

## **Opening Statement: Dr. Manuel Bernal Mejia**

June 2021

Good morning Senators. My name is Dr. Manuel Bernal Mejia. Thank you for giving me the opportunity to share my journey of becoming an emergency medicine physician as an undocumented individual.

First, I want to make sure to thank Chair Durbin and ranking member Senator Grassley, as well as Senator Graham for introducing the Dream Act with Senator Durbin. I would also be remiss if I also did not thank Senator Blackburn for her service to my home state of Tennessee.

It is an honor to be with you all and share a bit of my story. Also, I want to recognize my sister Jazmin Bernal, who is with me today to share this special moment. My mother was 24 years old and my father was 27 when they made the difficult decision to leave everything known to them to come to the United States in search of a better life for their 2-year-old son. Little did they know their decision would lead to my career as an emergency medicine physician. Day after day, I provide critical care to save American lives on the frontlines of the pandemic, even as my own future in this country remains uncertain.

My memories of my birth country are shaped only by the family pictures that were shown to me as a child. To be honest, the United States is the only home that I know. Home is the beautiful state of Tennessee, where I grew up and had quite the average upbringing. As a kid, I was enrolled in way too many extracurriculars - from karate to swim team - all while living in blissful ignorance of the gravity of what it meant to be undocumented. It was not until I first attempted to obtain a driver's permit that I started to grasp the extent of the many barriers I would face as an undocumented person. Nonetheless, I forged ahead, diving into my studies to distract myself from what my undocumented status might mean for my future. I'm proud to tell you that I was one of 36 individuals accepted to the University Honors Program at the University of Tennessee at Chattanooga, where I eventually graduated *Summa Cum Laude*.

I developed an appreciation for the medical profession early on when I witnessed the compassionate care a loved one received at St. Jude Children's Research Hospital. This transformative experience served as my first true exposure to the field of medicine and helped me embrace the idea that my unique skill set and talents could be best utilized delivering medical care to others. In college, and later, as a medical student, I realized that a career in emergency medicine was the best avenue for combining my love for serving marginalized communities and pursuing medicine.

While in college, I had the unique opportunity to serve as a medical scribe for doctors in the ER of a small community hospital in Chattanooga, Tennessee. There, I worked side by side with Emergency Medicine physicians, and I eagerly absorbed as much as possible about serving ill patients. I saw firsthand the inherent vulnerability patients face in the emergency department, and how that vulnerability is exacerbated by language, cultural, and educational barriers. I observed the ER's role in the community as the access point to healthcare for people from marginalized communities. And all while my desire to become an emergency medicine physician grew stronger by the day, I knew that being accepted to medical school as an undocumented

student would be almost impossible. I spent endless nights drafting emails to numerous medical school deans inquiring whether my undocumented status would obstruct my dreams of matriculating into a medical school in the United States. Repeatedly, those conversations would end in disappointment. It seemed like my hopes of becoming a physician were getting further out of reach.

The DACA program changed everything and opened many new doors for me. Importantly, it allowed me to enroll at the Loyola University Chicago Stritch School of Medicine, where I eventually went on to graduate within the top third of my class.

Fast forward to today: I am now less than one week away from completing a 3-year residency training program specializing in emergency medicine. And while DACA has been a lifeline, only a pathway to citizenship granted by Congress would allow me the ability to live free from fear, safe with the knowledge that I can continue to serve my community.

As an ER doctor, I have taken care of patients at all stages of life - from delivering babies taking their first breath, to providing comfort care measures for dying patients during their last moments of life. I trained during the height of a global pandemic, taking care of a too-high-to-count number of critically ill COVID-19 patients, all while fearing the possibility of deportation because the previous administration was working relentlessly to dismantle DACA. I know that no protections are truly permanent, save for ones provided by legislation, which only you all have the power to grant.

I am honored to serve my community during this pandemic, and to help save lives at a time when our country has collectively experienced great loss -- even as I face my own uncertain future. And while it is true that most Dreamers are not doctors, we all contribute to this country in our own way. America is our home and on behalf of the millions of Dreamers living in the U.S. I ask that we be allowed to give back to our home permanently after being allowed to earn citizenship.

I've been offered a position as an attending physician in a hospital in Illinois where I will continue to serve the American people. While I know I'll work my hardest every day, only a pathway to citizenship will allow me to serve fully, and to continue my career as an ER doctor. I encourage the members of this committee to help ensure that young people like me, who have built our lives here, can contribute fully to the communities we know and love by passing a pathway to citizenship.

Thank you again for allowing me to share my story with you today.