

Young Arizona immigrant gets deferred action

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PHOENIX (AP) — Carlos Martinez has two engineering degrees from the University of Arizona, but he has never been able to use them because he is an illegal immigrant.

But soon, the Tucson resident will be able to work legally after becoming one of the first undocumented immigrants in the country to be approved for a work permit under President Barack Obama's controversial deferred-action program.

Martinez, 30, said he was notified Sept. 14 that he had been granted permission to stay in the country temporarily for two years and that his work permit was being processed. He received a second notification on Sept. 18 that his work permit had been mailed. He expects to receive it as early as today, clearing the way for him to apply for jobs as a computer-software engineer, his dream job.

"I felt like crying. I couldn't believe it," Martinez said. "The first thing I did was go to church to thank God."

As of Sept. 19, just 29 of the 82,361 undocumented immigrants nationally who have applied for deferred action have had their cases completed, according to U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services. It is not known if all those cases have been approved.

Under the program, undocumented immigrants granted deferred action can remain in the country for two years without the threat of deportation. They also receive work permits and can reapply after two years.

U.S. Department of Homeland Security officials initially said it could take several months for the applications to be processed. The first applications, however, were approved in about a month.

Critics of the program say the speed at which some of the applications have been approved raises concerns about fraud and suggests the program's main goal is to score political points for Obama among Latino voters as the election campaign heats up.

"The only deterrent to fraud is thoroughness," said Steven Camarota, research director at the Center for Immigration Studies, a Washington, D.C., think tank that opposes the program. "Given what we know about how the immigration bureaucracy normally works, (the speed of approvals) raises all those questions."

The reason behind the sudden expediency may be "political, if you want to get the political dividend," Camarota said.

The program, known as Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals, is aimed at undocumented immigrants who were brought to the U.S. when they were minors, are under age 31 and have lived continuously in the U.S. for five years.

Obama has said he was motivated to administratively allow undocumented immigrants to apply for deferred action because Congress has failed to pass the Dream Act, a bill that would allow undocumented high-school graduates brought to the U.S. as minors to become citizens if they completed at least two years of college or served two years in the military.

But some Republicans in Congress have called the program a "backdoor amnesty" that rewards illegal immigrants.

As many as 1.7 million young illegal immigrants in the country may be eligible to apply, including 80,000 in Arizona, according to some estimates.

Obama announced the program on June 15. The federal government began accepting applications on Aug. 15.

Martinez said he applied on the first day because he was eager to get a work permit so he could begin pursuing his career.

He said he was surprised he was granted deferred action so fast.

"I was prepared to wait four to six months," Martinez said.

He said he is originally from Cananea, a mining town south of Naco in Sonora. He said he was 9 when his family brought him to the U.S. 21 years ago. They used border-crossing cards to enter legally through the Naco Port of Entry but then remained in the country illegally.

Despite "not speaking a word of English" when he came to the U.S., Martinez said he graduated from Cholla High School in Tucson with a 3.93 grade-point average and was accepted at four universities: Northern Arizona University, Arizona State University, the University of Arizona and the University of Miami in Florida.

He chose the UA because he could not afford to pay room and board if he attended a university away from home.

Martinez said he graduated with a bachelor of science degree in computer engineering in 2003 and a master's degree in software-systems engineering in 2005.

He said he has never been able to use his degrees because, as an illegal immigrant, he cannot work legally in the U.S.

"I have had job offers, but because of my legal status, they couldn't hire me because I was living in the U.S. illegally. They could not sponsor me, either," he said.

To earn money, he said, he cleans yards.

Carmen Cornejo of the Arizona Dream Act Coalition, an advocacy group, said she believes Martinez is the first undocumented immigrant in Arizona to be granted deferred action. She knows of several undocumented immigrants from the Phoenix area who are in various stages of being granted deferred action.

As more are granted deferred action, she expects more will apply.

"A lot of people are taking a wait-and-see attitude (before applying)," she said.

http://www.necn.com/09/25/12/Young-Arizona-immigrant-gets-deferred-ac/landing_nation.html?&apiD=723d401da60f40538e25977ad86ff817