. border checkpoint from Mexico in a car at age 13. He had hoped for an education and career, but he started working full time after school after an accident incapacitated his father. In a California animal laboratory, he cleaned and fed dozens of cows.

Martin was surprised to learn that he may be eligible for the new federal program aimed at young illegal immigrants. Agricultural workers like him say a work permit and the benefits that come with it could open doors previously closed, leading to better paying jobs, improved working conditions and benefits and a path to higher education.

"This would change my whole life," Martin said. "I came to this country with the goal of studying and getting ahead. But you really can't do it without a work permit, a [Social Security](#) number and a drivers' license."

The program does not grant legal residency or a path to citizenship.

More than half of the 1 million young illegal immigrants eligible for the program are in the labor force, mostly working in low-wage industries, an analysis by the [Migration Policy Institute](#) shows.

To be eligible, immigrants must prove they arrived in the [United States](#) before they turned 16, were younger than 31 as of June 15, have been living in the country at least five years, are in school or graduated and have not been convicted of certain crimes. The program is also open to individuals who haven't graduated high school, as long as they enroll in an adult education program, vocational training or even English language instruction.

Despite the possibilities, workers and advocates say farmworkers and others who are out of school could face significant hurdles when applying: a lack of information about the program,

limited English skills, little access to legal advice and limited access to adult school to fulfill the program's education requirement.

Two-thirds of farmworkers are foreign-born Mexicans, the majority without legal status, and many are young. More than half are under the age of 31, according to the National Agricultural Workers Survey. Data from the survey shows that at least 54,000 farmworkers could qualify for the program.

Jaime Hernandez, 23, who picks strawberries in California for \$8 per hour, found out about the program from a friend and is hoping to apply.

Hernandez, who crossed the Arizona desert with his parents at age 11, dropped out of high school to work in the fields and help his family. If he is granted a work permit, he plans to get a better-paying job and go back to school to become a lawyer or a radio engineer.

"I'm afraid, I don't have the money to pay for a lawyer, and I don't know if I am guaranteed acceptance or if I will be rejected," Hernandez said. "But still, it's worth it ... I'm not giving up."

For eligible workers who have never filled out an application and speak little English, applying is intimidating, said UFW Foundation's Richard Gorman. "Our hope is that once they have papers, once you take away the fear of deportation, that will encourage workers to stand up for themselves and for others in their own workplaces, to form a union or complain to their boss when there is a problem."

Some farmers are worried the program could cut into their workforce. One group of growers, the Nisei Farmers League, is discouraging farmworkers from applying, worried workers or their families could be deported once their addresses are given to the federal government.

Another worry: Because the application for work authorization asks for all previously used Social Security identification numbers, the information could lead the government to track down agricultural employers who hired the illegal workers and subject them to audits or sanctions, said the league's president, Manuel Cunha.

"There is no safe haven at the end of the day," Cunha said.

Federal immigration officials have said they won't use information from the applications for immigration enforcement against workers. Officials declined to comment on whether information provided by applicants would be used to prosecute or audit employers.

<http://www.usatoday.com/news/washington/story/2012-08-25/immigration-farmworkers/57310808/1>