

Announcement opens doors, local immigrants say

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President Barack Obama's announcement on Thursday that he will temporarily shield from deportation more immigrants who are in the U.S. unlawfully rippled through the home of Natasha Morales in Winston-Salem. She qualified for protection from deportation in 2012 under a separate program. Now, her mother, Norma Castellanos, may also qualify.

Morales entered the U.S. unlawfully from Mexico in 1999, walking across the border with her mother when she was 5.

All these years later, Morales is a junior at Salem College majoring in math and chemistry, helped by scholarships from the Winston-Salem Foundation, Hispanic League and the Tomorrow Fund.

At her home near Bowman Gray Stadium, Morales has two siblings, 9 and 13. They're both U.S. citizens, born in Winston-Salem. Unlike Morales, they don't know what it is like to live under the threat of deportation. But, even if they may be too young to fully comprehend it, they have lived under the threat that their mother and sister could one day be deported.

U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement deported 368,644 people during the year ending September 30, 2013, according to the agency. About 11.5 million immigrants now live in the U.S. unlawfully. In North Carolina, it's about 350,000, or about 3.5 percent of the state's overall population.

In 2012, Morales became lawfully present in the U.S.

She applied for a program implemented by Obama that temporarily protects a certain group of younger immigrants from deportation for two years. The program, known as Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals, could affect as many as 1.7 million people in the U.S., according to the Pew Hispanic Center. Through DACA, Morales could get a work permit, Social Security card and driver's license. But although she is now lawfully present, her immigration status remains unchanged by DACA, which provides no direct path to legal status, much less citizenship.

Unlike Morales, Castellanos could not apply for DACA because it was open only to certain younger immigrants. On Thursday, Obama cast wider the temporary safety net he started under DACA, making it possible for more than 4 million immigrants in the U.S. unlawfully to apply for protection from deportation.

Castellanos is one of them.

Immigrants who have been in the U.S. unlawfully for more than five years and are parents of citizens or lawful permanent residents may qualify. They'll have to pass background checks and pay fees. Also, Obama will expand DACA to include people who arrived in the U.S. as minors before 2010; the current cutoff is 2007. And he will lift the requirement that applicants be under 31.

Because Castellanos is a parent of children who are U.S. citizens, she has a shot at qualifying for the new relief program.

During the 15 years here, the fear of deportation has always followed, she said in Spanish: "I wouldn't like it at all to have to take my children to Mexico, especially with all that Natasha has achieved here, thanks be to God." For Castellanos, Obama's announcement "will open doors," she said. "I consider him my president also."

For Morales, the relief that her mother might get is just as real for her: "It gives hope. Now she can have the same thing I have."

While many legal scholars say that Obama remained within the legal boundaries of the executive branch, some Republicans described the efforts of Obama to temporarily set new priorities on law enforcement as unconstitutional.

"President Obama does not have the legal authority to legislate, and his unilateral actions on immigration are a blatant overreach of his constitutionally granted executive authority," said U.S. Rep. Virginia Foxx, R-5th. "The president claims to believe in the Constitution, but his actions tonight demonstrate otherwise."

Obama acted within his legal authority, according to Christopher Schroeder, a Duke Law School professor.

"He is not overriding any law. If there were a law on the books that said, 'Deport DREAMers whenever you find them and do not grant them any kind of discretionary relief or deferral from deportation,' then DACA would qualify as an attempt to 'override a law.' But there is not ... and you won't be able to find any law that the president is overriding with tonight's announcement, either," Schroeder said.

Obama also responded to his critics: "And to those members of Congress who question my authority to make our immigration system work better or question the wisdom of me acting where Congress has failed, I have one answer: Pass a bill. I want to work with both parties to pass a more permanent legislative solution."

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