

# Walking the Path to Citizenship

By [Rebecca Kaplan](#)

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In the Capitol, Congress has been debating immigration reform. Across the United States, 11 million people ponder a pathway to citizenship. (Chet Susslin)

It has been 13 years since Carlos Crespo crossed the border from Mexico into the United States in the desert near Nogales, Ariz. The "coyote" he paid \$1,000 to help him cross later went to prison. Crespo went to Baltimore.

And there, he built a life that would look familiar almost anywhere in the U.S. He met and married Christina, who is also from Mexico. They had a daughter, Veronica. At 43, Crespo spends his days working at an auto body shop, where he has held a job for the last 11 years, and volunteering at Casa de Maryland, an advocacy group that helps immigrants.

And he watches the immigration debate taking place 39 miles away in the U.S. Capitol, which will largely determine his family's future.

"I have faith that we are going to pass immigration reform," he said in Spanish, speaking in Casa de Maryland's Baltimore office. "There is a lot of pressure now ... we don't want to sleep. We want to keep fighting, keep pushing the Republicans because we know it is their decision. They'll do what they want, but we are sending the message that if they don't pass immigration reform, those who can vote won't vote for them."

As the year goes on, the prospects of Congress passing an immigration bill that includes a pathway to citizenship have grown dimmer. The Senate backed a bill in late June that outlines a roughly 13-year process. That's likely to be even more arduous in the House—if the House approves anything at all. (So far, committees have passed five immigration bills, but none deals with a path to citizenship.)

While Congress addresses many vital issues—from food stamps to declarations of war—few have the type of direct impact that a pathway to citizenship would have on the 11 million people living illegally in the United States. For them, the ability to become U.S. citizens could change everything, from whether they can drive legally and buy a home to where they can work and whether their children can afford college.

There's also the fear of deportation, which, however low the chances, is a major issue for Crespo. His daughter, now 3, has Down syndrome, and Crespo is worried about having to leave the U.S. because he says the level of health care in Mexico is not as good. Here, his daughter was able to get insurance, but their doctor at Johns Hopkins told Crespo that her life depends on the treatment she is receiving.

However, an opportunity for citizenship would affect Crespo in many ways. He would like to buy a house. He would like to stay active in U.S. politics. He's been volunteering with Casa de Maryland for eight years, helping to do outreach in his community, and he loves that he can go to Annapolis and talk directly to the state's lawmakers. In Mexico, he said, you can't do that.

Perhaps most important, Crespo said, he wants the opportunity to demonstrate that he's not here to live off the government. "We want Republicans to give us the opportunity to demonstrate that we want this country, we want to move this country forward, really. We're not a burden," he said. "Many conservatives think that people are living off the government because they don't pay taxes. So this is what we want to demonstrate to them, that we can move the country forward together."

### **No Easy Path**

Any pathway to citizenship passed by Congress will not be easy.

Under the Senate bill, people like Crespo would have to spend 10 years as a registered provisional immigrant and be subject to a host of requirements. If they are continuously employed; speak or are learning English; study U.S. history; pay a processing fee, a fine, and back taxes; and pass a background check, they can apply for a green card—provided the backlog has been cleared. After three years of lawful permanent resident status, people may apply to naturalize as citizens.

Yet Crespo, like many others, says that the even a long, complicated, and expensive pathway to citizenship is worthwhile. He's more comfortable communicating in Spanish, and he doesn't think he could pass an English test right now. But if a reform bill makes it all the way to the president's desk, Crespo said he'll be ready.

That won't be the case for everyone. Even if a law is passed that offers illegal immigrants the chance to gain legal status and citizenship, history shows that many will not take advantage of the opportunity.

A study conducted by the Homeland Security Department found that of the 2.7 million people who were given legal permanent resident status under the 1986 Immigration Reform and Control Act, only 41 percent chose to naturalize by 2009.

Even now, immigrants who are granted legal permanent residency don't always become citizens. According to a study by the Pew Hispanic Center released earlier this year, the number of eligible immigrants from Latin America and the Caribbean who had not yet naturalized by 2011 exceeded those who did seek citizenship. Rates of naturalization are particularly low among Mexican immigrants, the largest population that stands to benefit from legislation that includes a pathway to citizenship.

More than nine in 10 Latino legal permanent residents express a desire to naturalize, but 45 percent have cited personal or administrative barriers to applying, such as insufficient English (26 percent). Nearly all of those who cite administrative barriers (18 percent) say the \$680 cost

of a citizenship application is prohibitive—and undocumented immigrants being offered provisional status would have to pay additional fines before even getting the chance to naturalize.

### **Focused on Family**

While getting to citizenship would be difficult, life without papers might be even harder.

