

Angel Silva – Independent Consultant and DACA Recipient

Chairman and Members of Congress, thank you for having me here. If you had told me three years ago I'd be here testifying I'd have called you a liar, and I must admit this feels a bit surreal. I am grateful to be here today to speak about my experience as a DACAmented, unafraid professional, and how existing Appropriations bill language has, for several years, prohibited the Legislative Branch from compensating DACA recipients like myself as staffers in Congress. I found out about this current practice while attempting to work on the Hill, and my experience is not unique to me in this regard.

I was born in Tlalnepantla de Baz, a town right outside of Mexico City, and came with family at the age of 1 to Sun Valley, California, where I was raised and graduated high school. I attended Glendale Community College, since at the time we couldn't pay full tuition at university due to the high cost. I would work with my family, saving up money to pay for classes over time.

While in community college I became involved the California Dream Network, a group of immigrant student activists pushing for community-focused policies in California and nationwide. The Dream Network would spearhead issues like Medicare for All in California, the California Dream Act, and comprehensive immigration reform, and it was through the Network that I saw firsthand how the power to change people's lives across the state and the country lay within legislative bodies, like the California State Legislature and within halls of Congress. One major legislative victory, financial aid for qualifying undocumented individuals through the passage of the California Dream Act, made it possible for me to transfer to Cal State University, Northridge (CSUN) and graduate with a degree in journalism and political science. A policy decision changed the trajectory of my life, and made it possible for me to stand here today to tell you that.

I remember wanting to engage within this world beyond activism, and enter civic service through working in Congress. I remember the failure of the House to take on comprehensive immigration reform in 2013 as the pivotal moment that motivated me to pursue civic service through the legislative process, and upon arriving to CSUN I dedicated myself to preparing to enter Congress as a staffer. It was at my university that I took on my first internship in DC, through our CSUN in DC Program in 2015 with a cohort of 12 other students. I remember seeing one of my good friends, who like me was a DACA recipient, enter Capitol Hill through the Congressional Hispanic Caucus Institute (CHCI) internship program. Her success further crystallized this notion that even if we didn't come from privilege, even if our existence in this country was uncertain, our future wasn't, and that we could achieve what we set our minds to.

Her example – and her insistence – were what led me to follow in her footsteps and apply to CHCI myself, and I soon entered Capitol Hill as a Congressional Intern myself in Spring 2017, during my last semester of undergrad – just as she had a couple of years prior. As an intern in Rep. Linda Sanchez's office, I had the experience I had been seeking since first becoming an activist – working amongst people who not only had the power to codify meaningful change, but who shared some of the values that our communities embody. I naturally wanted to extend that

beyond my time as an intern, and was thrilled when I heard of the Senate Diversity Initiative (SDI) from a CHCI alum. Naturally I reached out to explore my options on the Hill.

I still remember meeting with Lorenzo Olvera, the director of the SDI, and talking about my goals back then and how working on Capitol Hill would further those goals. I spoke about my activist background, and how I wanted to continue advocating for our communities at the federal level. We also spoke about my status. I didn't think it'd be an issue, and I wanted to be transparent. Soon after our conversation, I went back to the office.

I don't remember the words, but I do remember the context of the conversation that I had later that day with Mr. Olvera. What I do remember is seeing a call come in later that evening to follow up on the earlier conversation, and the excitement I felt at the potential for next steps on the Hill. I remember feeling the full weight of my status, and its limitations, when I found out about the preexisting language explicitly barring people like me from engaging in the most fundamental methods of public service. What I had been building up to had been irrevocably torn and walled off from access. I didn't know how to react. How would you react if what you'd been building up to for years was suddenly unreachable?

I would continue to explore the possibility of working on the Hill with Mr. Olvera, reaching out to connect after hearing of Rep. Pete Aguilar's efforts to remove this barrier that same year. Then, the news hit that the President had taken the extraordinarily damaging decision to rescind DACA, a decision whose fallout is still being settled in the courts today. Disillusioned, I let Mr. Olvera and his staff know that I was removing myself from consideration for future opportunities, since I didn't see a near future where I could work on the Hill. I focused my efforts instead on opening doors for our community to learn from Congress, working at CHCI to open the door for others just as the organization did for me.

