

Obama denies health care to young immigrants granted temporary reprieve from deportation

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The Obama administration has ruled that the tens of thousands of immigrant youth who are applying to stay in the United States under the Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals (DACA) program, enacted by executive order in June, will not be considered “lawfully present” residents. They will therefore be ineligible for health care assistance under Medicaid, the Children’s Health Insurance Program, and the health care overhaul passed by Congress in 2010.

This vindictive and discriminatory decision, chiefly motivated by a desire to placate anti-immigrant forces and the Republican Party, highlights Obama’s cynicism in issuing an executive order in the run-up to the presidential election giving a minority of undocumented immigrant youth a two-year reprieve from the threat of deportation.

In a transparent bid to capture more votes from Hispanics, Obama declared in announcing the DACA program last June that undocumented immigrant youth brought to the US as children were “dreamers” who shared American values and patriotism. They were, he said, “for all intents and purposes, Americans.”

That, however, was merely for public consumption. Privately, Obama was preparing to bar these “Americans” from any access to federal health benefits. He made no mention of such intentions either then or later.

The presidential directive announced in June allows immigrants who arrived in the US before the age of 16, are less than 31 years old, are enrolled in school or have a high school diploma, or have been honorably discharged from US military service, to register with the Department of Homeland Security. If approved, they receive a two-year reprieve from the threat of

deportation and can receive work permits, driver’s licenses and Social Security cards.

It is expected that only 800,000 of the estimated 11.5 million undocumented immigrants in the US will qualify for the program. Those who apply actually place themselves in heightened jeopardy of being victimized by the government, since they effectively declare themselves to be “illegal,” making them easier targets if and when a new directive is handed down by a future administration.

Once registered, immigrants still have no path to citizenship and their legal status is only temporary.

Obama’s talk of young “dreamers” last June was a reference to the so-called Dream Act, a bill allowing for a six-year “conditional path to citizenship” that is bottled up in Congress.

Obama issued the directive in June in large part to counter flagging support among Hispanics. Disillusionment and anger has mounted as Obama has pursued a brutal crackdown on so-called “illegal” immigrants. By 2011, the Department of Homeland Security was deporting 400,000 immigrants a year, an all-time record. Since coming to office, the Obama administration has deported an estimated 1.2 million immigrants.

Some time after issuing the executive order on DACA, the White House ruled that immigrants accepted under the program would, for the purposes of the 2010 health care overhaul, be deemed not “legally present.” They would therefore not be eligible for federal subsidies provided under Obama’s health care plan to help low-income people purchase private health insurance policies. At the same time, in a letter to state health officials, the administration declared that young

immigrants under the DACA program “shall not be eligible” for Medicaid or the Children’s Health Insurance Program.

Marielena Hincapié, the executive director of the National Immigration Law Center, said, “We had been working closely with the administration, so we were quite surprised and shocked by the new restrictions on health coverage. This is shortsighted, reactionary and bad public policy.”

Obama’s undemocratic policy will encourage right-wing state and local authorities to intensify their attacks on immigrants. Arizona Governor Jan Brewer has already issued an executive order to state agencies to deny driver’s licenses and other public services to immigrants who are granted relief from deportation under DACA.



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