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Quick Start to Program Offering Immigrants a Reprieve

By [JULIA PRESTON](#)

One month after the Obama administration started a program to suspend deportations of young illegal immigrants, more than 72,000 of them have applied for the temporary reprieve, senior [immigration](#) officials said on Tuesday, and this week the first approvals have been granted.

The figures for applications received so far — the first results the administration has released since a federal agency began receiving the documents on Aug. 15 — show that large numbers of young immigrants are ready to take the risk of coming forward, administration officials and immigrant advocates said, and that the agency in charge has been able to manage the rush of paperwork.

The immigrants requesting two-year deportation deferrals do not reach the high estimates of 250,000 that officials had said they were prepared to handle in the first month of the program, which is [President Obama](#)'s most significant immigration initiative.

But at the current rate, at least 200,000 young immigrants could have applications in the pipeline by the time of the presidential election on Nov. 6, and many thousands will probably have received deferrals and the work permits that go along with them. Officials originally predicted that it could take several months for the immigration agency, [United States Citizenship and Immigration Services](#), to issue the first deferrals.

The intense activity around the program in immigrant communities, especially among Latinos, has already yielded some political benefits to Mr. Obama, with Democrats repeatedly highlighting the initiative during their convention last week, to cheers from the floor. Initiated by an executive action, the program grants deportation deferrals that must be renewed after two years, and it does not provide any legal immigration status.

Pressure is increasing on Mitt Romney, the Republican candidate, to clarify his position on the program. He has not said whether he would continue it if he is elected, although he has said he would prefer “a more permanent solution” for young illegal immigrants.

The surge of applicants has not been greater, lawyers and advocates said, because of difficulties many young immigrants have encountered in gathering the documents they need to meet the program's requirements and in mustering the \$465 application fee, a hefty sum for many. Since the program has no filing deadline, eligible young people are taking time to consult with their families, weighing the benefits for them against possible risks for parents and siblings here illegally who are not eligible.

“There has been huge interest in community programs where people can get information,” said Laura Lichter, president of the [American Immigration Lawyers Association](#), who practices in Denver. “But these applications are not something you would be ready to go with in one day. They take a fair amount of work. And we have to be sure people understand the risks they are taking.”

To qualify, illegal immigrants must be under 31 years old and have come to the United States before they were 16. They must show that they have lived here continuously since June 15, 2007, and be currently in school or have earned a high school diploma or have been honorably discharged from the military. They must pass a background check to show they do not have any significant criminal record or pose a threat to national security.

The program posed a test for the immigration agency, known as U.S.C.I.S., which has not been known for brisk efficiency. According to the [Migration Policy Institute](#), a nonpartisan research group, as many as 1.2 million illegal immigrants could be immediately eligible for the program.

Given only two months to prepare, Alejandro Mayorkas, the director of the agency, worked to rally its 18,000 employees, including some 11,000 federal workers, to rise to the task. The applications — sheaves of school transcripts, utility and other bills, rental contracts or other documents immigrants can find to track their daily lives over the past five years — have to be submitted by mail.

Operating in the bureaucratic equivalent of a blitz, the agency has been issuing receipts for applications within 48 hours after they were logged in, Mr. Mayorkas said. Fingerprints and photographs are taken for background checks, generally within three weeks after an application is received.

The first applicants gave their fingerprints last Thursday, Mr. Mayorkas said, and the checks were completed by Monday. The agency is equipped to perform the criminal checks, Department of Homeland Security officials said, because those are required for most visas the agency routinely issues.

Completed applications first reached the decision-making officers on Monday. By that afternoon the first few approvals were issued, Mr. Mayorkas said, with several dozen more on Tuesday. Some immigrants were notified immediately by text message.

“If somebody submits documents that show by the preponderance of the evidence that they meet the guidelines, we are poised to move the cases as quickly as possible,” Mr. Mayorkas said.

Mr. Mayorkas said he expected the first work permits, which are approved in a separate but parallel process, to be issued in coming weeks.

Administration officials have said the program will be paid for by fees, with no taxpayer money invested. California is leading in applications, not surprisingly, followed by Texas, New York, Florida and New Jersey. By far the largest number of applicants was born in Mexico. But

officials said a surprisingly large number of applications came from South Koreans, a much smaller population of immigrants.

As the deferral program expands, resistance to it has grown among Republicans in Congress, who say it is undermining the administration's broader enforcement against illegal immigration and making it difficult for immigration agents to do their jobs.

In a letter on Tuesday to John Morton, the director of the agency in charge of enforcement, Senator Jeff Sessions, a Republican from Alabama, wrote, "There is no question that the administration's unilaterally decreed policy is contrary to codified federal law and places our law enforcement officers in an untenable position."

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