That was three years ago. Since then I've grown a great deal, and learned about the world in environments that weren't the Hill. I worked in the Baltimore Mayor's Office of Immigrant Affairs, fulfilling this impossible dream of working in government as an undocumented person. In that office, I learned crisis management to the highest degree due to the President tarnishing our city's name in his attacks on immigrants, an unexpected, debilitating cyberattack that crippled city government operations, and an incompetent mayor who hid her illicit gains to the detriment of our city's stability.

On a more positive note, I've had the opportunity to join in an amazing group of individuals through the Dream Lead Institute, a project from the Hispanic Heritage Institute and Trinity University that brought me and 29 other amazing immigrant leaders in my community from across the country. They all inspire me in one way or another – from my organizing friends pushing meaningful change in places like Texas and Kansas, to friends making meaningful policy happen in New York and supporting education in Rhode Island and Washington State, they all inspire me to do more despite the barriers placed in front of us. I've had the opportunity to support meaningful work through policy and programming in Baltimore to support immigrants through Centro SOL, a nonprofit based out of Johns Hopkins School of Medicine that supports community efforts to bolster mental health for Latinx communities in the city.

I'm grateful for the experiences I've had in these past three years. And yet, I still think to this day of where I'd be if I had entered the Hill. I am currently working as an independent consultant, focusing on communications work, policy and education. I've been able to apply my lived experiences through my work, and have been fortunate to work alongside organizations and community partners dedicated to uplifting and defending the marginalized through our work. However, to this day I still find myself how much more effective I could be had I had the opportunity to work in Congress.

I'm not the only one who's faced these barriers, either, and my case isn't an isolated incident. As for the friend I mentioned, she continued interning for her Member of Congress in his district office in California after her internship through CHCI ended – this time without pay, as current rules don't allow pay to DACA recipients, whether as staff or interns. When the office asked her to apply for a position in the district office, she asked if it was even possible – and the office came across the same provision that we're talking about today. She avoided applying to work in Congress entirely, and now works on social responsibility initiatives and advocacy with global clients at one of the most diverse firms in the United States.

I also want to highlight Giovanni Escobedo, who was part of my cohort in the Dream Lead Institute and also took part of the CHCI internship program in Spring 2016. Giovanni, like my friend the year before and myself a year after, was another DACA recipient who, like us, was exploring opportunities for the Hill after his internship experience. Near the end of his internship, Giovanni began applying for a position on the Hill, and as he was looking over the paperwork, he found out the citizenship requirements, and how limiting they were – even for Legal Permanent Residents, who can work on the Hill. In his words, it wasn't until he went through all the rules that he realized that he, as a DACA recipient, couldn't be hired, even in a Member of Congress wanted to hire him. Undeterred, Giovanni would later go on to work in the Texas State Senate, and is now the Regional Director of Advocacy for Raise Your Hand Texas, working to bolster public education in the Rio Grande Valley and across the State of Texas.

At the end of the day, these archaic rules restrict the potential of both Congress and of the upward mobility of our communities. When people like the friend who inspired me, like Giovanni, like me, are pushed out of environments that we strive for, we're not the only ones who suffer – we're not the only ones that lose out. The American people lose out on having staffers that understand the nuances of their lived experiences – which is crucial to creating and implementing effective policy. The House of Representatives and the Senate, the legislative bodies we trust with the future of our nation – this institution itself loses out on incredible, driven talent every time a DACA recipient finds out their career path blocked off to the halls of Congress. And members themselves lose out on the perspective of those whose lives are in the hands of the Hill.

I hope that my journey and that of my friends helps shed a light to what is lost when our dreams, like us, are deferred. I want to thank the Subcommittee for your time, and I'm more than happy to answer any questions you may have. Thank you.