

## **Melanny (alias), DACA recipient, higher education worker**

### **TESTIMONY:**

Good morning, everyone.

My name is Melanny, and I am a DACA recipient.

I was born in Ecuador and came to Chicago when I was one year old. I have spent nearly my entire life in the United States. Everything that has shaped me—my education, my community, my values, and my dreams—was formed here.

Because this is my home.

Like so many immigrant families, my parents came to this country searching for opportunity and a better future for their children. Growing up, they constantly reminded me that no one could ever take away my education. They taught me that education was about much more than a degree. It was about opportunity, finding your voice, and building a future that could change not only your own life, but the lives of others.

As I got older, I began to realize that my immigration status would shape opportunities that many of my classmates never had to think twice about.

In high school, I was a top cadet in my NJROTC program. I dreamed of serving the country I call home and hoped to pursue an ROTC scholarship after graduation. But despite my accomplishments, I wasn't eligible because I did not have a Social Security number.

Then DACA was announced.

I was 17 years old and one of the nearly 13,000 young people who lined up in Chicago seeking application support.

For the first time, I felt like the future I imagined for myself was possible.

Because of DACA, I was able to pursue higher education at City Colleges of Chicago and later Northeastern Illinois University. I became the first person in my family to earn a bachelor's degree and later the first person in my family to earn a master's degree.

Today, I work in higher education because I believe every student deserves the opportunity to dream, belong, and thrive.

But while DACA opened doors, it was never a pathway to citizenship.

Today, DACA is being chipped away at piece by piece. Hundreds of recipients have been detained or deported, thousands face uncertainty due to delays, and recent efforts to strengthen protections have failed to move forward.

I am also waiting on my own DACA renewal.

Even after doing everything right, making plans for the future is difficult when the stability of your life depends on court decisions, processing delays, and political debates beyond your control. But this moment is bigger than me.

It is about TPS holders, young people who never qualified for DACA, workers, families, and entire communities who continue contributing to this country while living in uncertainty.

We must deliver protections for all of us.

Because we belong here. Home is here. And we are here to stay.

I urge Congress to finally deliver a pathway to citizenship—not only for DACA recipients, but for immigrant families across this country.

Thank you.

**BIOGRAPHY:**

Melanny is a first-generation Latina, DACA recipient, higher education leader, and advocate for immigrant communities. Born in Ecuador and raised in Chicago, she arrived in the United States at the age of one and has spent more than a decade navigating life under DACA while advocating for educational access and opportunities for undocumented students. From undocumented student to national scholarship leader, advocate, and higher education professional, Melanny's journey reflects the power of opportunity, resilience, and the profound impact immigrants have on their communities when given the chance to thrive.

## Sam Lee (alias), DACA recipient, healthcare worker

### TESTIMONY:

Thank you for the opportunity to share my story.

I was only 6 years old when my family immigrated to the US. We left South Korea after US-backed economic policies were implemented in 1988, which led to the 1997 economic crash.

We built our home in the northern suburbs of Chicago, where my younger siblings were born. I fell in love with our community, going to a friend's quince, freestyling in the school hallways, and friends asking me about Korean dramas.

My parents worked hard, owning their own restaurant. Around the time I was applying for college, the DACA program was announced. Because of DACA and my family's labor, I was able to attend college and major in psychology.

Now, I work in healthcare research in Chicago. Immigrants work in restaurants, schools, childcare, and many other places that are essential to our society and economy. **But we are more than just our labor and the taxes we pay.**

We build community and show up where systems fail. Through mutual aid efforts in Chicago, I have: been outside to get hotels for unhoused people during freezing temperatures, bolstered a food distribution and clothing closet, supported my trans friends as a pre-crisis responder, administered Narcan, and more. Many of these efforts started to serve asylum seekers, but they grew as we worked in solidarity with many communities, recognizing that our struggles are interconnected.

In growing up in the US, community has been critical to my well-being. I am thankful for organizations like the HANA Center, an immigrant justice organization based in Chicago's Third Congressional District. HANA Center provides social services and organizes Korean and multiethnic immigrants to fight for the systemic change we need. Each year, HANA Center assists nearly 200 young people like myself to file their DACA renewals. I've built community with other DACA recipients and immigrants and had opportunities I would've never had otherwise.

