



THE ECONOMICS BEHIND A NEW PROGRAM PROTECTING UNDOCUMENTED FAMILY MEMBERS OF U.S. CITIZENS

Marketplace

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A new program aimed at giving work permits and green card pathways to certain undocumented family members of U.S. citizens is now open for applications. Roughly half a million people are eligible for the program, according to government estimates. And these families — and the U.S. economy — stand to benefit.

The new Parole in Place program, for undocumented immigrants with a spouse or step-parent who is a citizen, protects people from deportation and offers a work permit.

“And that excites people a lot, right?” said Jessica Cisneros, managing attorney with the Texas Immigration Law Council. “Because once you get that, you also get a Social Security number, and that changes the economic reality for so many families.”

She’s helping run an information hotline about the program. They got 250 calls their first day, some from people working without authorization.

“Sometimes, they have to resort to sketchy jobs, right, where they are taken advantage of,” Cisneros said.

While U.S. employers frequently hire undocumented workers, having immigration status tends to increase their wages, according to Pia Orrenius, an economist with the Dallas Fed.

“You’ll see higher labor force participation, especially among women who gain status,” she said. Immigration status can also help undocumented people access a driver’s license and better jobs.

“Undocumented immigrants, in general, are often in a certain few industries, including hospitality, agriculture, construction,” said [Justin Yancy](#), president of the [Texas Business Leadership Council](#).

Being relegated to certain roles undercuts the productivity of this workforce, per real estate developer Woody Hunt. “They’re engaged in the workforce and paying taxes, etc.,

but those limitations on what they can do keep them from fulfilling their potential.”

“You get productive people stuck in unproductive jobs,” Pia Orrenius added. “They’re not realizing their true value and the employer is not realizing their true potential.”

But while there are clear benefits to immigration and policies that take undocumented immigrants out of the economic shadows, “that doesn’t mean that everybody’s a winner,” she said. “Whereas most natives, U.S. workers are not competing head to head with undocumented immigrants, some are — some definitely are.”

And it’s often low-education workers who end up competing for jobs with undocumented immigrants, Orrenius said.