One common theme is family separation. For example, Albertina—or "Tina," as her friends call her (she declined to supply her last name because of her legal status)—came to Baltimore from Mexico nine years ago on a tourist visa and stayed. Three of her daughters were born in her home country, but the fourth was born in the U.S. and is a citizen.

Tina's oldest daughter returned to Mexico to pursue a college education. Maryland voters had not yet approved a 2012 ballot initiative that would grant in-state tuition to undocumented students; without those lower rates, college was out of the question in the United States.

Now, Tina's eldest daughter can't legally come back to the United States because authorities know that she once overstayed a visa. But they hope she'll be able to come back under a reform bill.

For others, work becomes a problem. That is the case for Sonia, 50 (who also declined to supply her last name), a Peruvian woman who lives with her husband and two daughters in Broward County, Fla. In her home country of Peru, Sonia had studied psychology at Universidad Inca Garcilaso de la Vega. Her husband, Dante, had started law school. They came to Florida on tourist visas with their two young daughters in search of a better life. The family spent time and money working with lawyers to legalize their status, but they were unsuccessful.

Sonia was able to validate her credentials, but she couldn't find work. She was especially disappointed that she couldn't take a job she was offered as a psychologist working with children in her native Spanish language. So she and her husband first found jobs cleaning at the local mall. Now, she cleans houses and Dante works the night shift at a gas station. Sonia rides her bike to work; the family made the decision that only her husband should take the risk of driving without a current license.

Sonia's oldest daughter, however, is an example of someone who has been able to prosper when given a legal avenue to do so.

President Obama enacted the Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals program in 2011. It prevents undocumented immigrants between the ages of 15 and 31, who were brought to the country before they turned 16 and who can prove continuous residence since 2007, from being deported.

Sofia, 19, was granted deferred action status, and was able to start taking classes at Broward College, although she's limited to two a semester because she can't afford to take a full load with

the out-of-state tuition rates she must pay. Sonia notes with pride that Sofia also has a full-time job, "not in cleaning, not in construction, not in gardening. She got a job at an orthodontic lab."

## **The Dreamers**

Young undocumented immigrants like Sonia's daughters are the most likely subset of the entire population in the U.S. illegally to be granted some sort of relief. The so-called Dreamers have become one of the rare points of agreement in the immigration debate: Few people believe that those brought to the country as children should be deported (though a Dream Act died in Congress as recently as 2010).

As their ranks have become more visible and vocal, they have started to push lawmakers to address their situation, and to keep their families together, too.

"To me, as a person that considers herself an American, a citizenship is not a paper, it's not a nine-digit number," said Gaby Pacheco, one of the most prominent faces of the Dreamer movement, who came to the U.S. illegally from Ecuador with her family when she was 8. "It means so much more. It means being able to ... pursue my own happiness."

Under the Senate bill, people who can prove they were brought to the U.S. before the age of 16 are granted an accelerated pathway to citizenship: They only have to spend five years in provisional status before being eligible to apply for a green card, followed by citizenship three years later. That could open up opportunities for thousands of young immigrants without papers, just as the deferred-action program has done so for 22-year-old Ray Jose.

Jose's parents brought him from the Philippines to the U.S. when he was 9, in search of more opportunities and a better education. They came on tourist visas but did not leave. Jose grew up like the other kids in Rockville, Md., attending school and playing baseball and lacrosse. It was only when he was a senior in high school, and offered a track scholarship to Virginia Tech, that he learned about his status. When he came home to share the news with his parents, his mother said to him in their native language of Tagalog, "My son, please forgive me," and explained the story of how he had come to the U.S.

With low-paying jobs—his mother is a caretaker for the elderly, and his father works at a printing press—college would be unaffordable for the family, and he wouldn't be able to apply for financial aid. Maryland had not yet passed its own version of the Dream Act that would grant in-state tuition to undocumented youth.

"Everything that I was taught—if you work hard, get your education, you can do what you want. I'm not in that same situation," Jose said. His parents were able to scrape together enough money to pay for one semester at Montgomery College, the local community college, where he finally met other people like him. In the Filipino community, he explained, being undocumented is frowned upon and not widely discussed.

He got involved in pushing the Maryland Dream Act, and works now as an organizer for United We Dream, a group that advocates for young immigrants and their families. He goes to school

part time so he can work to help support his family, and his application for deferred action was granted. But he wants an immigration bill that would put him on a pathway to citizenship so he can have opportunities, like the chance to do cardiology research, much of which is funded by the government and would require him to have legal status or citizenship. Plus, he wants the chance to vote; to have peace of mind that his parents won't be deported; and he wants them to be able to travel to the Philippines to see members of their family from whom they've been separated for 13 years.

"For my family overall, it would mean that we'd actually be Americans on paper, because in our minds and in our hearts ever since we left the Philippines I think we've been pursuing the American Dream," he said. "We've had that problem where we're Americans, but it just doesn't say it on paper."

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