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New program gives kids of immigrants a second chance

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Immigrant workshop: Immigrant advocates help illegal immigrants brought to the U.S. as children to get work permits, avoid deportation under new federal initiative.

Written by Brian Haas
The Tennessean

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It may sound strange, but Veronica Zavaleta can't wait for her son to give his fingerprints to the federal government. Those prints will allow him, for the first time, to legally work in the United States and avoid deportation if he continues on the right path.

"This, for me, means a lot because it changes everything for my family," she said.

Her son is one of thousands of Tennessee's illegal immigrants who are eligible under a new federal program to apply for a work permit and avoid being deported. The program, called Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals, started in June and applies only to illegal immigrants who were brought to the U.S. before age 16, have resided here permanently since June 2007, are in or have



Veronica Zavaleta talks about her son, a student at Western Kentucky University, who may get a chance to legally work in the United States. / George Walker IV / The Tennessean

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completed school and have not been convicted of any serious crimes.

Justice for Our Neighbors, the Tennessee Immigrant and Refugee Rights Coalition, Conexion Americas and the Hispanic Organization for Progress and Education of Clarksville, Tenn., on Saturday held a workshop on how immigrants can apply for the new program. It included informational seminars, legal advice and help with applications.

"These are kids who are doing the right thing. They're getting their education, they're not getting in trouble with the law," said Kaki Friskics-Warrens, co-chairwoman of Justice for Our Neighbors.

The new program does not offer permanent citizenship, like the DREAM Act set out to do before failing to get enough votes in Congress. Instead, it gives immigrants a work permit and a Social Security number so they can work at companies that use the federal E-Verify system, which is set up to make sure all employees can legally work there. It also could prevent them from getting deported, as long as they don't break any laws.

The process is not easy. Immigrants must offer several forms of identification, including birth certificates; proof must be offered of continual residency in the United States; they must submit to being fingerprinted by the federal government and they also must pay a \$465 fee.

Even so, interest in the program is overwhelming, said Megan Macaraeg, organizing director with the Tennessee Immigrant and Refugee Rights Coalition.

"More than we can handle," she said. "It's like responding to the flood."

'We are human'

They expected at least 100 people to apply or seek out information at Saturday's seminar. Macaraeg said there are about 10,000 young immigrants who could be eligible for the program.

Zavaleta said that her son Carlos, 19, recently got his appointment



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to provide his fingerprints to the federal government for the program. She brought him and his younger siblings to America about 11 years ago to escape domestic violence, she said.

Today, she works 12- and 14-hour days at a cleaning business to pay for his education at Western Kentucky University, where he is studying computer science and international marketing. She said that just because they came here illegally doesn't mean they don't have anything to offer the United States.

"I want everyone to know that we are here and that we work very hard. We came without permission, but we're not breaking any rules here," she said. "We're contributing to this country and we are human."

Contact Brian Haas at 615-726-8968 or bhaas@tennessean.com.

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