

Temporary visa opens up world for young immigrant

Jens Manuel Krogstad, USA TODAY 7:22 a.m. EDT September 24, 2013

MARSHALLTOWN, Iowa -- Eren Sanchez said since receiving a [temporary work visa](#) in July she feels like Dorothy in the movie "The Wizard of Oz."

She's seeing the world in color for the first time.

Sanchez, 24, is among the more than 565,000 young immigrants in the U.S. who have received two-year visas in the past year. The permits are offered under a year-old federal program for people ages 15 to 30 who have grown up in the U.S., but arrived illegally in the country as children.

Under the Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals policy put in place in August 2012 by the Obama administration, about 950,000 immigrants nationwide were eligible for the visas, according to an estimate from the Immigration Policy Center in Washington, D.C.

Sanchez, who graduated from Marshalltown High School in 2007, is reaching her young adult milestones all at once: First credit card, learning to drive and studying for the ACT college-entrance exam, to name a few.

"I'm doing stuff my friends did years ago," Sanchez said.

The policy requires a person to be in school, or to have graduated from high school or earned a GED certificate. Military veterans are also eligible. People are not eligible if they've been convicted of a serious crime or at least three misdemeanors. Serious crimes include those that involve violence, driving while drunk or drugs.

Immigration advocates caution that the visas are not a permanent solution because the program is offered at the discretion of the president. There's no guarantee the program will continue under future administrations.

It's one reason why Congress needs to pass immigration reform — sooner rather than later — that offers a path to citizenship for most of the nearly 12 million immigrants living in the country without authorization, said Ann Naffier, a Des Moines immigration attorney.

"As great as the program is — and it is a really great program — it is temporary and it is unstable," said Naffier, who has helped process visa applications around the state. "These are people wanting to build their lives and they want to know what their future looks like, and right now they have no idea."

An immigration reform bill passed by the Senate in June remains stalled in the House, despite a coordinated push by reform advocates nationwide. House Republican leaders this week told Latino groups they still hope to pass a bill this year.

The Senate bill provides a path to citizenship for those living in the U.S. without authorization. It would also direct \$38 billion to double the size of the Border Patrol and expand technology to monitor the 2,000-mile border with Mexico.

As the bill winds through Congress, Iowa immigrants don't face the hurdles of some in other states as they forge a new life. Arizona has barred visa recipients from getting driver's licenses and paying discounted in-state tuition at the state's three universities.

Iowa officials in January reversed a month-old decision to ban visa recipients from receiving driver's licenses. Iowans with the permits, though, will have to wait for discounted tuition. A bill to allow them to pay the same rate as other Iowans didn't advance out of a state Senate committee.

Iowa's public universities don't require Social Security numbers or proof of citizenship on applications, so officials said it's difficult to determine which students may be undocumented. Those who are identified, however, pay more than twice as much in tuition as other Iowa students.

Immigrants like Sanchez who hope to go to college will either need to find private scholarships or take out student loans because they aren't eligible for government student financial aid.

"We're just bleeding the potential of these really talented young people," said Joa LaVille, an immigrant advocate in Marshalltown. "They're homegrown. It's what we're looking for."

Ed Rodriguez, 24, of Orange City said he was fortunate to receive scholarships from community members to attend Northwestern College in Orange City.

To win support from donors, though, he said he had to "come out" as an undocumented immigrant.

"At the time, the only option I saw was to go out there and open myself up," said Rodriguez, who now helps local Latino youth through the nonprofit Justice For All in Rock Valley. "Looking back, it's kind of crazy."

Sanchez, the visa-holder from Marshalltown, said she plans to apply only to Iowa schools: Iowa State University, University of Iowa, Drake University and Grinnell College.

"I'm an Iowa girl," Sanchez said.

First, however, Sanchez has some dreams to fulfill. Her 8-year-old brother, a U.S. citizen, was thrilled when he learned she'd have a driver's license. Her brother hasn't traveled much outside of Marshalltown and Sanchez would be the first in her family to have a license, she said.

On the boy's wish list for his birthday this month: a trip to Chuck E. Cheese in West Des Moines. He'd also like to visit the Blank Park Zoo in Des Moines and Adventureland Park in Altoona.

"We're going to have a good time," Sanchez said.

About the visas

The Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals program was created by President Barack Obama in June 2012. The government began accepting applications in August of that year.

About 3,150 immigrants in Iowa — and 950,000 immigrants nationwide — were eligible, according to an estimate from the Immigration Policy Center in Washington, D.C. To date, about 2,000 people in Iowa and 565,000 nationwide have been granted the two-year visas.

To be eligible, immigrants must prove they arrived in the U.S. before they turned 16, are 30 or younger, have been living in the country at least five years and are in school or graduated or served in the military. People are not eligible if they've been convicted of a serious crime or at least three misdemeanors. Serious crimes include those that involve violence, driving while drunk or drugs.

Applicants must pay a \$465 fee and provide proof of identity and eligibility.

The visas are offered at the discretion of the president. Future administrations could discontinue the program.

<http://www.usatoday.com/story/news/nation/2013/09/24/temporary-visa-opportunities-young-immigrant/2859321/>