



Deferrals for illegal immigrants spikes interest in GEDs

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Posted: Wednesday, September 26, 2012 11:00 am | Updated: 10:59 am, Tue Sep 25, 2012.

By Natasha Khan Cronkite News |

Jamie Jimenez, a 19-year-old illegal immigrant, dropped out of high school three credits short of a diploma, blaming slacking off and stomach problems.

Then came news of President Barack Obama's two-year deferral program offering work permits to undocumented young people. A key requirement of that program is having a high school diploma or GED or being enrolled in school.

That had Jimenez attending an orientation recently for a new GED-preparation program at Friendly House, a nonprofit serving the Latino community.

"It makes me want to be successful," he said. "It just motivates me more to come back."

Nonprofits such as Friendly House and advocacy groups are seeing a surge in people seeking GEDs to become eligible for deferred action.

Jimenez, originally from Zacatecas, Mexico, would have to pay \$300 for 10 weeks of instruction offered by Friendly House.

"Our program is comprehensive, respectful and addresses a need that is going to continue to grow," said Martin Flores, the organization's director of strategic development.

Immigrant rights advocates say there aren't enough available GED programs to meet the demand because of Proposition 300, passed by voters in 2006. In addition to making those lacking proof of legal residency pay out-of-state tuition to attend public universities and community colleges, the law bans illegal immigrants from taking adult education courses administered by the Arizona Department of Education at state or federally funded schools.

Those outlets typically prepare people for GED tests free of charge. Some also offer what are known as fee-based GED preparation classes that are paid for entirely by students and as a result don't require citizenship.

The fee-based course at Mesa Community College costs \$237, for example.

Friendly House, which also runs a charter school, offers free GED-preparation instruction administered by the state but created its fee-based alternative in response to recent demand from illegal immigrants.

"We have developed and customized and put programs in place to address the needs of the community," Flores said.

There are no citizenship requirements for K-12 schools in Arizona. For illegal immigrants who have dropped out or are too old to return to high school, however, going for a GED may be the only option if they want to qualify for deferred action.

“Suddenly you have a demand and few outlets to process that demand,” said Carmen Cornejo, a longtime community activist currently with the Arizona Dream Act Coalition.

“This is a bottleneck,” said Barry Leshowitz, a professor emeritus in Arizona State University’s Department of Psychology who advocates for undocumented youths. “I would say it is absolutely critical issue that needs to be addressed.”

Advocates say providing GED classes for illegal immigrants has largely fallen on community-based education programs offered by nonprofits and some community colleges and high school districts with fee-based programs.

The Migration Policy Institute estimates there are 1.76 million illegal immigrants, including 80,000 in Arizona, who are eligible for deferred action. Nationally, the group said, 20 percent in that group lack high school diplomas or GEDs.

The nonprofit Chicanos Por La Causa offers free GED classes at its Workforce Development Center in Phoenix, but those are currently at capacity. Seventy-five percent of the calls to the center have been from people inquiring about GED classes, said Amanda Bernal, the group’s media director.

“Oh yes, it has gotten crazy,” she said.

As for public institutions, GED programs that are fee-based and aren’t linked to any government funding have no restrictions under Proposition 300, according to Karen Liersch, deputy associate superintendent of adult education services at the Arizona Department of Education.

“Proposition 300 is really all about the use of taxpayers dollars,” Liersch said.

A person must show two forms of identification to take Arizona’s GED test, but there is no citizenship requirement, Liersch said.

Taking the GED test, which must be done in person, costs between \$60 and \$105 depending on location, according to the state Department of Education’s website.

Mesa Community College offers four fee-based classroom GED courses in English and four in Spanish, and those are full in large part because of the demand created by deferred action, according to Monica Margailan, coordinator of minority services.

Rio Salado Community College has seen an increase in enrollment for its fee-based online GED-preparation course, which lasts 14 weeks and costs \$90, according to Lily Beth Brazones, program director for community development adult basic education.

Tempe Union High School District plans to start a fee-based GED-preparation program in October, according to Vanda Salls, director of community and adult education services. She said the program isn’t a response to deferred action but about “providing resources for all segments of our community.”

“The state-funded adult-ed world is closed to them, but through community ed they have another opportunity,” Salls said.

For Jimenez, the 19-year-old who went to Friendly House’s orientation, enrolling in a GED course is a first step.

“It gives me the outlook to have hope for the future and in the next couple of years hopefully, maybe, I’ll be working and supporting my family how I envisioned,” he said.

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