April 23, 2019

The Honorable Nancy Pelosi
Speaker
U.S. House of Representatives
Washington, DC 20515

The Honorable Mitch McConnell
Majority Leader
U.S. Senate
Washington, DC 20510

The Honorable Kevin McCarthy
Minority Leader
U.S. House of Representatives
Washington, DC 20515

The Honorable Charles Schumer
Minority Leader
U.S. Senate
Washington, DC 20510

Dear Speaker Pelosi, Minority Leader McCarthy, Senate Majority Leader McConnell and Senate Minority Leader Schumer:

On behalf of the nearly 118,400 members and affiliates of the American Psychological Association (APA), I am writing in support of immigration policies like those advanced in both H.R. 6, the American Dream and Promise Act of 2019 and S. 874, the Dream Act of 2019. While these bills are not companion bills and differ in some details, we support both bills and the House of Representatives and the Senate finding common ground on policies that assist young immigrants. Based on psychological research, we support the key provisions in both bills that allow hardworking, young immigrants, who have already demonstrated their strong work ethic and potential, to gain conditional permanent resident status. We also support the confidentiality provisions in both bills, since losing one’s privacy in the application process is likely to add to the individual’s stress. We sincerely hope that Congress can find a permanent legislative solution to protect undocumented immigrants who arrived in the United States as children.

APA is a scientific and professional organization representing psychology, comprised of clinicians, researchers, educators, consultants and students across the United States and around the world. APA works to advance the creation, communication and application of psychological knowledge to benefit society and improve people's lives. Numerous APA members serve immigrant youth and adults in a wide range of settings, including schools, clinics, community centers, hospitals and refugee resettlement centers.

Impact of Fear of Deportation

Research demonstrates that adult immigrants who fear deportation are much more vulnerable to heart disease, asthma, diabetes, depression, anxiety and post-traumatic stress disorder. Enduring effects seen in children include:
• Emotional and behavioral changes or difficulties;
• Sleep and eating disturbances;
• Excessive crying;
• Increased fear;
• Poorer academic performance, and
• Aggressive and withdrawn behavior in older youth.¹

Furthermore, many of the immigrant youth and family members involved have already experienced traumatic and stressful circumstances in their home countries. Central American nations have seen a surge in violence and are some of the most violent in the world.² The fear of deportation could exacerbate the psychological trauma that these immigrants have already experienced.

Specifically, psychological and medical research on child trauma and migration stressors shows that successive traumatic events—including deportation-related experiences, such as immigration raids and exposure to violence in home countries—put children at risk for the development of a range of disorders, including depression, anxiety and post-traumatic stress disorder.³ Research evidence also demonstrates a clear link between exposure to multiple traumatic experiences during childhood and a 4-to 12-fold increased risk of early incidence of alcohol/drug abuse, suicide and heart disease, which are leading causes of death in adulthood.⁴

Keep Families Together

Based on the large body of research that indicates the deleterious effects of parent-child separation, APA strongly supports policies that keep families together. Although Dreamers are primarily young adults, if the American Dream and Promise Act of 2019 or similar legislation is not passed, they could be separated from their parents who are U.S. citizens. They also face separation from their own U.S.-born citizen children.

H.R. 6 proposes meaningful legislative changes that enable families to stay together. According to the APA’s Presidential Task Force on Immigration, sustained parental separation predicts ongoing difficulty trusting adults and institutions, as well as reduced educational attainment. Sudden and unexpected family separation is also associated with stress and emotional trauma for children, housing instability, food insecurity, interrupted schooling and behavioral/emotional responses, such as aggression and changes to sleep and appetite. Parental separation can also have a long-term negative impact on children in adulthood.⁵

As psychologists, we have serious concerns about sending young immigrants back to dangerous conditions in their home countries that many Dreamers came to the U.S. to escape. Furthermore, many of these young people have no recollection of, or connection with, their country of origin.

Dreamers’ Current Experience

Research suggests that experiences of Dreamers are distinct from other immigrants and are associated with uncertainty about the future and a disconnect from their country of origin, as well as resiliency and educational attainment.⁶ Furthermore, while much of the scientific research
focuses on the negative aspects of the health and mental health of Dreamers due to their lack of permanent legal status, there is also evidence of their high level of engagement in society. This is related to self-confidence and social support within the immigrant community. If legislation is passed to support Dreamers, they can be expected to continue to contribute positively to society given their passion and desire to stay in the U.S.

We are very encouraged that so many members of Congress are dedicated to finding a permanent solution for Dreamers. If APA can be of assistance in this effort, please contact Serena Dávila, JD (sdavila@apa.org or 202-336-6061), in our Government Relations Office.

Sincerely,

Arthur C. Evans, Jr., PhD
Chief Executive Officer

cc: The Honorable Lucille Roybal-Allard
The Honorable Richard Durbin
The Honorable Lindsey Graham

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