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'THEY'VE GROWN UP WITH OUR KIDS': TEXAS BUSINESS LEADERS PUSH FOR PERMANENT DACA PROTECTIONS

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More than 200,000 young immigrants eligible for the Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals program – commonly known as DACA – live in Texas, filling critical positions in the workforce, paying taxes and generally helping fuel the state's economy.

But fear of deportation has been a constant for them, because the program and its protections aren't permanent under federal law and have been used as bargaining chips for years in the political battle over immigration reform.

Some Texas business leaders – backed by Sen. John Cornyn, the state's senior U.S. senator and a key Republican vote on the issue – see an opportunity to change that, barely two weeks into the new Democratic administration of President Joe Biden.

The group has created what it is calling the Texas Opportunity Coalition to advocate for a federal "DREAM Act" that would make DACA's deportation protections permanent. DREAM is an acronym for "development, relief and education for alien minors."

Companies across Texas employ DACA recipients and have "seen them start their own businesses and strengthen others, and we see firsthand the way their contributions and taxes and talent help our state economy grow," **Woody Hunt**, chairman of El Paso-based Hunt Companies, said during an event Tuesday to announce the effort.

The coalition includes top Texas business groups and trade associations, such as the **Texas Business Leadership Council** and the Texas Association of Business. It also includes the Austin Chamber of Commerce and nearly a dozen other chambers of commerce around the state, as well as various companies and universities.

DACA was created in 2012 through an executive order by then-President Barack Obama, with the aim of protecting from deportation immigrants who were brought to the United States illegally as children.

About 646,000 DACA recipients, known as Dreamers, were living in the United States as of last June, according to the Migration Policy Institute, with an additional 685,000 eligible for the program. Texas has about 106,000 DACA recipients – second behind only California – with an

additional 125,000 people eligible.

"These young people are vital parts of our communities" but have been "living in a constant state of uncertainty about their future," Cornyn said, speaking in a videotaped address played during Tuesday's event.

"They've grown up with our kids, attended the same churches, shopped at the same grocery stores and in some cases defended our freedoms in the United States military," he said.

Cornyn's support for a permanent DACA fix has been mixed in the past. He backed the issue during his reelection campaign last year, however, and his biggest task now might be to persuade fellow Republicans to do so as well.

Republican leaders in Texas have previously taken the lead in multistate litigation aimed at curbing DACA, and a 2018 lawsuit by Texas Attorney General Ken Paxton to have Obama's executive order declared unconstitutional remains pending.

In addition, former President Donald Trump, a Republican, repeatedly tried to abolish DACA but was prevented from doing so by court rulings.

Still, Karl Rove – who served as senior adviser to former President George W. Bush and is a member of the coalition announced Tuesday – said he views support for permanent protections for Dreamers to be a winning issue for both Republicans and Democrats, calling it a humane solution to a difficult situation that has broad support among average people.

"I just think (opposition to permanent protections for Dreamers) puts us on the wrong side of an issue that we ought to be for" as Republicans, Rove said.

DACA-eligible immigrants "do not deserve to be given the back of our hand and told to get lost and return to a country that in many cases they have no memory of whatsoever," he said. "Our system is broken, and if we can't solve the things that are most obvious and have the clearest and broadest mandate to resolve, then how are we going to resolve these other thorny problems in our immigration system?"

A spokesperson for Sen. Ted Cruz, R-Texas, didn't respond to a request for comment regarding the new Texas Opportunity Coalition. Cruz has previously referred to DACA as "illegal amnesty," and he isn't listed as a member of the new group.

Cornyn leveled criticism at Obama during his videotaped

Austin American-Statesman

address Tuesday, calling the former president's original 2012 action to create DACA "a shortsighted executive memorandum."

But "after years of being yanked around," recipients of the protections deserve to see them be made permanent, Cornyn said.

Biden already has issued an executive order of his own calling for DACA to be preserved and fortified, and he also has urged Congress to revamp U.S. immigration policy overall. His proposal includes making Dreamers eligible to apply for permanent U.S. residency immediately and for full citizenship after three years.