

Young immigration activists wary of delayed deportation policy

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ATLANTA — Viridiana Martinez has been on the front lines in the debate over immigration reform, organizing protests and getting arrested in acts of civil disobedience.

But when the president announced a policy allowing young people like her to temporarily avoid deportation, she was anything but elated.

“It’s all political theater,” said the 26-year-old who came to the U.S. illegally from Mexico when she was 6 and grew up in North Carolina. “For me, at this point, applying for deferred action would be like accepting that theater, and I can’t do that.”

The lukewarm responses of Martinez and other leaders of the so-called DREAMers movement come after they have spent months or even years traveling the country while openly declaring themselves “undocumented and unafraid.”

They have gotten themselves arrested, boldly given interviews to the press and allowed their pictures to be taken, and many are known to immigration authorities, who have taken no steps to deport them.

The policy shift announced by President Barack Obama in June provides a two-year protection from deportation to certain young people brought to this country illegally and the chance to apply for a work permit. Now the young activist leaders are deciding whether it’s worth accepting a deal that falls far short of what they’re asking for.

Some, like Martinez, are rejecting the program because its narrow scope doesn’t provide a path to legalization or any security for their families. But others have decided to apply despite misgivings, lured by the chance to get a driver’s license and qualify for in-state tuition in some states and to get a work permit.

Keish Kim, brought from Korea when she was 8, has been a vocal and active critic of a policy that effectively bars students who can’t prove their citizenship or legal residency from attending Georgia’s most competitive state colleges and universities. She’s skeptical of the new program, but decided to apply.

“If I do get deferred action, I can legally work and help sustain my family financially,” said the 21-year-old Syracuse University student. “That means a lot to a lot of undocumented families.”

The government began accepting applications Aug. 15. The Migration Policy Institute estimates that as many as 1.7 million people could be eligible. By Oct. 10, about 180,000 people had applied and nearly 4,600 applications had been approved.

Throng of young people have turned out at events nationwide where immigration lawyers have offered free guidance on completing applications. Still, some are concerned about signaling their presence to immigration authorities. And there are other obstacles: the \$465 application fee and the extensive documentation required to prove eligibility.

Mohammad Abdollahi, 27, who grew up in Michigan after being brought here illegally from Iran at age 3, said he is concerned about applicants who might get rejected. The leader of many protests around the country said he doesn't plan to apply until the guidelines are more inclusive.

"Getting a work permit would help me," he said. "But I know there are so many other people who are not out and are not organizing that are not going to qualify or their applications are going to get rejected."

Many critics say the policy — which they contend falls short even as a stopgap measure — is a way for Obama to pander to the growing Latino voting bloc ahead of the elections.

"He got away with making it seem like he became our friend," Martinez said of the president. "I'm not going to drink the Kool-Aid."

Martinez has been arrested during civil disobedience actions in Atlanta and Charlotte, N.C., and recently purposely got herself detained in a federal immigration detention center in south Florida to gather stories of others locked up and to try to help win their release.

She is not applying out of principle, but recognizes her high profile may give her more protection from deportation than others. Her sister, who lives in a small town in North Carolina, has applied for the program to gain work authorization.

To be eligible, applicants have to prove that they arrived in the U.S. before they turned 16 and are under 30 years old. They must be high school graduates or in school, or have served in the military, and they cannot have a serious criminal record.

The requirements are similar to those of the failed DREAM Act, which would have provided a path to legal residency for many brought here illegally as children. The new policy does not provide legal status, and both protection from deportation and work authorization is only for two years.

Last spring, groups of young activists staged sit-ins at Obama campaign offices around the country and gathered signatures asking the president to issue an executive order halting deportations for anyone who would be eligible for the DREAM Act had it passed.

Some believe confusion about the new policy has ended up giving more credit to Obama than he deserves, and that more comprehensive reform may be shelved.

“I’m just afraid that people will push aside immigration as if it was addressed,” said Kim.

The program is not an executive order, but rather a policy directive that will leave those who are approved in a state of limbo. They will also not be eligible for certain benefits that legal immigrants and American citizens can access.

For some, the cost is an issue.

Georgina Perez, a 23-year-old full-time college student with no job, wants a work permit, but she can’t afford the \$465 application fee.

“I was very cautious (when the policy was announced). I didn’t celebrate it right away,” said Perez, who came from Mexico when she was two and has helped lead immigration protests in Georgia and got arrested during a civil disobedience action last year. “Now I see that I should go ahead and apply for it, but there’s another roadblock, the money.”

Though many who have devoted themselves to advocating for the DREAM Act are disappointed, they see the president’s program as proof that the movement is having an impact.

“This just showed the power that we have and the power of organizing to create some sort of change,” said Maria Marroquin, 25, a pre-law student at Dominican University near Chicago who came to the U.S. illegally from Peru when she was 13.

Marroquin founded Dream Activist Pennsylvania in 2009 and was one of seven young people arrested when they sat down in a downtown Atlanta street in April 2011 as an act of civil disobedience.

She applied for the president’s program last month.

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