

Testimony of Dalia Larios
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Subcommittee on Immigration, Citizenship, and Border Safety

“Strengthening our Workforce and Economy through Higher Education and Immigration”
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I would first like to thank Chairman Padilla, Ranking Member Cornyn, and members of this subcommittee, for your time and the opportunity to share my story.

My name is Dalia Larios. I am a doctor completing my residency training at the Harvard Radiation Oncology Program where I care for cancer patients in Boston, MA at Massachusetts General Hospital and Brigham and Women's Hospital. I am also a DACA recipient.

At the age of ten, I came to the United States with my family. I grew up in Mesa, Arizona, a city approximately three hours away from the Mexico-U.S. border. Even as a child, I knew that my state was often at the center of immigration debates and with that came a constant reminder of my vulnerability. As the eldest and only undocumented child in my family, I worried my parents would be detained by ICE and never come home. I worried I would also be taken away and separated from my three younger siblings. My concerns extended beyond my immediate family. I was frequently distressed by common hardships immigrant communities faced—neighbors who avoided seeking medical care for fear of deportation, friends who agonized about surprise raids by ICE, and classmates who mourned futures that would never exist with limited educational opportunities.

For years, I remained grounded and inspired by my parents: my father, a construction worker, and my mother, a house cleaner. If you look carefully, my father's hands are different. Calluses on his palms and scars on his fingers testify to years of landscape and construction work; there is a palpable grittiness to his handshakes paying tribute to years of sacrifice. Just as admirable is my mother's intangible resilience—she is a woman who learned to drive even when told it was not for women and who started her own business cleaning houses with limited English proficiency. Seeing my parents work long hours at multiple jobs to support our family motivated me to focus on things I could control in my life.

I concentrated on my classes, finding refuge in my books. Through books, I escaped to places where I felt safe. Growing up, I had often felt as if I had committed a crime—the laws of this country made me feel guilty and insecure even though I was only a child. I felt as if there was something tarnished about who I was as a human being. In hope of being worthy and accepted, I used school to show that I cared and was grateful, that I wanted to give back. As a teenager, I picked up several jobs to support my education, cleaning houses with my mom and tutoring younger students. I was often asked, “Dalia, why do you do this? Even if you go to college and graduate, you will never be able to have a job using your degree. What's the point?” While those words were difficult to hear, I believed, like many other immigrants, in the possibility of something better.

Still, the specter of my undocumented status has shadowed every major transition of my life. Despite graduating in the top 1% of my high school class with nearly 700 students, I never knew if I would be able to attend college, let alone afford it. No one in my family had attended university and, as an undocumented student, I was not eligible for federal or state financial aid. State laws classified me as an international student, which raised tuition and excluded me from most forms of institutional scholarships. Some colleges asked me to provide proof of U.S. Citizenship or permanent residency if I wanted to attend classes beyond one semester, which made this process heartbreaking and again made me question my worth in a system that did not see me. Thankfully, through a community that believed in me and the generosity of private donors, I was able to attend Arizona State University. I graduated summa cum laude with a degree in biological sciences and a passion for medicine.

Soon after graduation in June 2012, Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals, or DACA, was created. This program cast a light on a generation of young people like me who were living in the shadows. Because of DACA, I was able to take a gap year to work and earn money to afford the medical school application process. Even as I took the MCAT and paid application fees, I didn't know what schools would consider my application, or how I would afford the cost of medical education. Undeterred, I applied to medical school and after an anxious interview cycle, I became the first DACA recipient accepted to Harvard Medical School. In 2019, I obtained my medical degree and graduated with honors.

At the beginning of 2020, I served in intensive care units at the peak of the COVID-19 pandemic. Many times, I remember being the only doctor who spoke Spanish when most patients were Spanish speaking. As I peered through patient windows, I could not help but feel an extra sense of responsibility to provide the best care possible. And yet, during this time, my own future was in question as the U.S. Supreme Court was also set to decide on DACA's future in June of 2020. Although the program was spared, this process highlighted the susceptibility of DACA to political discord.

Now, in my specialty training, I care daily for cancer patients undergoing treatment with radiation therapy. Serving them is the honor of my life which I hope to do for decades to come. However, my future continues to be filled with uncertainty. I worry about where I will work when I am done with medical residency. What states will offer a professional medical license to a DACA recipient? What of my research? Will I be able to attend international conferences one day and share my work outside the U.S. – something I have not done since I arrived from Mexico over two decades ago? Given the impermanence of DACA I fear the program will continue to be threatened for years to come and with it, my livelihood and that of countless other immigrants.

For me, the thought of deportation is exceptionally painful to bear. Most days, I don't allow myself to think about it; it would mean losing everything and everyone I know. My siblings are all U.S. citizens and my parents have also adjusted their status—my mother is now a permanent resident and my father a U.S. citizen. I am the only person in my family who is undocumented. I would also be separated from my patients who are part of the communities that raised me, the very communities I hope to continue serving as a doctor and researcher. Knowing the threat of deportation is always present, I remind myself of where I find refuge: my family, my books and now as a doctor, my patients. Some days, I think about the 10-year-old who first came to this country and wonder, has she done enough?

Tomorrow, June 15th, will mark 10 years since DACA came into existence. However imperfect, DACA exemplifies the power of higher education and meaningful community integration. It showcases that the desire to succeed is not sufficient if structural and systemic changes are not implemented to provide inclusion. I could not have become a doctor without the protections of DACA. And hundreds of thousands of immigrants share my story. In the past two years, we have seen immigrants play vital roles during a global pandemic—from doctors and researchers to teachers and military officials. I am proud to serve alongside my colleagues in these spaces. I hope that as a country we work to support policies that acknowledge our full potential and our full humanity.