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Children of undocumented immigrant parents fear deportation, separation under Trump promise



SAM JANESCH | Staff Writer Mar 13, 2017



Roger Avila-Vidal is interviewed March 5 at Church World Service in Lancaster on Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals, the federal immigration policy that allows children of undocumented immigrants to have a legal status.

ANDY BLACKBURN | Staff Photographer

A couple of weeks ago, McCaskey High School junior Roger Avila-Vidal started driving a different route to school.

Avila-Vidal, who's on the school's tennis team, was just following the advice of his Mexican immigrant parents who want to see him fulfilling his dream of going to Columbia University.

The route change was to avoid roads where his parents, who are in the country without legal documents, think Avila-Vidal might run into law enforcement officers.

The high schooler hasn't done anything wrong. In fact, Avila-Vidal, who arrived in the U.S. when he was 2, hasn't had a run-in with the law — not even a speeding or parking ticket.

Yet, the 17-year-old, a recipient of the Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals program, is worried that President Donald Trump's efforts to fulfill his campaign promise to deport millions of "bad hombres" might put an abrupt end to his dreams.

Avila-Vidal is one of potentially thousands of DACA-eligible Lancaster County residents who are concerned for their parents and themselves under the new Trump administration's executive actions on immigration.

As immigration officials ramp up enforcement, these parents and their children are talking about how to move on with their lives if they are separated and forced to live in different countries.

Those like Avila-Vidal, who were given temporary legal status under former President Barack Obama's 2012 DACA program, also have been detained in some instances, even as Trump has not issued a retraction of the program.

"We are really seeing an uptick in just picking people up willy-nilly," said Troy Mattes, a Lancaster immigration lawyer of 20 years.

'Stress for our students'

While the number of undocumented immigrants and DACA-eligible young people in Lancaster County is unclear, there are about 21,000 who are eligible across Pennsylvania, according to a 2016 report from the Migration Policy Institute.

About 750,000 people benefit from DACA nationwide. The program protects recipients from deportation for a renewable two-year period and allows them to work.

Mattes said his three-lawyer firm represents more than 100 local “DACA kids,” often also referred to as “dreamers.”



Roger Avila-Vidal speaks during an interview on Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals, the federal immigration policy that allows children of undocumented immigrants to have a legal status.

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Every Lancaster-area school district has children who benefit from DACA — and their primary concern in recent weeks has been whether or not their parents will be safe, he said.

“That is a stress for our students,” School District of Lancaster Superintendent Damaris Rau said during a recent public forum on immigration issues.

Rau said the district has been monitoring the attendance of immigrant students because they are worried parents will take their children out of school and go into hiding.

Amber Hilt, coordinator of K-12 ESL and world language for the district, said that means they have asked staff, teachers, counselors, nurses and others to “have a keener ear to the ground, to trust that gut instinct if they do think that’s a situation of a student not coming due to an undocumented status.”

Hilt couldn’t say whether such situations have occurred recently — only that the district is taking a proactive approach to help connect students with resources that might help.

‘In a year they will not be here’

Avila-Vidal said his dad told him if he and his mom are detained and deported, they will at least try to get him to stay with a relative so he can finish high school and college.

“But they told me that if I do end up being caught, to just be prepared for whatever might happen and don’t worry about it — we’ll just have to start a new life in Mexico,” said Avila-Vidal, whose father is a chef and mother is a dishwasher at a local diner.

Older DACA recipients may not live with their parents, but they don’t want to see them deported, either.



Audrey Lopez speaks during an interview on Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals, the federal immigration policy that allows children of undocumented immigrants to have a legal status in the U.S.

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Audrey Lopez, who turns 28 next month, is having detailed conversations with her parents about “plan B” for the first time in her life.

Lopez’s parents brought her to the U.S. when she was 11 years old, making a stop first in Miami before growing up in Harrisburg. After obtaining her Millersville University degree in international studies and anthropology, she stuck around the Lancaster area to work at Church World Service — which settles hundreds of refugees a year.

As an immigration legal counselor, she knows better than most the risk her parents now face.

“In my head, in a year they will not be here,” Lopez said, tearing up. She knows that she would not see them for “many, many years” because of a 10-year restriction on returning to the U.S. if deported for illegal immigration.

Her dad, who lives in Harrisburg and cleans offices for a living, is making plans, she said.

“What would happen to our home? What is going to happen to things that are here? Who takes care of that? Do they go in storage? Do you take them to your apartment? Who takes the cars?” she said of the questions he’s asking.

Other families in similar situations have previously talked a little more openly about the possibility of deportation.

Agustina Drot de Gourville, of Lancaster city, said it’s something she and her Argentinian family have always prayed about.

At 27, she and her three younger sisters are all registered with DACA. They immigrated in 2000, and with her father moving back several years ago after her parents’ divorce, the question is now about whether her mom will be safe.

Even her mom’s deportation back to Argentina would “definitely be a culture shock” after living in the U.S. for so many years, said Drot de Gourville, a special education aide at Conestoga Valley School District.

‘Great heart’

In a February press conference, Trump called DACA “a very difficult situation for me” and that he would “show great heart.”

There is no indication he will retract the order, but at the same time his administration has given more latitude for any illegal immigrant to be subject to deportation.

And reports of DACA kids getting picked up by immigration enforcement officials isn’t easing concerns.

In Mississippi, 22-year-old Daniela Vargas was detained by U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement after she spoke out publicly alongside immigration advocates. Vargas’ DACA status had expired in November, and she was in the process of renewing it when she was detained.

In Washington state, DACA-recipient Daniel Ramirez Medina, 23, was detained and stripped of his legal status. Medina is still detained and there is a dispute over whether he has a criminal history.

“Nobody wants a community where you completely live in fear,” said Lopez of Church World Service. “It’s gotten to a point where even my American citizen friends are like, ‘Well, you know if there’s anything you need, we’ll hide you.’ I’m like, ‘What is this, like World War II? You shouldn’t be hiding us period.’”

The president’s comments, Avila-Vidal said, gave his mom hope.

But in his mind, Trump must “show those actions — he can’t just say it.”



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