But now DACA is being destroyed. People are facing long delays that push them out of status, and some are being deported. Just last week in my childhood suburb, a disabled DACA recipient and educator was fired due to the renewal backlog. She did everything "right" – but the system failed.

Our immigrant families and friends, not only DACA recipients, are under attack. Communities are being targeted and terrorized because of their skin color or how they came to live here. Existing opportunities are being destroyed, and new ones are nonexistent.

**We need a permanent solution.** We need a pathway to citizenship for all 11 million undocumented immigrants, and we need it right now. I call on Congress to pass the Registry Act and to abolish ICE. Every person deserves dignity and has the right to belong. Thank you.

**BIOGRAPHY:**

Sam Lee is a DACA recipient from South Korea. He grew up in the northern suburbs of Chicago and currently works in healthcare. He is a community leader with the HANA Center.

## **Luis Enrique or Quique (alias), DACA recipient, paralegal**

### **TESTIMONY:**

It's an honor to be part of a movement that's been unapologetic in advocating for the livelihoods of our most vulnerable brothers and sisters.

My name is Luis. I'm 27 years old, and grew up in DeKalb, a small (but mighty) rural city. DeKalb has taught me the power of compassion and what it means to be a good neighbor. But growing up undocumented means you're conditioned not to draw attention to yourself, making it easy for someone to get lost alone in the process.

There's a constant feeling that no matter the triumphs and obstacles you overcome, it may never actually be enough, as if the world seems to be designed to be completely against you at every turn.

Thousands of DACA recipients are being pushed out of status, as renewal applications continue to be backlogged. Others are being actively targeted by immigration despite their valid status. None of this is happening by accident, and DACA is not the only program being attacked. So too are protections like TPS, asylum, and humanitarian parole. The efforts to weaken DACA point to a larger delegitimization push to strip millions of people of their status. And that hurts all of us. Employers lose workers. Schools lose educators. Hospitals lose nurses, doctors, and caregivers. Communities lose neighbors, leaders, business owners, and taxpayers.

As a DACA recipient myself, I feel as though I have been forced to live life with my hands tied, knowing that despite earning a college degree and obtaining a job, I still lack stability and agency, and that what I've worked for can all be taken away in the blink of an eye.

Pero seguimos luchando, y aunque agüitados, mantenemos la fe, porque no lo hacemos por nosotros sino por los que queremos más, porque sin ellos, no tendríamos las bendiciones que tenemos ya.

Today's DACA anniversary is due in large part to Chicago's youth activists from the "IYJL" who, 16 years ago, bravely told their stories trying to change this broken immigration system. The legacy of their work and courage continues today.

Today is actually about more than just DACA. It's also about the communities left out. The parents. The siblings. The neighbors and family who never qualified.

We're fighting for a future in which we're ALL protected. Where all working families—including immigrant families—have the stability we all deserve.

Because Freedom and democracy are not a zero-sum game, and our parents are no less deserving of a pathway to citizenship than DACA recipients.

**BIOGRAPHY:**

Quique is a DACA recipient from Mexico. He currently works as a paralegal at a nonprofit. As a DACAmented individual, Quique believes in the power of community activism and is excited to work for an organization that prioritizes it in the legal practice model. He hopes to attend law school to serve marginalized communities in public policy and legal representation.

## **Laura (alias), undocumented student**

### **TESTIMONY:**

Good afternoon, and thank you for the opportunity to speak today.

Today marks 14 years since DACA was created. For many young immigrants, DACA opened doors to education, employment, and stability. But it was never meant to be the final solution, it was only a temporary one.

My family and I immigrated from South America to the United States when I was very young. Because of when we arrived, I was not eligible to apply for DACA; a reality that hundreds of thousands of other young people who do not qualify for DACA's protections know all too well.

For over a decade, I have called this country home. For my father, it's been close to three decades. So I ask: how many more years must families wait for a permanent solution?

