

## Med student “dreamers” speak out on maintaining DACA protections

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Blanca Morales is a student at Harvard Medical School and a Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals (DACA) recipient who is suddenly living with the fear of deportation. “Now, with the potential of DACA being ripped away by the new change in leadership, I find myself mourning the dream of becoming a community physician, and instead dealing with the nightmare of being separated from my loved ones,” she said. And there are many more medical students with DACA status just like Morales.

“Unfortunately, it would not just be my nightmare, but that of hundreds of thousands of students and hardworking individuals who only wish to improve this country they call home,” Blanca told *AMA Wire*®.

A bipartisan, bicameral bill recently introduced in the U.S. House of Representatives seeks to protect from deportation those with DACA status. The AMA recently expressed its support of the bill, “Bar Removal of Individuals who Dream and Grow our Economy Act,” also known as the BRIDGE Act.



At the age of 5, Morales did not understand the long and difficult journey to the United States. She could only focus on the pain in her stomach as she walked to reunite with her parents in Southern

California.

Once there, she “soon found many families were like our own: new to this country, hardworking and striving to establish roots in a land that introduced us to the idea of dreaming big and, paradoxically, kept us hidden in the shadows.”

“I believed my teachers when they said that if I just worked hard enough, I could achieve great things,” she said. Morales earned high grades, but, due to her undocumented status, spent four years at Santa Ana Community College where her concern for her community drove her to pursue a career in medicine.

After being named valedictorian of her class, Morales transferred to the University of California, Irvine, where she graduated with honors and a degree in neurobiology.

“However, my immigration status had not changed, and despite having a tremendous desire and academic potential, I put my dreams of becoming a doctor on hold,” she said. “Eight years after receiving my B.S., students like myself could be considered for matriculation in medical programs as a direct result of President Obama’s implementation of DACA.”

A letter of acceptance to Harvard brought Blanca to tears. “I let myself believe I was finally given permission to contribute to society,” she said, concluding with a note of uncertainty.

## **Proud to contribute**

Another DACA recipient, Zarna Patel, is a second-year medical student at Loyola University Chicago Stritch School of Medicine, has been in the United States for 20 years, emigrating from Gujarat, India, when she was only 3 years old.

“For every single one of those years, regardless of what the United States considered me, I considered it my home, my pride, my people,” she said.

There are 28 students with DACA status at Stritch, which is the largest concentration of DACA students at a medical school in the country.

“I have worked tirelessly to serve my communities and push myself to be a physician this country and the AMA can be proud of,” Patel said. “My journey to medical school and my goals for the future are a testament to my commitment to the people of America and to the medical profession.”



During her undergraduate education, Patel dedicated her time to pediatric cancer patients, the homeless and sexual-assault survivors. She volunteered in a clinic for the uninsured, even though she did not qualify for any of the services provided due to her immigration status. She has mentored other students and raised awareness of HIV/AIDS. And she has goals for the future.

“I hope to specialize in primary care and work with the underserved in rural and urban communities,” Patel said.

“I hope to implement increasing diversity and inclusion in medical education and practice,” she said. “I hope to champion a nonprofit organization dedicated to promoting health as a human right. I hope to serve and treat the whole person—mind, body and soul.”

“From the day we began our medical education, we have been welcomed into your dedicated, cerebral and forward-thinking community,” Patel said. “We have not given up on the people of this great nation, so please do not give up on us.”

## **A fuller part of society**

A second-year medical student at the Icahn School of Medicine at Mount Sinai, Denisse Rojas also is a DACA recipient. She arrived in the United States from Mexico at 10 months old and attended public schools in California.

“Though I’ve faced many hurdles, I was able to work throughout college to afford my education and confided in trusted advisors to gain access to professional opportunities,” she said.



Rojas was the first undocumented student to receive research funding from the University of California, Berkeley, Haas Scholars Program, has co-authored a research paper in the journal *Science*, and co-founded Pre-Health Dreamers, a national organization that helps undocumented students achieve their career aspirations in health care.

“When DACA arrived in 2012, it was a relief to so many who could begin their educational endeavors, resume their careers or even let themselves dream of becoming a health professional,” Rojas said. “It felt surreal when my DACA approval came in the mail. DACA has allowed for the significant economic and social incorporation of undocumented students into American society and has only served to benefit communities nationwide.”

As a doctor, Rojas intends to provide care to underserved, immigrant and undocumented patients, and serve low-income communities. She recently published a policy paper with the UC Berkeley Labor Center. The report provides guidance to policymakers and advocates on creating county and city-level health care programs for undocumented residents.

“Unfortunately, none of my aspirations are possible without DACA or another long-term immigration remedy for undocumented immigrants in the United States,” Rojas said. She called for support for “motivated individuals like myself, who have so much to contribute to the medical field and society.”

## **Aim to increase physician diversity**

With no choice in the matter, Diana Andino, a medical student at Stritch, arrived with her parents in the U.S. from Ecuador. They sought opportunity for their daughter to have a better education and future. “Once I was granted DACA, I knew that my aspiration of becoming a physician would be possible,” Andino said.

“Loyola was the first school to welcome DACA students and facilitate for us to have financial

resources,” she said. “It is an honor to be part of this extraordinary institution alongside great classmates and faculty.”

Andino believes that, as an immigrant and a physician, she will be able to relate to people who are facing challenges. “I feel a responsibility to take care of people that come from a similar background as mine, and give them a voice while taking care of them,” she said

“After recent events, I continue to pray over my family, and the rest of the immigrant community,” Andino said. “It has been difficult to keep that in mind while also worrying about my next exam here at school.”

“Diverse patient populations deserve to have a diverse physician community,” Andino said. “One way to increase this diversity is to facilitate entrance and allow a pathway for financing medical education for DACA students.”

## **Fellow students voice support for “dreamers”**

In addition to letters from DACA recipients, *AMA Wire* also received an outpouring of support from their fellow students. Watch the website in the coming days for more on why DACA students are so important to diversity in medical education and the future of the health care workforce.