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EDITOR'S PICK

El Paso business leaders urge protections for undocumented immigrants brought to the country as children

By David Crowder / El Paso Inc. staff writer
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Manuel Balce Ceneta

Texas chambers of commerce and business leaders around the state, including some of the biggest companies in El Paso, are calling on Congress to establish a path to citizenship for “Dreamers,” people who were brought to the country illegally as children.

Woody Hunt, senior chairman of El Paso-based Hunt Companies, and Cindy Ramos-Davidson, CEO of the El Paso Hispanic Chamber of Commerce, recently joined other members of the Texas Opportunity Coalition and U.S. Rep. Henry Cueller, D-Texas, for an online discussion of those

efforts.

They presented new data showing the significant economic impact that immigrants protected under the Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals, or DACA, are having in Texas.



'It's been over 30 years since, under Reagan, we had comprehensive immigration reform,' says Woody Hunt. 'I think it's so hard, we've got to do it piecemeal.'

El Paso Inc. file photo

For cities, states and the country, economic expansion is based on the growth and productivity of the workforce, Hunt said in an interview after the virtual event.

"Immigration policy is at the heart of both of those," he said. "In the last 20 years, 50% of the increase of our workforce in the country has come from immigration.

"On the productivity side, you've got 11 million people here that we have put constraints on as far as getting a driver's license, schooling and work mobility. That's not a policy for productivity."

Opponents say the DACA program rewards people for breaking the law, encourages illegal immigration and hurts American workers.

The Dream and Promise Act approved by the U.S. House in March and pending in the Senate would provide permanent protection, legal residence and eventual citizenship to more than 4 million "Dreamers" who meet certain conditions. "Dreamers are a key economic cornerstone to our nation's economy, especially here in Texas and most importantly, in our border community of El Paso-Juárez with over 9,000 Dreamers who play an integral role in our businesses," Ramos-Davidson said.

One of those El Paso immigrants is Itzel Campos, whose parents brought her and her brother to the United States from Torreon, Mexico, in 2001. She considers herself an American but lives with a haunting fear that something might go wrong, though she is now protected by DACA.



Itzel Campos, whose parents brought her and her brother to the U.S. from Torreon, Mexico, in 2001, outside of Academy Sports + Outdoors on the Westside, where she works.

Photo by David Crowder

A Franklin High School graduate, Campos recalls last year when she had to renew her protected status under DACA.

“I was interviewed again, and it was a scary situation because I didn’t know what would happen, since DACA’s not guaranteed,” she said. “I was terrified that I might not get it in time. And, since I work, I do need it. It’s required, and I was just really scared in that moment.

“It’s scary because I honestly consider myself an American. I basically grew up here. I was 5 years old when I was brought over, and I’m 20 now. I learned English perfectly and graduated from high school.”

Now, she works at Academy Sports + Outdoors and attends El Paso Community College. She and her older brother, now a college graduate, are supporting their parents in El Paso, so a lot is at stake.

Another reason she would like to clear up her status once and for all is that she’s never been able to return to Mexico to visit relatives.

Campos and her brother aren’t alone.

There are more than 6,000 DACA-eligible young people in El Paso and more than 173,000 in Texas. Those Texans have \$2.4 billion in spending power and paid \$730 million in taxes in 2019, according to data recently released by Texans for Economic Growth and the Texas Opportunity Coalition, business-led groups advocating for passage of the Dream and Promise Act.



The push is on again in Congress to renew and enhance DACA, as has been tried every session since the Obama presidency over a decade ago.

This year, 20 Texas chambers of commerce along with high-profile businesspeople are behind it, together with many other organizations nationally. In El Paso, along with Hunt and the Hispanic Chamber, they include WestStar Bank, El Paso Chamber, Borderplex Alliance and EPCC.

Hunt is one of El Paso's best-known Republicans and philanthropists, and his stance on the DACA issue might come as a surprise to some.

To Hunt, it's not just about doing the right thing for those young adults brought to the U.S. as children, it's about how badly cities, states and the national economy need them today – and more like them.

They're here now, and more are coming all the time.

Hunt is working with individuals and organizations that see it as a human rights and social justice issue.

"I don't disagree with that," he said. "But I try to view it as an economic development issue because I think that's the issue that will have the greatest chance of broad-based support. The fundamental question is there's an estimated 11 million people in the country that are undocumented."

While many Americans see illegal immigration as the nation's big problem, Hunt wonders what the country would do without them.

That's because they're filling jobs that Americans don't want, such as farm work, and other positions that there are not enough Americans to fill after decades of steadily declining birthrates in the United States.

Those issues will have to be dealt with one at a time, Hunt said.

"It's been over 30 years since, under Reagan, we had comprehensive immigration reform," Hunt said. "I think it's so hard, we've got to do it piecemeal.

"You do the easiest pieces first, which should be the Dreamer bill and agricultural workers. Those are the ones that get the highest support in all categories – Democrats, Republicans and independents if you look at the polling."

When it comes to productivity declines tracking years of declining birthrates in America, Hunt noted that advanced countries around the world are facing those issues as well, especially Japan and Germany.

There are two other problems that he said can't be addressed with a declining workforce: paying down the national debt and recruiting enough soldiers for national defense.

"That should be a concern of everybody," Hunt said.

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