



New Connecticut law extends deadline for young immigrants

Susan Haigh, Associated Press, July 4, 2018

HARTFORD, Conn. (AP) — Connecticut has joined a handful of states in providing particularly vulnerable immigrant youth additional time to apply for a federal legal status that could eventually lead to their permanent residency in the U.S.

Under a new law that took effect on July 1, immigrants who are 18, 19 and 20 years old and who've been abused, neglected or abandoned, can now ask a state probate court judge to determine if they're eligible to apply for a federal status known as special immigrant juvenile status.

It's different from DACA, the Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals program, which does not provide a path to citizenship in the U.S.

New York, California, Washington and Maryland have passed laws similar to Connecticut's. Meanwhile, New Jersey's existing statutes have been interpreted to include the 18-to-20-year-olds, while courts in Massachusetts extended the state's jurisdiction.

Before this new change, Connecticut's law applied only to immigrants under age 18, even though the federal government allows people up to age 21 to apply. The gap between the Connecticut and federal government age limits was highlighted in a Connecticut State Supreme Court case involving a teen from Honduras who was unable to apply for the special federal status because of the state's age restriction.

The discrepancy has created problems for other youth and young adults who lack legal status in the U.S. and are seeking protection from deportation.

"We had many conversations with 18-year-olds and 19-year-olds, saying, 'We're so sorry. You've reached us too late,'" said Stacey Violante Cote, director of operations at the Center for Children's Advocacy, which has offices in Hartford, Bridgeport and New Haven. While it's unclear how many immigrants this new law could impact, she said the children's legal rights organization fields several calls a week from unaccompanied minors who've made it to Connecticut, often after fleeing serious abuse and neglect. For many of them, Cote said, English is not their primary language, and they haven't had access to services and support.

One of the center's recent clients was born in Guatemala, where he had an alcoholic father with a history of family violence. Emotionally abused at a very young age and eventually abandoned, Cote said the boy was forced to live under conditions that put him at risk of physical and sexual abuse, malnourishment, educational neglect, deplorable living conditions and child labor. He fled to the U.S., where he eventually faced deportation proceedings and was referred to the Center for Children's Advocacy.

While the organization was eventually able to help the boy obtain the required state court order when he was 16 years old, allowing him to then pursue the special immigrant juvenile status, Cote said his then-18-year-old sister was not able to seek the same protection because of her age.

Camila Bortoletto, campaign manager for Connecticut Students for a Dream, said the state's age limitation has been an unnecessary barrier for those who've faced "extreme and unimaginable" obstacles and difficulties. She said the youth often don't have access to basic services, let alone an immigration attorney who knows the system.

"This means that many youth do not find out they qualify for SIJS until they are already over 18 and it is too late to apply under the current process in Connecticut," she told state lawmakers in February.

This marked the second year that advocates pushed for this legislation in the Connecticut General Assembly. This time, the bill passed with strong, bipartisan support in both the House of Representatives and Senate.

"It shows that state legislatures have a role to play and can make immigration policy better, more fair, more inclusive," said David McGuire, executive director of the Connecticut American Civil Liberties Union.