

# HOUSTON CHRONICLE

## **HOUSE PASSES BILLS TO PROTECT DREAMERS, BUT BORDER CRISIS THREATENS MEASURE IN SENATE**

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Houston Chronicle  
March 18, 2021*

WASHINGTON — The U.S. House of Representatives on Thursday passed legislation creating a path to citizenship for more than 3.1 million immigrants — including some 500,000 Texans — who were brought to the country as children or are taking shelter from turmoil in their home countries.

Many, however, are not getting their hopes up — especially the so-called Dreamers, who grew up in the United States and have spent years in limbo, as politicians on both sides of the aisle have talked about offering permanent protection only to tie their fates into broader political fights.

“Of course I want to be super-hopeful,” said Susana Lujano, a 28-year-old Dreamer who has lived in Houston since she was 2. “But if I’m 100 percent honest, it’s kind of hard to believe ...Constantly we’re told for sure this is going to happen — and right now, how can it not? So why is it not happening?”

The familiar pattern was taking shape again. The Democratic-led House passed the Dream Act on a mostly party-line vote as Republicans focused debate on a growing migrant surge at the southern border, which they’re calling the first political crisis of President Joe Biden’s term.

“We are not doing our job,” said U.S. Rep. Chip Roy, a Central Texas Republican. “A secure border is pro-immigrant. Instead what we’re doing today is pass legislation, which is a magnet for more traffic of children.”

Congressional Democrats say that’s a distraction. The so-called American Dream and Promise Act protects specific groups of immigrants and has nothing to do with what’s happening at the border, they say. Another immigration bill that the House passed on Thursday creates a merit-based visa system for migrant farm workers.

“The fear-mongering by Republican politicians needs to stop, and we should do the work of improving people’s lives and rebuilding our economy” said U.S. Rep. Joaquin Castro, a San Antonio Democrat. “Essential workers are risking their lives to ensure we stay healthy and have food to eat today, but could be separated from their families and deported tomorrow.”

The Dream Act offers permanent residency for a decade to those “Dreamers” who were 18 or younger when they came

to the United States, as long as they have an American high school diploma or GED and pass a background check. That’s as many as 449,000 Texans, according to the Migration Policy Institute.

The bill would also cover those with Temporary Protected Status or Deferred Enforcement Departure. That’s another 54,000 Texans who are in the U.S. because of ongoing conflicts or political or economic strife in their home nations, according to MPI estimates.

Many in both groups have lived in the U.S. for years. Dreamers on average arrived at the age of 8 while those with temporary protected status on average have lived in the United States since 1997, according to the Center for American Progress, a left-leaning Washington think tank.

“Dreamers have waited, it is time for us to deliver,” said U.S. Rep. Sylvia Garcia, a Houston Democrat.

Dreamers were first offered protections by the Obama administration’s 2012 Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals, or DACA, program. The Trump administration sought to dismantle that program even as former President Donald Trump professed “great love” for Dreamers; the U.S. Supreme Court blocked its efforts to end DACA. Biden, meanwhile, has vowed to protect the DACA program, which Texas and other states are still suing to end.

Along the way, lawmakers have said repeatedly that Congress needs to step up to provide a permanent solution. The House passed a version of the Dream Act last year only to see it die in the Senate, where then-Majority Leader Mitch McConnell never brought it to the floor. And U.S. Sen. Ted Cruz, a Texas Republican, blocked the efforts of Democrats to force a vote last summer.

It appears Dreamers may yet again be caught up in a bigger political battle. Just nine House Republicans supported the bill. Every Texas Republican opposed it.

At least 10 Republican senators would need to support the bill for it to pass the chamber under Senate rules, which require 60 votes in most cases to end debate and advance to a vote, and many there have begun to point to the migrant surge at the border as reason they can’t now support the legislation.

The U.S. Border Patrol reported 100,441 encounters with migrants at the southern border in February, a 28-percent increase from January. The figure is all but certain to increase even more quickly this month, as agents say they are overwhelmed by the flow of people seeking to cross. The vast majority of those encounters were with single

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adults, nearly all of whom are turned away immediately under a public health order that the Trump administration put in place to help contain the spread of the coronavirus. The agency said about 25,000 of those immigrants had been apprehended before.

The Department of Homeland Security, however, has stopped using that order to expel unaccompanied children, 9,457 of whom arrived in February alone — a record for February — according to Border Patrol data. That figure was in line with surges in 2014 and 2019, which saw between 7,000 and 9,000 apprehensions of unaccompanied children a month with peaks above 10,000.

“Unfortunately, what’s happening at the border right now is going to inflame people’s emotions a lot and I think make anything harder to do, which I think is very regrettable,” U.S. Sen. John Cornyn told reporters this week.

Cornyn ran Spanish-language ads during his recent reelection campaign saying he “strongly supports the legalization of Dreamers.” Last month, he threw his support behind a new coalition of Texas businesses pushing for Congress to pass a Dream Act, deemed the Texas Opportunity Coalition, and told a Dallas TV station, “I’m ready to act on that.”

“I’m on record saying I’d like to find a permanent solution to the DACA recipients,” Cornyn told reporters this week. “The problem is every time we try to meet the Democrats halfway, they move the goalposts.”

But to many Dreamers and their advocates, it’s Republicans who are moving the goalposts. They say the Dream Act is totally unrelated to the situation at the border now and that it would only extend protections to those who arrived in the country before Jan. 1.

“Both senators from the state of Texas, they say one thing and when the community or the state requires real leadership they seem to shy away from sticking their necks out,” said Cesar Espinosa, executive director of FIEL, an immigrant-rights group in Houston. “We unfortunately don’t have too much faith in them, but we are continuing to speak to them.”

Cornyn said he would “take a look” at the House bill, but he feared it may be “overly broad.”

“I don’t want to further incentivize people to bring their kids to the United States, hoping that we’ll keep passing successive pieces of legislation,” Cornyn said. “But in this case, I think that if we build it appropriately and it’s structured appropriately, I think we could do something that would provide a fair outcome for a large number of

young people who’ve done nothing wrong without creating some additional problems.”

Texas business leaders who launched the Texas Opportunity Coalition with Cornyn’s support last month say they’re still hopeful lawmakers can strike a deal. Dreamers have long been seen as sympathetic figures to lawmakers on both sides of the aisle and **Justin Yancy**, the group’s co-founder, said he hopes Senate hearings will remind Republicans of that.

Dreamers are a major boost to the economy, with 96 percent of them either working or in school, **Yancy** said. Permanent protections would also be a relief for their employers.

“The optimism of being able to move and get something done — we’ve gone from there to a situation where all that’s being talked about on immigration is the crisis. And it’s not helpful,” **Yancy** said.