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Relaxed deportation rules open dream for young immigrants

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Jose Machado, a student of Nicaraguan descent, reacts during an announcement on the new U.S. immigration law during a news conference at the downtown Wolfson Campus of Miami-Dade College on Friday, June 15, 2012, in Miami. President Barack Obama eased enforcement of immigration laws Friday, offering a chance for hundreds of thousands of younger illegal immigrants to stay in the country and work. / Roberto Koltun / The Miami Herald / Associated Pre

Written by Elizabeth Bonner The Tennessean

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Cesar Molina, who emigrated from Mexico to the United States when he was 5 years old, thinks President Barack Obama's announced plans to block deportation of young people will free him up to make plans he can follow through on.

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“Now I have no obstacles to actually pursue my dreams,” said Molina, now 17. “I want to reach my dream in becoming a car engineer and show every Hispanic that no dream is too big or too small to accomplish. You shouldn’t be stopped at a certain limit just because of where you come from.”

With Obama’s order, undocumented immigrants under 30 who are in school, have a high school diploma or its equivalent, or have been honorably discharged from the military can have deportation proceedings deferred for two years with the possibility of renewal at the end of that time frame.

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The Molina family’s journey to the U.S. was not easy. They were detained for a week during the first attempt and lost in the desert during the second trip. When Molina did make it, his hardships were far from over.

“It’s been a rough life over here,” Molina said. “I’ve been put down because of my immigration status. People would make fun of me because I didn’t know the language.”

But Molina, a rising junior at John Overton High School, feels this directive will give his generation of Latinos a fresh start in the country they’ve come to call home.

“What I had planned after high school was to go back where I came from,” Molina said. “Many young students after high school work a job where they don’t get paid well enough. They don’t go to college because they weren’t born here. They’re illegal in this country, and they pretty much throw their dreams away.”

Those who qualify must have lived in the U.S. for at least five years, as of Friday, and had to have been brought here before they turned 16. Anyone convicted of a felony or significant or multiple misdemeanor offenses is ineligible.

In a release Thursday, the Department of Homeland Security said the change will allow the government to focus immigration enforcement efforts on those who pose a threat to national security or public safety, specifically immigrants convicted of violent crimes or repeat offenses.



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While this deferral process does not grant permanent residency status or citizenship, the administration is giving these young people the reprieve Congress hasn't been able to achieve with the DREAM Act, which has failed to pass in several attempts, beginning in 2001.

The move echoes some of the provisions of the DREAM Act but does not provide for a six-year period of temporary residency and the possibility of citizenship after college or military service.

In his speech Friday, Obama urged Congress to pass the DREAM Act, calling his action a temporary solution.

"Let's be clear, this is not amnesty, this is not immunity, this is not a path to citizenship, this is not a permanent fix," Obama said from the White House Rose Garden. "This is the right thing to do."

Molina said he hopes this is a step toward uniting the country and defusing some of the controversy over immigration.

"It's opening doors, so everybody can come together and we can live as one," Molina said. "We can all pretty much say that we're a family as long as we live inside the United States."

Corker opposes plan

U.S. Sen. Bob Corker, R-Tenn., said Obama's decision contradicts the president's statements last year that he could not act without congressional approval.

"Regardless of one's political affiliation or views of our current immigration policies, the president's decision to selectively enforce the law should be of grave concern to all Americans," Corker said in a statement. "This is an outrageous overreach of executive power by the administration."

But some who were affected by the decision said it would be good for the entire country.

"The Latino community is the fastest-growing population in the United States," said Jose Rodriguez, 22, a recent graduate of Lipscomb University. "We're already here. Would we rather have an uneducated population who is going to continue to live in poverty and working minimum-wage jobs or do we want to educate our citizens and allow them to pursue opportunities that are going to better themselves and the economy?"

"I believe this (Latino) community has what it takes to impact the country in a big way. It just gives us more opportunities to contribute, and that's really all we're asking for. All we're really asking for is a chance."

Time of tension

The news comes at a time of tension in the Nashville immigrant community, as the Tennessee Supreme Court heard oral arguments Thursday in a case challenging the Davidson County Sheriff's Office's authority to participate in the 287(g) federal immigration program.

Protesters argued that the sheriff's office was overreaching by actively enforcing immigration law through the federal program.

At a rally before the hearing, immigrants shared stories of detainment and near deportation. Two students spoke of almost being forced from the only home they'd ever known.

Luise Escoto, 19, came to the United States from Mexico when he was 3 and said he considers himself a Nashvillian, but seeing these scenarios has made him weary of promises like the president's.

He took a wait-and-see approach to Obama's decision.

"I feel the same way a lot of my fellow dreamers feel," Escoto said. "We feel like this might be a blessing, but we don't know how much of a blessing it actually is. We feel like we want to celebrate, but at the same time, it's too soon to tell."

Contact Elizabeth Bonner at 615-259-8892 or ebonner@tennessean.com.

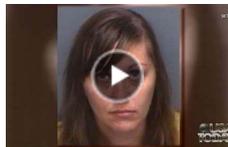
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