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DREAM Act

By Ryan Stark Lilienthal

On November 18, 2005, a bi-partisan group of U.S. senators introduced the Development, Relief, and Education for Alien Minors (DREAM) Act of 2005 (S. 2075). The DREAM Act gives meaning to the aspirations of millions of undocumented immigrant youth, who grow up in the United States and share the same hopes as their U.S. citizen peers – to live the American Dream. U.S. citizens should support the DREAM Act not only because it enables motivated and talented youth to obtain their goals, but because it offers a vision of a brighter future for all Americans.

The DREAM Act provides success-driven immigrant youth a vehicle to obtain legal status and to fully integrate into American society. Under the DREAM Act, students who arrive in the United States before turning sixteen, and are physically present in this country for more than five years, qualify to legalize their status so long as the government determines that they possess good moral character, and have not committed any specifically-listed offenses. At the time the application is filed, applicants must document their admission to a higher education institution, or receipt of a high school diploma or general education development certificate. Six years after receiving resident status, DREAM Act beneficiaries must show continued good moral character; ongoing residence in the United States; and acquisition of a higher education degree, two years of

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completed higher education towards a degree, or two years served in the uniformed services.

The DREAM Act, which was introduced in prior years, takes on added significance this year in light of growing debate in our country over how to address the challenge posed by the presence of 11 million undocumented immigrants. Some see the immigrants as the problem – calling them illegal and characterizing them as criminals. According to this view, the appropriate solution lies in enforcement, and should involve mass deportation. Others recognize that the problem stems from our immigration laws, which do not provide a legal means for many foreign workers (mostly blue collar) to enter the United States, even though numerous U.S. businesses and industries rely on these workers to survive (i.e. food service, construction, janitorial/cleaning, child care, etc.) Advocates who understand that the problem stems not from the immigrants, but the system, want comprehensive immigration reform to ensure that U.S. employers can sponsor immigrants for lawful entry if U.S. workers are unavailable.

Lost in the debate are the children of undocumented immigrants, who enter the United States illegally with their parents. It is not their choice to come to this country; and many arrive very young. Take the example of Manuel Luiz (a pseudonym), who entered the United States when he was five years old with his parents, and now lives in central New Jersey. Manuel recently graduated at the top of his high school class, but

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cannot pursue the numerous college scholarships offered to him because of his undocumented status.

By denying access to education and employment opportunities to students like Manuel, our laws stifle the ambition of a growing segment of our population. Compounding their frustration and despair, is the feeling of ostracism and isolation immigrant children experience in our communities. Because of their illegal status, undocumented immigrants even fear contacting the police when victimized by violent criminals. Without a remedy like the DREAM Act, Manuel, and similarly situated youth, are at risk of becoming a permanent underclass, hiding in the shadows of society, and raising their own children to live in fear of the larger community.

The DREAM Act offers hope to students like Manuel, and the rest of us. It is a vision of the United States that embraces a generation of undocumented youth who long to succeed as Americans. By welcoming these students, and encouraging their dreams, we will advance our own interest in building a more vibrant and thriving country. Please contact your congressman and encourage them to support the DREAM Act.