STATEMENTS OF SUPPORT SIGNED, SEALED, DELIVERED

By Olivia P. Tallet

Members of the community and clergy hold envelopes with postcards addressed to legislators asking them to support Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals program participants and keep families together. More than 20,000 postcards are being sent.
Father Carmelo Hernandez, pastor of St. Leo the Great Catholic Church speaks about the postcards thousands of members of different congregations are sending to legislators.

Juan Gutiérrez was three when he crossed the border illegally from Mexico to Texas in a taxi. He vaguely remembers that his mother asked him to hide on the floor in the back seat of the car, right before passing through a border checkpoint.

Now, 23 and a mechanical engineering student at the University of Houston, Gutiérrez is among a throng of youthful immigrants and members of the Houston clergy that sent 20,000 postcards to area legislators on Thursday, demanding a permanent solution for members of the controversial immigration program called DACA.

In the Houston metro area, the program has shielded from deportation about 35,800 so-called Dreamers who came to the country illegally when they were minors, providing them with work permits, according to Pew Research. President Donald Trump suspended that program in September, and heated negotiations between legislators and the White House to reach a deal for a Dreamers bill are stalled.

The cards were mailed to U.S. Sens. Ted Cruz and John Cornyn, and U.S. Reps. Pete Olson and Ted Poe, all from the Republican Party, as well as Democratic Reps. Sheila Jackson Lee and Gene Green, among others.

The messages demand that they support DACA and “legislation that keeps immigrants together.”

The Metropolitan Organization of Houston, part of a nationwide network of community, religious and business organizations, organized the collection of postcards signed by parishioners in congregations located in Houston’s areas of the legislators’ districts.

Since DACA was suspended, “we have seen the struggles that families face upon the possibility of being separated,” said Pastor Carmelo Hernández at the St. Leo the Great Catholic Church in Aldine, where he conducts Mass.

**Bipartisan support**

Legislators from both parties support a long-term solution to shelter Dreamers from deportation.

“I do believe it’s important for us to find a solution for these young men and women who now find themselves trapped by the fact that they were brought here underage by their own parents,” Cornyn said in a statement.

That seems to be in line with the general sentiment of Americans. In a new CBS News Poll, 70 percent said they support allowing DACA beneficiaries to remain in the country legally.

Congress has been working on a bipartisan DACA deal.
While a deadline looms, Trump has made clear that he would sign a DACA deal in exchange for Democrats supporting the funding of his promised border wall that comes with an $18 billion price tag.

However, Democrats are demanding a “clean deal” and could force a government shutdown.

In a tweet on Wednesday, Jackson Lee supported Jewish activists protesting in the Senate and demanding a fix for dreamers. “I am with them in calling for a clean #DreamActNow,” she wrote.

Separate bills

Republicans, for their part, are trying to gain support for a short-term funding bill to circumvent a shutdown and buy more time. They have expressed support for the president on the border wall and lean toward a separate bill to address DACA together with other immigration issues.

“I support a solution for the DACA young adults,” said Cornyn’s statement. But, he added, “I think this is an opportunity for us to do something we haven’t been able to do, which is to deal with border security; deal, as the President gave us the mandate for, with the diversity visa lottery as well as family-based immigration.”

Poe has a similar position, which, according to his office, hasn’t changed: “It is past time for Congress to act to finally address our broken immigration system, including strengthening our border security, interior enforcement, and giving clarity to the ‘Dreamers.’ ”

‘Political chess’

Meanwhile, about 800,000 young Dreamers nationwide “are becoming hostages of the political quandary,” said Father Hernández. “They are instead using these young people like pieces for their political chess.”

“I would like people to understand just one thing about us Dreamers,” said Angelica Velásquez, a 20-year-old DACA recipient who helped to collect postcards from parishioners of the St. Leo the Great Catholic Church, which she attends. “We are not asking for free things or handouts.”

Velásquez was brought to Houston by her parents when she was 3 years old, and the family entered on tourist visas that they overstayed. “All we want is to be able to work and be part of this society; we are not taking anything away from people, we are contributing,” she said.

Suspension halted

Last week, a federal judge in California granted a temporary order against the termination of DACA, allowing Dreamers who are currently registered with the government to apply for renewal. The Trump administration is already fighting the order in what could become a long battle in court, according to professor Geoffrey Hoffman, director of the University of Houston’s Immigration Clinic.

“We are taking advantage of the California judge’s order and helping many Dreamers that are coming to our offices to renew their DACA as soon as possible,” said Cesar Espinosa, who directs the nonprofit FIEL immigrant activist group in Houston.

“What we need is a permanent solution from Congress now that this problem has national attention; we need to end this constant uncertainty of temporary executive orders and court battles,” he added. olivia.tallet@chron.com twitter.com/oliviaptallet

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