IMMIGRATION

A NEW PATH

Thousands in Santa Cruz County stand to benefit from new Obama policy

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Fortunata Matias is an immigrant who plans to apply for temporary residency under a policy announced by President Obama on Thursday.

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The policy follows a similar 2013 executive action, but fewer than 2 million young people who came to this country before June 2007 were eligible to apply for temporary legal status under what is known as Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals, or DACA.

The new policy is a significant expansion, covering parents of U.S. citizens and legal residents, as well as immigrants brought to the country as children before 2001.

“It’s big,” said Doug Keegan, director of the Santa Cruz County Immigration Project. “We’re expecting a big flood.”

Keegan said an earlier estimate of 13,000 immigrants eligible for Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals, Keegan said 20,000 to 30,000 people in Santa Cruz, Monterey and San Benito counties could be affected by the new policy.

Watsonville in particular is home to many immigrant parents with American-born children, Keegan said.

“We have a lot of families who have been here for decades,” he said.

Keegan said his office already has calls. But with exact details about how the program will work, he’s short on answers right now. He doesn’t expect the program to be operational for at least three months, and he urges anyone interested in participating to use the time to gather documentation to prove not only that they were here before 2001, but that they were in the United States on Thursday before the announcement was made.

Keegan also warned against seeking the assistance of notaries, who advertise legal help but are not qualified to provide it and often prey on immigrants.

Matias wasn’t able to take advantage of the last program since she arrived in 2008 to live with her sister and get the education she couldn’t in Mexico. Seeing the shame and pain her mother endured after losing her teeth to domestic violence inspired Matias’ goal of a career in dentistry. She wants to work with women and children who can’t afford care.

But at 36, Matias went to work in the strawberry fields to help the family. It was a year of hard labor, she said.

“I learned to appreciate (education),” Matias said. “When I got back to school, I already had experienced a life of working here. I think that made me strong.”

Caribillo student Maria Genis came to the United States as a 15-year-old and qualified for the 2012 program. She said it enabled her to get a job that pays more than minimum wage, a driver’s license and a restoration of her driving privileges.

“We do they stand? What do they stand to lose?” Genis asked. “Maybe things are changing. Maybe things are getting better. But we can’t stop here.”