Being undocumented is more than someone's immigration status, it becomes a way of life when a pathway to citizenship is consistently denied because of political gamesmanship. It is the fear of going to school, driving a car, leaving your home, or simply living your daily life while wondering if you'll return home that night or if your family will be torn apart. It means carrying uncertainty into every decision you make.

As a rising college senior pursuing degrees in Finance and Economics with a minor in Pre-Law, I have done everything that so many of us students are told will lead to success. Go to school so you can get your degree. Get your degree so you can get a good job. Get a good job so you can buy a home. That's what we have been advised. So that's what I've done. I have excelled academically, taken on leadership roles, and dedicated myself to serving my community. But when I graduate, I still won't be able to legally work in the profession I have spent years preparing for.

Without a pathway to citizenship, students like me are denied opportunities to contribute fully to the place we call home. We struggle to access graduate school financing, buy homes, start businesses, and build the futures we envision not just for ourselves, but for our communities. We are ready to contribute our skills, talents, and ambitions, but we need the opportunity to do so.

Today, as we reflect on 14 years of DACA, I urge Congress to move beyond temporary protections and to deliver lasting solutions. We need a pathway to permanent status, work authorization, and security for all working families, including immigrants.

DACA gave hope, but hope alone is not enough. We also need action. Bold, courageous action that ensures we have the chance to live without fear, to work, to learn, and to contribute to the country we call home. Because no one should spend decades proving they belong in the only place they have ever known.

Thank you.

**BIOGRAPHY:**

Laura is a first-generation college student, advocate, and community leader. She is committed to expanding educational access and supporting immigrant communities. Her work centers on advancing equity in higher education, connecting students with resources, and creating pathways to opportunity. Through advocacy and community engagement, she works to ensure that all students have the support needed to succeed academically and professionally.

## Jocelyn Aranda-Ortiz, deportation defense organizer

### TESTIMONY:

Good morning, my name is Jocelyn Aranda-Ortiz, and I am the Deportation Defense Organizer at The Resurrection Project. Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals has been in headlines and public debate since it was created 14 years ago.

DACA was won through youth organizing, storytelling, and bold actions like Coming Out of the Shadows. It exists because young people demanded protection and we have had to fight every year to keep it alive. What was meant to offer safety and the ability to work has become a fragile, uncertain lifeline.

I want to share the testimony of two sisters in our community, both DACA recipients: "Portense bien, porque tienen mucho que perder" (behave well because you have a lot to lose) is something that our siblings and we grew up hearing from mom and dad. A family of six and a family of mixed status, my sister and I with DACA.

Our nightmare became a reality in October, 2025 when we were wrongfully detained by Border Patrol. Two butterflies caught in a net. We were manhandled, thrown harshly to the ground, told "you're getting a free flight", yelled at, taunted, made fun of, threatened with deportation and that included our family. They attempted to intimidate us and escalated the situation while we attempted to protect the people by exercising our right to film and protest.

During our excruciating detainment in the parking lot of the Broadview facility we waited hours to find out what would happen with us, despite being threatened with deportation. After hours of waiting and not being questioned about our status, border patrol finally approached to ask if we had DACA. We exercised our right to remain silent, but they expressed that we were doing ourselves a disservice by not answering because, "if you guys are DACA we cannot deport you." After they learned that we in fact, were DACA recipients they got ready to release us—saying we were "lucky."

DACA recipients like Jazmin and Jessica are not isolated cases. At TRP, we help 450 people renew DACA each year and see how vulnerable they remain, especially with 5–6 month processing delays that threaten jobs, income, and stability. These are adults rooted in our communities. DACA recipients deserve dignity and real safety. We urge you to defend DACA and fight for a pathway to citizenship.

### BIOGRAPHY:

Jocelyn Aranda-Ortiz is a lifelong La Villita resident and the daughter of immigrant parents; grounding her work in the experiences and resilience of the community that raised her. For more than 8 years, she has been deeply involved in immigrant advocacy across Illinois, supporting undocumented students, families and community members navigating complex legal and social systems. Her commitment has taken many forms from campus organizing and statewide

coalition work to direct support for families facing deportation. Today, Jocelyn serves as the Deportation Defense Organizer at The Resurrection Project, where she continues to build relationships, expand access to services, and ensure that immigrant communities receive the dignity, information, and support they deserve.

