

Obama program offers young TN immigrants a world of opportunity

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isters Tina, left, and Anna Sharma are among the first young immigrants in Nashville to be approved for President Barack Obama's deferred action program. The two came to the U.S. from India as children. / Dipti Vaidya / The Tennessean

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A straight-A student who loaded up on advanced coursework in high school, 19-year-old Tina Sharma of Goodlettsville had all the academic credentials to pursue her dream career in neuroscience.

But she faced an obstacle few realized: Sharma, an immigrant who had arrived in the United States from India a decade ago, lacked documentation to live here legally. She and her sister had come with their father, who wasn't able to get his work visa renewed.

"When I shared my story, my teachers didn't believe me," said Sharma, who graduated from Martin Luther King Jr. Academic Magnet High School last spring. "They didn't understand what I was trying to tell them."

While her friends drove to school, Sharma rode a city bus because

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she lacked a driver's license. Financial aid for college wasn't



Lt. Gov. Ron Ramsey's softened view on immigration has raised eyebrows in the GOP. / File / The Tennessean

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possible, she said, nor could she legally work. Despite high marks in the classroom, Deferred Action for Early Childhood Arrivals her long-term professional goals appeared unreachable.

What it does: If approved, it's a temporary shield for

That outlook has changed rapidly, however.

Sharma and her sister, Anna, belong to the ranks of young people known as "dreamers," undocumented immigrants who arrived in the United States as children, have lived here ever since and hope to obtain full citizenship one day. In October, they became two of the first people in the Nashville area to be approved of President Barack Obama's deferred-action program, which offers two-year renewable work permits and protection from deportation.

Now, in the aftermath of this month's election, "dreamers" are suddenly the center of renewed political attention.

With Republicans recognizing waning support among the nation's Hispanic population, some in the GOP are already making efforts to appeal to the immigrant community. Outgoing U.S. Sens. Kay Bailey Hutchison, R-Texas, and John Kyl, R-Arizona, this week unveiled legislation that would offer undocumented youths a path to legal status. The bill is seen as their version of the federal DREAM Act, which would pave a way for full citizenship but has stalled annually in Congress.

Already, though, the deferred-action program has created opportunities for Sharma.

"Now I'm able to drive and I can actually apply for a job and do internships, and try to figure out exactly what I want to study and where I want to work," said Sharma, who had enrolled in Belmont University this fall. "In a way, I feel like it kind of gives you an identity."

The Sharmas were among those who applied the first day the Deferred Action for Early Childhood Arrivals program opened. Many more young immigrants across Middle Tennessee are just now beginning to taste the same freedom as that first wave of applications are approved.

According to the U.S. Department of Homeland Security, 308,935

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immigrants had applied for the program as of Nov. 16, with 53,273 applications being approved, figures that increased dramatically from the month before.

A report from the Immigration Policy Center says 5,871 immigrants in Tennessee qualify for the initiative, while as many as 14,184 will over time. Homeland Security officials could not say how many applications had been received or approved in Tennessee.

Application surge is expected

Celebrated by some as a turning point in the nation's immigration history, Obama's initiative came with a political calculus as well — a gesture, most believe, to solidify enthusiasm among Hispanic voters in crucial swing states during this month's election. Mitt Romney had vowed to halt the program.

With fears assuaged after the president's re-election, immigrant advocates are expecting a surge in deferred-action applicants, even as more programs are debated and might open up for young immigrants.

"We think there will be more people applying now because people before were kind of waiting to see what would happen," said Tabatta Castillo, who has worked with the Tennessee Immigrant and Refugee Rights Coalition in hosting clinics on how to apply for the program.

Castillo said some immigrants were hesitant to disclose their personal information to the federal government without assurance the program would be continuing. "Now, those people that were afraid will be more likely to want to apply and there will be an increase."

'It changes my life completely'

For months now, immigrant advocacy groups have helped applicants through what some say is a tedious process to navigate — especially for undocumented immigrants who had previously sought to hide their illegal status.

David Esquivel, a Nashville attorney who has assisted Justice for Our Neighbors, which offers legal services to immigrants, pointed out that applicants must show continuous U.S. residency. "It's not an easy process.

"You're talking about people who entered when they were children, so they've got to depend on their parents or friends or other people to provide information," he said.

Over a series of clinics, Castillo said, she helped screen about 1,400 immigrants on potential eligibility for deferred action and a temporary work permit. She said herself and others in Middle Tennessee have collectively submitted more than 500 applications.

Castillo knows of only a handful of immigrants in Nashville granted approval — and she's one of them. She received a letter notifying her of her approval earlier this month.

The 26-year-old arrived in the United States from Venezuela when she was 15. "It changes my life completely," said Castillo, who recently graduated from Lipscomb University's School of Nursing. "Now that I have a work permit, I'll be able to take my exams and become a registered nurse, and I might be able to work in a hospital."

Ramsey speaks out

Even immigrant activists don't ignore the politics behind Obama's summer unveiling of deferred action. On Election Day, 7 out of 10 Hispanics voted for Obama, a larger margin than four years ago.

The long-term goal of young immigrants remains full citizenship, however, and they hope deferred action leads to it one day.

"It's something that can get built upon, and it's a good way to get people out of the shadows and registered into the system," said 29-year-old Brenda Perez of Nashville, approved this month of the federal program.

Born in Mexico, Perez has been living in the United States since 1989, but noted that she still can't do things like return to the United States if she were to travel to her native Mexico to visit family.

In addition to national conversation among Republicans, state Republicans have stepped out on the issue.

In Tennessee, Lt. Gov. Ron Ramsey offered a softened view in a recent interview with WJHL-TV in Johnson City.

"I think that is somewhere where we're going to have to reassess where we are and figure out a fast track of people being able to become citizens of this country," Ramsey said, adding that he's against amnesty and wants to make sure the nation's borders are policed. "But let's face the facts. They're here. They're hard-working people. They're Christian, Roman Catholics. They think like we as Republicans do. They're conservative. So, we need to figure out a way for them to become citizens."

Ramsey added that it was much easier to become citizens in the United States "when our forefathers came through Ellis Island."

The statement elicited praise from local immigration rights advocates but rose eyebrows of members of his party.

"I thought that was disappointing," said Rep. Joe Carr, R-Lascassas, saying the lieutenant governor, whom he called a friend, was "pandering." Carr added that he worries many immigrants who come to the United States not through legal channels feed off public assistance, though even he framed youths

differently.

“When we talk about children being here because their parents brought them here and they happen to be illegal, that is not the same moral equivalent in my mind as the parent who brought them here,” he said.

The Associated Press contributed to this report.

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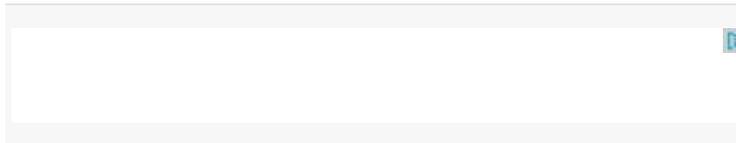
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