

HOW DO YOU DOCUMENT AN UNDOCUMENTED LIFE? DESPERATE APPLICANTS SCRAMBLING FOR EVIDENCE OF STAY IN THE US



President's Obama's amnesty to the children of undocumented workers ushered in new hope and promised a life of freedom to millions of youth who were hitherto leading furtive lives. However, they are finding that it is not so easy for them to get the certification that will shake off the chains of illegality and openly proclaim that they belong here. Chul Soo, a 27-year-old illegal immigrant from South Korea does not have any credit card or a driving license as he was legally not entitled to them and in spite of entering the USA in 1995 is having considerable difficulty in proving that he has been here for the last 5 years, leave alone the 17 years he has spent here. "It's frustrating," he said, referring to his effort to piece together a mosaic of records. "I really need this right now." The rule makes it clear that in order to qualify for the scheme, the applicant must have come to the US before he or she was 16 and that he has lived here continuously for 5 years. For many illegal immigrants providing the evidence has been no problem for they have lived lives like American citizens, having school transcripts, medical records and bank statements. But many have lived fear filled clandestine lives afraid that an open life could expose them to the immigration authorities and they could spend time in jail or worse even be deported. For them proving that they have been residing in the US for the last 5 years has been a herculean task. To become eligible for the program they are even calling up former employers asking them for a reference or affidavits that attest when they had worked for them. However, most employers are averse to giving such documentation as it is a written confession that they employed illegal immigrants, which is a serious criminal offense in the US. Jacqueline Esposito, director of immigration advocacy at the New York Immigration Coalition says that "One of the most striking things is the desperation and sadness when you're talking to someone who absolutely qualifies but they can't provide documents that prove it." 22-year old Hira, a Pakistani illegal immigrant who came to the US 12 years ago, has no such problem as her parents kept all her documents in safe custody. She can prove her five year residency through tax documents, communication with her school, report cards, medical records and utility bills. Her family did not immediately apply for the problem fearing deportation for the parents. Hira says that they took the plunge after careful thought. "My parents finally decided that it was worth the risk. They came here for their children. It didn't make sense for all of us to sit here in the dark and wait this thing out," she said. Immigrant advocacy organizations across the country have been inundated with requests to help, but the lawyers said they were unsure of what constituted as proof and what did not? Immigrants have assembled date-stamped pictures of themselves from Facebook, particularly those that show them in front of American landmarks. Some have cellphone bills. Others have presented collected schedules and records of sports leagues in which they have played. They have even gone to their respective parishes and requested letters confirming that they have participated in the activities of the parish. Immigration authorities had predicted that they would receive around a quarter of a million applications in the first week but they haven't received even one third of that number. Perhaps the uncertainties, the challenges and the nagging fear, the doubts, the qualms and the apprehension of exposing themselves to the authorities have been too strong for those who have so far led terrified hide-and-seek lives. They would rather wait and watch.