News



Demonstrators calling for new protections for recipients of the Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals program walk through a Senate office building on Capitol Hill in late January in Washington. (CNS/Reuters/Jonathan Ernst)



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Although Catholic immigration advocates are disappointed that the Senate on Feb. 15 voted down multiple proposals for protecting young immigrants who were brought illegally to the U.S. as children, they say they are still holding on to hope and committed to working for a solution.

"We would be crazy to ever say we're without hope," said Daughter of Charity Sr. Mary Ellen Lacy. Legislation to protect such immigrants, known as Dreamers, from deportation "is the just thing to happen, this is the right thing to happen and I mostly believe that this is what God wants to happen, so it's going to happen," said Lacy, an immigration attorney who does political advocacy for Network Catholic social justice lobby.

Advocates had urged the Senate to pass a bill last week that protected Dreamers without including major anti-immigrant provisions, but even bipartisan compromises failed after the Trump administration attacked all proposals that did not fund a border wall, terminate the diversity visa program and sharply cut family-based immigration.

About 700,000 immigrants currently benefit from the Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals (DACA) program, which was established by an executive order from President Barack Obama in 2012 and grants them work authorization and protection from deportation. As many as 1.8 million could be protected under some proposals to allow Dreamers a pathway to citizenship.

Advocates decried the Senate's failure to pass a compromise, and the role that President Donald Trump's administration played in discouraging consensus.

"We are deeply disappointed that the Senate was not able to come together in a bipartisan manner to secure legislative protection for the Dreamers," said a joint statement Feb. 19 from Cardinal Daniel DiNardo of Galveston-Houston, president of the U.S. bishops' conference; Los Angeles Archbishop José Gomez, the conference's vice president; and Austin Bishop Joe Vásquez, chairman of the bishops' Committee on Migration.

"The president tweeted how the Democrats are failing the Dreamers," said Laura Peralta-Schulte, senior government relations advocate for Network, "and the reality is that we had a bipartisan policy [Feb. 15], we had two of them, and they were completely torpedoed by this administration."

Social Service Sr. Simone Campbell, executive director of Network, said in a Feb. 15 statement that while the compromises were "flawed," Trump's opposition to them "made his motive clear: his claims to support a solution for Dreamers are patently untrue. Trump and his accomplices are using this manufactured crisis to radically alter our current legal immigration system."

Unlike Democrats and some Republicans, "the White House and Republican leaders have acted in bad faith," Campbell said. "President Trump created this mess by recklessly terminating the DACA program and President Trump once again killed the only viable solution on the table."

Because Trump ended the DACA program in September 2017, Congress has until March 5 to pass a legislative solution before Dreamers' status starts expiring, although challenges from the courts have made that deadline less certain.

But after nearly a week of debate, motion to cloture votes on four amendments Feb. 15 all failed to achieve the 60 votes they needed to advance.

The Senate first rejected, by a vote of 52-47, a bipartisan bill from Sens. John McCain (R-Arizona) and Chris Coons (D-Delaware) that would have offered Dreamers a pathway to citizenship and included funding for border security, but not a border wall.

Although many Catholic advocates would have preferred a "clean" Dream Act, with no other provisions attached, others such as Network, the Sisters of Mercy, and the Leadership Conference of Women Religious had supported the proposal because of its relatively limited nature.

Senators also rejected an anti-sanctuary-city measure by a vote of 54-45 before voting on another bipartisan measure from the "Common Sense Caucus," led by Sen. Susan Collins (R-Maine).

The "Common Sense" plan included a path to citizenship for Dreamers, $25 billion for border security, a prohibition on Dreamers sponsoring their parents, modest

changes to family-based immigration, and a requirement that immigration enforcement prioritize criminals and those who recently entered the U.S.

Catholic advocates were divided on the bill, said School Sister of Notre Dame Ann Scholz, associate director of social mission at the Leadership Conference of Women Religious. LCWR made the difficult decision to oppose the bill because of concerns about the effects on family-based immigration and border communities, and the fact that most Dreamers opposed it.

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However, some Catholic organizations supported the measure, hoping it could be amended later in the process. Others, such as Network and the Sisters of Mercy, decided not to advocate for or against it.

The plan was sponsored by eight Republicans, meaning that only three more were needed to reach 60 votes if all Democrats voted in favor. But after the Trump administration attacked the measure, threatening a veto, the additional votes did not materialize. Several Democrats ultimately voted against it, making the final count 54-45.

The decisive failure of Trump's plan was one of the few bright spots advocates saw in the Senate debate. The Senate voted 39-60 against a bill sponsored by Sen. Chuck Grassley (R-Iowa) that mirrored Trump's list of demands.

"It's the only one that got to 60. It got 60 'no' votes. I think that's a good sign and a pretty clear repudiation of the White House's attempt to use Dreamers as a bargaining chip to get the kind of immigration reform that they want," said Scholz.

Jean Stokan, justice coordinator of the Institute Justice Team for the Sisters of Mercy, agreed. "If they want to make a deal ... what they were promoting was rejected in the Senate and it's really up to them to stop blocking solutions and to come up with something else," she said.

While disappointed in the outcome of the debate, advocates are committed to continuing to promote a solution for Dreamers.

The U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops announced a National Catholic Call-In day to Protect Dreamers Feb. 26, asking the faithful "to call their Members of Congress ... to protect Dreamers from deportation, to provide them a path to citizenship, and to avoid any damage to existing protections for families and unaccompanied minors in the process."

"We ask once again that Members of Congress show the leadership necessary to find a just and humane solution for these young people, who daily face mounting anxiety and uncertainty," the bishops' statement also said.

"We do see that there is the power of solidarity, the power of love with our brothers and sisters," said Mercy Sr. Aine O'Connor. "We're all in this together and as the Sisters of Mercy we have a resounding commitment to be in this for the coming weeks, months, day and night, however long it takes."

Scholz said her group would continue trying to educate staffers and member of Congress, especially making sure Catholic members of Congress "understand their faith in relationship with this particular question."

The Senate vote "didn't turn out the way we'd hoped it would, but we're certainly not going to abandon Dreamers," Scholz said. "We're going to listen to Dreamers, we're going to take our lead from Dreamers, we're going to take our energy from Dreamers, and we're going to be here until we get some kind of a solution to the problem our president created."

For Catholic sisters in particular, "this struggle with Dreamers and the larger struggle for immigrant justice is personal" because most orders initially came to the U.S. as immigrants to serve immigrants, Scholz said.

"We continue to minister to those aspiring citizens," she added. "So we continue to see the devastating effects. ... We see it and we feel it. There's no way that Catholic sisters are going to give up."

"How much we lose of ourselves in fighting this ... and how much degradation we allow to fall on innocent people before the right thing happens remains a question," Lacy said, "but I definitely believe, as a follower of Christ, he wants justice and he wants dignity for all of his children. And I just don't believe that this is not going to happen."

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