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## **Immigration debate held at UNC**

By Millete Birhanemaskel

What if your future was being debated by strangers, and all you could do was stand idly by and watch? Everything they said directly affected you, but you couldn't say a word.

Eighteen-year-old Alex Chadira didn't have to imagine.

He attended a congressional field hearing Friday hosted by Rep. Marilyn Musgrave at the University of Northern Colorado. He sat inside the walls of an institution of higher learning that would never accept him as a student.

Chadira is the son of undocumented parents. And, although he has lived in the United States since he was 4 years old and graduated from Skyline High School in Longmont, he cannot gain admission into a college or university.

Federal law mandates educating children, regardless of legal status, through high school. After that, technically, they are breaking the law as undocumented immigrants in the country.

Witnesses' testimony at UNC incited cheers and jeers from about 120 who attended. Some saw the controversial Dream Act, which has been reintroduced in Congress, as an argument of the rights of U.S. citizens over all others, a national security issue and a law that would create additional tax burden for Coloradans.

If passed, the Dream Act would provide a path to legal citizenship for children of undocumented workers with "good moral character." It also would provide Colorado high school graduates who are undocumented immigrants an opportunity to pay in-state tuition. Eight states, including California, Texas and Kansas, have statutes that already allow for this.

Kris Kobach, professor of law at the University of Missouri, said such statutes are in violation of federal law. And, changing the law would amount to a "pervasive incentive" for illegal immigration. He said, "It's a slap in the face to Americans who play by the rules and follow the laws."

Others said the issue is not about immigration at all.

More than 60,000 undocumented children graduate from U.S. high schools each year, testified Jared Polis, vice chairman of the Colorado State Board of Education. Many don't know life outside of the United States; English is their only fluent language.

So the question then becomes whether children should be punished for their parents' mistakes?

Chadira saved \$8,000 mowing lawns, changing brake pads and doing oil changes in the neighborhood. After graduation last spring, he went to Front Range Community College in Longmont where, he said, he was denied enrollment. So instead of beginning his freshman year of college, the B/C average student, who wants to study accounting, just hangs out at home, wasting time. "We make criminals out of our kids," said Richard Garcia, executive director of Colorado Statewide Parent Coalition.

Polis was met by applause when he said it was not only the right thing to do but the American thing to do to give them access to education. The moderator threatened to throw people out who reacted during the hearing. "The future depends on our ability to teach all children," Polis said. So does Chadira's.

### **The Dream Act**

- Would provide a path to legal status for people brought to this nation years ago as children.
- To qualify, an undocumented person would have to have graduated from a U.S. high school; entered the country at age 15 or younger or at least 5 years before the bill is enacted; and have "good moral character."
- Qualified individuals would be granted a a six-year conditional status, during which they would have to complete two years of higher education or serve at least two years in the military. The DREAM Act also would eliminate a federal statutory provision that would allow states to use their own funds to provide in-state tuition to undocumented students.

### **Overheard**

- "We tell children to go to school, stay out of trouble and succeed. It's the right thing to do and the American thing to do," said Jared Polis, vice chairman of the Colorado State Board of Education.
- "It's a slap in the face to American citizens who play by the rules and follow the laws," said Kris Kobach, professor of Law, University of Missouri.

### **Colorado tax dollars**

- In 2005, undocumented immigrant households paid between \$159 million and \$194 million in total state and local taxes.
- Undocumented workers cost the state about \$225 million for mandatory services such as K-12 education, emergency medical care and incarceration.
- Undocumented workers tax payments equal between 70-86 percent of state, local governments' costs for providing federally mandated services.

Source: The Bell Policy Center