Her work is driven by a simple but powerful belief: that every person deserves safety, stability, and the chance to thrive in the place they call home.

## **Elizabeth Cervantes, ICIRR Board Member**

Good morning, my name is Elizabeth Cervantes, board vice president of the Illinois Coalition for Immigrant and Refugee Rights. Thank you, Congresswoman Ramirez, for organizing this hearing.

ICIRR & its members have advanced landmark welcoming legislation in IL and been a key voice in national campaigns for decades— including the campaign to establish and strengthen DACA. We are grounded in the principle of organizing for an equitable society for all and persist in the belief that citizenship for all is the only permanent solution.

I have been organizing for immigrant rights for 17 years. I remember the DACA program announcement on this day 14 years ago, like it was yesterday. I also vividly remember how 2 months later, on August 15th when the first initial DACA application went live, thousands of families came to Navy Pier to receive legal assistance from ICIRR. There are photos of this day, but only those of us that were there can testify to the crisp feeling of hope in the air— from 7am until the late hours of the afternoon I was directing anxious new applicants through what they might expect, helping them sort through years of documentation for a smoother process. I can only describe what I witnessed as a sense of nervousness wrapped around a strong conviction that stepping out of the shadows to put their lives & futures in the hands of our government was the right thing to do. In the 14 years since DACA was announced, our coalition has worked with thousands of immigrants on initial applications and renewals. I have seen immigrants of all ages, varying stories and backgrounds, apply for their first job without fear, or finally travel outside of the U.S. with advance parole. A sense of belonging has unfolded across communities in the last decade, because DACA addressed that fear directly.

But the program has always arbitrarily excluded other members of the immigrant community while thousands continue in limbo, since the program closed 5 years ago. Today, we are seeing fees that have increased exponentially, unusual delays in the adjudication of renewals, increased scrutiny for advance parole humanitarian applications, and DACA recipients targeted for enforcement.

Through our New Americans Initiative partners and the Family Support Hotline, we know DACA beneficiaries are seeking renewal from 8 months and up to a year before expiration, worried about the delays. Many are losing their jobs, careers they have built with resiliency. This systemic uncertainty, created by Trump and DHS, poses real threats to DACA recipients, and sends ripples across families and our communities, all of this compounded by the ongoing relentless operations by ICE in Illinois.

When President Obama listened to immigrant youth organizers in 2012 by creating DACA, he said “these kids deserve to plan their lives in more than two-year increments.” That was true then as it is now – except today, even the youngest DACA holders are adults. And the larger truth is that all 11 million undocumented persons who call this country home deserve to stay, because truly thriving communities happen only when everyone belongs.

ICIRR remains steadfast in this endeavor, fueled by people every day meeting the moment, and working to make Illinois a place where EVERYONE is safe and cared for. There is a promise of certain unalienable rights guaranteed to all and protected by the constitution of the United States of America, regardless of the message this administration wants everyone to believe. And we will fight and take care of US until everyone sees that promise unfold.

**BIOGRAPHY:**

Elizabeth is co-founder and Associate Executive Director of the Southwest Suburban Immigrant Project (SSIPChicago), an immigrant rights organization in Illinois, serving Will & DuPage counties. Elizabeth oversees the operations, advocacy efforts for issue-based campaigns at the local, state, and national levels, and the implementation of civic, parent & youth leadership programs at SSIPChicago. After college, Elizabeth returned to her community in the southwest suburbs to build a grassroots organization with over a thousand immigrant members and community leaders today. With intuitive leadership, she has helped build and run over 20 innovative programs and campaigns to ensure the participation, dignity and voice of undocumented families, from legal representation, to health benefits, get out the vote and grassroots training. SSIPChicago has been instrumental in the passage of significant immigrant rights state legislation which has made Illinois one of the strongest and most welcoming states for immigrants in the country. Elizabeth received a Master's Degree in Social Sector Leadership and Nonprofit Management from the University of Chicago and serves as board vice-president of the Illinois Coalition for Immigrant and Refugee Rights (ICIRR).