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Open doors for DREAMers

**By Marlene Lao-Collins
and Ryan Stark Lilienthal**

During this Thanksgiving season, when we remember the feast the Pilgrims celebrated with members of the Wampanoag tribe, whose compassion helped the Pilgrims survive, we call upon Congress to help another group of immigrants: undocumented youth. These individuals grow up in the United States, pursue the American Dream, and wish to reach their full potential as contributing members of our communities, but they are stymied because of their legal status.

According to America's Voice Education Fund, every year, an estimated "65,000 young people (who) graduate from high school in the U.S. ... find themselves unable to work, join the military or go to college because of their immigration status." This statistic reflects reality in central New Jersey, where many undocumented teenagers graduate from high school at the top of their class.

The Development, Relief and Education of Alien Minors (DREAM) Act, which the House of Representatives and Senate will vote on in the coming weeks, provides an opportunity for undocumented youth to legalize their status based on their academic success and commitment to attend college or enroll in the military. Specifically, the legislation creates a conditional six-year path to resident status for individuals who complete high school, show good moral character, and complete at least two years of higher education or serve for at least two years in the U.S. military. It is estimated that approximately 2.1 million young people would become eligible for the DREAM Act upon its passage.

Among those who would benefit from the DREAM Act are immigrants such as

Marisol (a pseudonym provided to protect her identity), who arrived from Mexico to the United States at the age of 3 with her parents and moved to Trenton. She recently celebrated her "Quincenaria," which is a traditional Mexican 15th birthday celebration. Marisol is a highly motivated student. She is disciplined and works hard to get good grades; she is on the school's swim team and volunteers in her church to work with young children. She aspires to go on to college, like so many of her friends in the church youth group. However, she recently became aware that she is not a citizen and is crushed to learn the door to her dream is closed.

Some who oppose the DREAM Act contend that it is a form of amnesty that rewards rule-breakers. The immigrant youth who will benefit from the DREAM Act, however, are not the ones who made the decision to come to the United States. Denying these young people the chance to legalize their status essentially punishes them for their parents' actions.

Passing the DREAM Act not only benefits young immigrants, but advances U.S. interests. The individuals who would gain legal status from the DREAM Act's passage could then pursue their desired careers. Some would become doctors, nurses, teachers, lawyers, entrepreneurs and other contributing citizens. A 2010 UCLA North American Integration and Development Center study forecasts that the total earnings of DREAM Act beneficiaries over their working lives would be between \$1.4 trillion and \$3.6 trillion, giving them greater ability to contribute to their communities, help the economy grow and provide more in tax revenues.

While the DREAM Act has the backing of Democrats and Republicans in Washington, D.C., as well as the support

of a substantial majority of Americans across the country, it has repeatedly fallen victim to politics. According to a Nov. 10 Lake Research Partners poll, 66 percent of Americans nationwide support the DREAM Act, including 81 percent of Democrats, 60 percent of independents and 57 percent of Republicans polled.

In central New Jersey, we are fortunate to have two champions on important issues that affect immigrants. Rep. Rush Holt, D-Hopewell, has been a longtime supporter of the DREAM Act; and Rep. Chris Smith, R-Hamilton, has a record of fighting for refugees and against human trafficking. We urge them to be a bipartisan beacon to their colleagues on Capitol Hill by voting to pass the DREAM Act.

Such congressional leadership at this time is in keeping with the meaning of Thanksgiving. While celebrating Thanksgiving dates back to the Pilgrims, President Abraham Lincoln established the holiday as a national event in 1863. He proclaimed the holiday following the Battle of Gettysburg, and set the date for celebration one week after he delivered the Gettysburg Address. In his speech, President Lincoln reminded his listeners of the Founding Fathers, who "brought forth on this continent a new nation, conceived in liberty, and dedicated to the proposition that all men are created equal" — in short, the foundation of the American Dream. By passing the DREAM Act, we renew President Lincoln's Thanksgiving call for "a new birth of freedom."

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