

# Austin American-Statesman

## **DREAMERS KEPT OUR ECONOMY AFLOAT. OUR POLICIES SHOULD RECOGNIZE THIS.**

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As a paramedic who responds to emergency calls, Jesus Contreras of Houston is no stranger to answering when tragedy strikes. Four years ago, he was working around the clock seven days a week to help Texans deal with the aftermath of Hurricane Harvey. And for the past eleven months, he has been helping individuals fight for their lives during the COVID-19 pandemic, showing up at their doorsteps to transport them to local hospitals. Jesus is able to serve on the pandemic frontlines thanks to programs like Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals (DACA), which allowed him to obtain a driver's license in Texas and take the state exam required to be a licensed paramedic. DACA doesn't provide legal status to eligible young immigrants, but it offers temporary protection from deportation. Recipients are often known as Dreamers.

Dreamers like Jesus have shown up for Texas, and our nation, throughout the pandemic to save lives and keep our economy afloat as essential workers, entrepreneurs and consumers. This week our elected officials in the U.S. House took the first step in protecting them by passing the Dream and Promise Act. Now, it is time for our Texas senators to pass legislation providing them with a path to lawful status, and the certainty that DACA can't provide.

A Dream Act is needed if we are going to get our economy back on track because despite where you stand on the political spectrum, the fact is, Dreamers are vital to our economy. Texas's 213,000 Dreamers alone contribute \$454 million in local and state taxes on top of the \$509 million they pay in federal taxes. That is money being used to pay for schools, build roads, improve our parks, and help fund local health clinics. Dreamers in Texas also inject \$3.2 billion in purchasing power into our local economies, which helps businesses, small and large, stay afloat and keeps Texans employed.

Dreamers are not only vital to our economy, they are essential to keeping America competitive. We are facing a workforce crisis in America as our immigration policies are at odds with our demographic reality. We have an aging population and declining birth rates and, as a result, need foreign-born workers to sustain our economy. Farmers and ranchers have trouble finding the seasonable labor they need, while high-tech companies have trouble locating engineers.

However, we don't have to look far to find the talent employers need when Dreamers are already here. They

have grown up in our neighborhoods, graduated from our schools, purchased homes, and are already contributing their talents to our workforce. Over 96 percent of Dreamers in Texas are in school or in the workforce and 8,500 Dreamers have started their own businesses in Texas. The best way to retain this talent is by providing them with lawful status so they can continue innovating and strengthening our workforce.

Regrettably, none of Texas' Republican members in the House supported the Dream and Promise Act, despite the essential role Dreamers play in our economy. We urge Sen. John Cornyn, who publicly committed to passing a Dream Act, and Senator Cruz to take a leadership role in bringing other Senate Republicans on board to pass the Durbin-Graham Dream Act or the American Dream and Promise Act.

We created the Texas Opportunity Coalition, which currently has more than 100 leaders representing Texas businesses, chambers of commerce and universities to make the economic case for the Dream Act. We are on the ground and see the contributions Dreamers make daily and it is our duty to remind Texas representatives of these contributions. We are concerned about getting our economy back on track and saving Texas' businesses after this devastating pandemic, and we know that prioritizing a Dream Act should be part of any recovery effort. If Dreamers like Jesus remind us of anything, it is that Dreamers have always been essential to America's economy. It's time our immigration policies acknowledge this reality.

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