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Statement of the American Immigration Lawyers Association
Submitted to the Senate Committee on the Judiciary
Hearing on “Dream Deferred: The Urgent Need to Protect Immigrant Youth”

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Contact:

Gregory Chen
Senior Director of Government Relations
gchen@aila.org

Jennifer Ibañez Whitlock
Supervisory Policy and Practice Counsel
jwhitlock@aila.org

America urgently needs to modernize its immigration system. After nearly 30 years without major reforms, the country is unable to fully capture the enormous benefits that immigrants and their families bring to their communities, businesses, the economy, and the country. As the national bar association of nearly 17,000 immigration lawyers and law professors, the American Immigration Lawyers Association (AILA) urges Congress to create a more efficient, orderly, and fair system to meet the nation’s needs. Essential to any reform is providing a pathway to citizenship for Dreamers and other people who have lived in and contributed to our country but have no way to obtain permanent immigration status.

Dreamers are a particularly compelling population due to their circumstances as young people who were brought to the United States at an early age and only know America as their home. With the creation of the Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals (DACA) program in 2012, many Dreamers have received temporary legal status and work permits.¹ According to 2021 data, over 800,000 people have been granted DACA and it is estimated that over 900,000 U.S. residents are DACA-eligible.² Within the population of DACA-eligible residents, 94 percent are employed and bring an estimated \$21.2 billion dollars in spending power.³ Across the country, AILA attorneys have represented Dreamers as well as their families and the businesses that employ them in all sectors of the American economy.⁴ During the COVID-19 pandemic, their contributions and those of other people lacking immigration status were vital to the nation’s recovery.⁵ As we approach this year’s spring graduation ceremonies, many of the young people in the audiences hold much promise but also shoulder the burden of being undocumented or could soon age-out of legal status in the only country they have ever known.⁶ Indeed, 80 percent of the nearly 120,000 undocumented students who graduated high school in 2023 no longer qualify because of the DACA program’s timing requirements.⁷

Years of polling has shown that significant majorities of Americans support granting citizenship to Dreamers. A January 2024 UMass -Amherst/WCVB poll showed 68 percent of respondents support citizenship for Dreamers.⁸ Since the first introduction of the Dream Act in 2001 by Senators Durbin (D-IL) and Hatch (R-UT), many bills that protect Dreamers have been

introduced in Congress, most of them bipartisan.⁹ These bills provide permanent legal status and an opportunity to apply for citizenship to those who pass background checks and meet other eligibility requirements. At their core, these bills recognize that providing legal pathways to permanent status, even for the undocumented, is in line with America’s history and values.

While protecting Dreamers is vital, Congress must reform the immigration system in its entirety. Managing the flow of people into the United States – whether for family, economic, and humanitarian purposes or at borders, airports or consulates abroad –requires an all-of-government solution. The system must be more efficient and orderly while guaranteeing fairness and ensuring compliance with the law. At the same time, the system must be able to match and even anticipate the future social and economic needs of businesses and states that want and need immigrants. AILA calls upon Congress and the President to enact laws and issue policies that update our legal immigration system. These include:

1. Significant investments to ensure the efficient, orderly, and fair processing of migrants arriving at the U.S. southern border, including targeted resources to combat cartels smuggling Fentanyl and other narcotics.
2. Reforms to the visa system and expansion of other legal pathways to meet the needs of American families and businesses coupled with robust funding for the agencies responsible for administering immigration benefits and processing visa applications.
3. Permanent legal status for people who are undocumented or who have lived for years in a temporary status.

Immigration is essential to the country’s economic growth. By recognizing the tremendous strengths immigration brings to our nation, especially the promise of immigrant youth, Congress will ensure our collective prosperity. AILA calls on Congress to act now to protect undocumented youth and modernize the immigration system for a better future.

¹ American Immigration Council, “[Map the Impact: The DACA-Eligible Population](#),” last accessed May 6, 2024.

² Id.

³ Id.

⁴ American Immigration Lawyers Association, “[DACA: Failure is Not an Option!](#),” June 15, 2023; “[Helping DACA Recipients Renew](#),” March 7, 2018, and “[AILA Dream Defenders](#),” August 4, 2011.

⁵ Center for American Progress, “[The Demographic and Economic Impacts of DACA Recipients: Fall 2021 Edition](#),” November, 24, 2021 (estimating that 343,000 DACA recipients have been working on the frontlines of the coronavirus response in health care, education, and food services).

⁶ NBC News, “[Yale-Bound Valedictorian Comes Out as Undocumented in Emotional Speech](#),” June 9, 2016; NPR, “[Who belongs in America? An undocumented journalist tells his story](#),” November 24, 2023.

⁷ The Nation, “[Without Expanded DACA Protections, Undocumented Students Are Being Left Behind](#),” April 24, 2024.

⁸ WCVB News, “[Poll: Majority supports path to citizenship for Dreamers, migrants](#),” February 14, 2024;

⁹ 118th Congress: [H.R. 16 American Dream and Promise Act of 2023](#), 117th Congress: [S.264 Dream Act of 2021](#), [HR 4331 America’s CHILDREN Act of 2021](#), 115th Congress: [H.R. 496 the BRIDGE Act](#); See also, “[Former DHS Secretaries Write Letter to Congress in Favor of Dreamers](#),” January 3, 2018.