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Immigration attorneys at Nashville conference react to new Obama policy for young people

TRAVIS LOLLER Associated Press
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NASHVILLE, Tenn. — Immigration attorneys from across the country gave President Obama a standing ovation on Friday as he announced administrative changes that will allow many young illegal immigrants to live and work legally in the U.S.

The attorneys were gathered in Nashville for the annual meeting of the American Immigration Lawyers Association. As news of the pending announcement spread, organizers quickly put together an informational session that culminated in a viewing of the president's announcement in Washington on several large screens.

AILA President Laura Lichter cautioned the group about what the new rules do and don't mean.

"This is not a path to citizenship," she said. "This is not amnesty. This is a temporary reprieve from the imminent threat of deportation. It comes with a work permit that's good for a two-year period and can be renewed."

Depending on the state, those young people might also be able to get a driver's license or state identification card and might be able to attend school as a resident. But, she said, a change in administration could mean a change of policy.

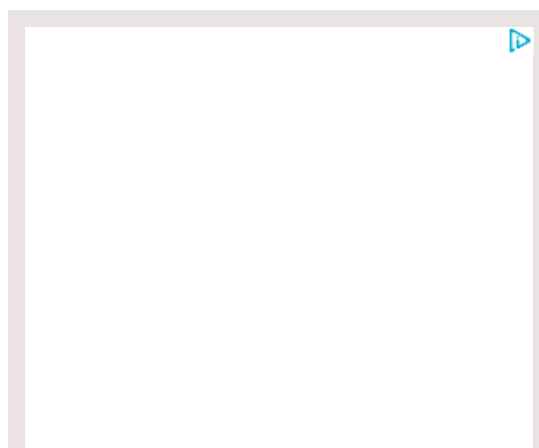
The news came a day after the Tennessee Supreme Court heard a challenge to a local program that is used to deport many Nashville immigrants.

Nashville immigration attorney Elliott Ozment, who brought that challenge, was at the conference on Friday and called Obama's announcement a "very positive development."

Ozment said he talks to young people nearly every day who were brought to the U.S. as children and are looking for a way to become legal.

"I can't wait to help these young people," Ozment said, "because when I talk to them, I almost break down. They are so good and sweet and earnest."

Workers at his office already have begun reviewing their files for



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people who might qualify for what is technically called "deferred action."

Word of the change also was spreading among immigrants and advocates like 19-year-old Luis Escoto, who was born in Mexico but has lived in Nashville since he was 3 years old.

Escoto has advocated for the DREAM Act since 2009 through his work with the Tennessee Immigrant and Refugee Rights Coalition. He even traveled to Washington in 2010, only to see Congress fail to enact the bill that would have established a path to citizenship for people like him.

Although the new administrative guidelines don't do as much, Escoto said he was happy about them.

"This is an accomplishment for all the hard work of the DREAMers around the country," he said.

Escoto graduated from high school last year and he hopes the new policy will help him go farther.

"It's my dream to go to college and be a psychologist," he said. "That way I can help people."

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