

Workshop Summary:

THE D.R.E.A.M. ACT

This workshop was led by Genie and Hector Zavaleta with the assistance of students from the Arizona Dream Act Coalition. Genie Zavaleta is a retired educator and counselor, who is now working with undocumented students and families and political action groups. Hector Zavaleta served in Hispanic Ministries in the Synod of the Southwest for 28 years; now retired, he works as a volunteer with families and others in poverty.

The Development, Relief and Education for Alien Minors Act (“DREAM Act”) was first introduced in the U.S. Senate in 2001, though under another name. It was most recently reintroduced by Senator Harry Reid (D-NV) in September 2010 as an amendment to the National Defense Authorization Act for Fiscal Year 2011. If passed, the bill would provide temporary (“conditional”) legal status, with the possibility of status as a permanent resident, for persons who came to the U.S. as children and were educated in American schools. Even though they grew up in this country, they do not have a U.S. birth certificate and thus cannot get a Social Security number. Without a SSN, they cannot work and have difficulty continuing their education past high school. Many are outstanding students who will contribute to the U.S. society and economy when the DREAM Act passes. Right now, however, their lives are on hold. The workshop shared stories of students in the Arizona Dream Act Coalition, made the case for passage of the Act, and outlined ways that the church can support these students by supporting the DREAM Act.

The act is designed to be passed as part of comprehensive immigration reform or independently. Either way, the act gives hope to many young people who currently have no other way of becoming a legal resident independent of their families. Under the DREAM Act, 65,000 students could become conditional residents each year and, if they comply with current immigration rules and regulations, eventually become permanent residents and citizens

Here’s how it would work: The first step is for the individual to enroll in some type of higher education (university, vocational school, or apprenticeship program) or the U.S. military. If certain requirements are met, this person may apply for conditional residency in the U.S. If, within six years of the initial petition, the applicant receives an associate’s degree or a certificate from a two-year equivalent program, the conditional status can be changed, and the individual can become a legal permanent resident of the United States.

To be eligible for permanent residency under the DREAM Act, the individual must have entered the United States before turning 16 years of age and must have been in the United States for at least five years without interruption. The individual must also demonstrate the ability to speak English. Under the Act, conditional residents would be eligible for private loans to fund their education, but not Pell grants.

One of the purposes driving the DREAM Act is to better utilize the taxpayer dollars that are being used to educate undocumented immigrant youth in public schools across the country. If these youth are willing to continue their education through additional schooling or the military,

they would be allowed to become a legal part of U.S. society without the risk of losing their families through deportation. The DREAM Act is designed to benefit youth who, having been brought across the border by their parents, have spent more of their lives in the United States than in their countries of origin. Despite lack of papers, they are culturally part of the U.S., which is now their home.

What You Can Do:

1. Promote understanding – read about and study immigration issues, including the DREAM Act. Get the facts and share them with everyone you know. Counter misinformation.
2. Contact your representatives in Congress and in your state legislature, especially when there is an alert on legislation that affects immigration or the DREAM Act.
3. Help DREAM Act students – contribute to scholarships and legal funds; promote passage of the Dream Act; get to know undocumented students in your area; support their efforts and activities.
4. Support DREAM Act organizations – get on their email list, contribute money, volunteer. Groups include: Arizona Dream Act Coalition <http://arizonadreamactcoalition.org> (or similar groups in your area); CADENA <http://dreamactaz.org> or any DREAM Act support group in your area; Chicanos por las Causa <http://cplc.org> or any group that provides scholarship help; United We Dream <http://unitedwedream.org> (national student organization).
5. Be politically aware – work to elect those who share your views; visit the legislature; visit offices of your Congressional delegation; write letters to the editor or articles for newspapers and magazines.
6. Include immigrants, especially DREAM Act students, in your prayers.

NOTE: The DREAM Act was once again incorporated into the National Defense Authorization Act in September 2010, but a Senate filibuster ended progress of the bill. It was reintroduced in December but failed to reach the 60 vote threshold necessary to advance to the floor. Republican gains in the House will compound challenges to its passage in 2011, but President Obama has expressed his intention to continue to work for its passage.

Developed from materials provided by workshop presenters and other sources