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CITY AND LOCAL ORGANIZATIONS TO HELP IMMIGRANTS DESPITE CHALLENGES TO NEW POLICIES



Media Release

Department of Neighborhoods and Houston Immigration Legal Services Collaborative launch website for immigrants

Website features information about citizenship and deferred action

Houston Mayor Annise Parker today announced the launch of a new informational website for immigrants who are interested in applying for citizenship or deferred action. The new website is the product of a partnership between the City's Department of Neighborhoods Office of International Communities (OIC) and the Houston Immigration Legal Services Collaborative (HILSC). The partnership was established last December in response to President Obama's executive order on immigration.

"We formed this partnership with one simple goal in mind—to make sure that Houston is prepared for the implementation of the President's executive order," said Mayor Parker. "I am certain the recent court order delaying implementation of the President's order will be temporary. When it is lifted, Houstonians affected who will be able to take advantage of the President's order need access to accurate information and a way to connect with reputable organizations that can help them. With the launch of this new website, I'm pleased to report that Houston is ready."

The website www.adminreliefhouston.org provides access to accurate, up-to-date information about applying for citizenship and new "deferred action" programs that offer the right to stay in the U.S. and work permits to eligible undocumented immigrants. The site will help people find trusted community organizations for legal guidance and assistance.

"The new immigration policies will have a huge impact on our community," said Wafa Abdin, Vice President of Immigration and Refugee Services at Catholic Charities Cabrini Center for Immigrant Legal Assistance, a member of HILSC. "We are the largest provider of low-cost legal services for immigrants in Houston. We are working with our colleagues in the Houston region to address the increased demand from immigrants seeking accurate information and legal assistance as pertains to the expanded DACA and the new DAPA program."

President's Immigration Executive Order

On November 20, 2014, President Obama announced executive actions to help undocumented Americans gain the right to temporarily stay and work in the U.S. With over 1.3 million immigrants, the Greater Houston metropolitan area has one of the highest concentrations and fastest growing immigrant and refugee populations in the country. More than 200,000 undocumented immigrants in the Houston region will be eligible for legal status through the new programs.

The policy changes include an expansion of the Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals (DACA) program and the creation of the Deferred Action for Parents of Americans and Lawful Permanent Residents (DAPA) program. Under deferred action, the government will not place people who meet certain requirements into deportation proceedings. It does not mean that a person will get a visa or a green card and it is **not** a path to citizenship. However, a person with deferred action is temporarily protected from deportation and is eligible for a work permit for three years with the option to renew.

Legal Challenges to New Programs

The applications for the expanded DACA program were expected to be available starting on February 18. On Monday, however, a federal judge from the U.S. District Court in Brownsville, Texas issued a temporary injunction against the new policies. The injunction does not pronounce the policies illegal, but it prevents the administration from implementing them until the court rules on their constitutionality. It is expected that the case will proceed to the 5th Circuit Court and possibly the U.S. Supreme Court.

“This is a temporary setback,” explained Anne Chandler, Executive Director of the Tahirih Justice Center, a member of HILSC. “While the applications for DACA are not available today as we had hoped they would be, this is the time for the community of Houston to prepare for DACA and DAPA by collecting the required documents, attending information sessions and getting in touch with our trusted partner organizations.”

The Texas Organizing Project (TOP), a member of HILSC, is one of the many organizations helping immigrants get ready to apply for the new programs once they become available. TOP member Ehirazema Jazmin Meza is from Mexico, has been in the U.S. for twelve years and has two U.S.-born children. She will benefit from the new DAPA program once it is available.

"My family, neighbors and friends have been waiting for too long for a chance to come out of the shadows, and we have faith that the courts will ultimately uphold the President's executive action," Meza said. "I have children who were born here. We contribute to the workforce with our labor. Our lives are deeply rooted here. We are Texans. We are Americans."

About the New Website www.adminreliefhouston.org

The newly-launched website offers a one-stop-shop for immigrants seeking information about applying for citizenship or deferred action. It will keep those affected informed on the latest developments and sources they can turn to for guidance.

The website includes a list of local organizations from which immigrants can seek legal assistance and other types of services. Hundreds of in-person information sessions about deferred action programs are scheduled throughout 2015. A calendar of these events is available on the website and new events are being added daily.

The website is currently available in English and Spanish and will soon be available in all six of the City's official languages: English, Spanish, Vietnamese, Chinese, Urdu and Arabic.

Misinformation and Fraud

There is a lot of misinformation about deferred action programs. Unscrupulous individuals, often called “notarios,” take advantage of immigrants, scamming them out of money and often putting their ability to obtain legal status in jeopardy forever. Immigration fraud is a huge problem in our community and the website will help individuals avoid fraud by pointing them towards high-quality, trustworthy help from partner organizations.

To avoid fraud:

1. Be aware of *notarios*. Notarios CANNOT practice immigration law. Only licensed attorneys and Board of Immigration Appeals Accredited (BIA) Representatives can. Always ask to see credentials.
2. Never pay to print or get DACA renewal applications. You can get them for free at the uscis.gov website.
3. If it sounds too good to be true, it probably is. When in doubt, check with a trusted organization and with the USCIS website for answers.
4. Report fraud if it happens to you.

Local Immigration Services Agencies

Trusted partner organizations of the Houston Immigration Legal Services Collaborative who provide resources for immigrants seeking deferred action:

- Boat People SOS
- Bonding Against Adversity, Inc.
- Catholic Charities St. Frances Cabrini Center for Immigrant Legal Assistance
- Chinese Community Center
- City of Houston Department of Neighborhoods - Office of International Communities
- Ethiopian Community Organization in Houston
- Fe y Justicia Worker Center
- Fort Bend Lawyers Care
- Houston Volunteer Lawyers
- Human Rights First
- Kids in Need of Defense
- Memorial Assistance Ministries (MAM)
- Mi Familia Vota
- Neighborhood Centers Inc.
- NALEO Educational Fund
- OCA-Greater Houston
- South Texas College of Law Legal Clinics
- Ser and Hacer (The Children's Center)
- Tahirih Justice Center
- Texas Organizing Project
- University of Houston Law Center
- United We Dream - Houston
- YMCA International Services

More information about the Houston Immigration Legal Services Collaborative and a full list of members can be found at <http://citizenshipcorner.org/join-the-collaborative/>.

Facts about immigration in the Houston region can be found at http://citizenshipcorner.org/wp-content/uploads/2015/02/HILSC_factsaboutimmigration.pdf.

To learn about the programs and initiatives of the Department of Neighborhoods Office of International Communities, visit www.houstontx.gov/oic.

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