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Trump's bid to end immigration program puts Easton family at risk of deportation

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EASTON — Jennifer Villacorta's mother and aunt fled El Salvador for the U.S. more than 20 years ago, escaping violent gangs and widespread poverty. They were desperately searching for a better life for themselves — and for the many family members back home who couldn't make the journey. They had pledged to support them, too.

Villacorta's mother was pregnant with her when she requested asylum at the border and was granted Temporary Protected Status (TPS). The program grants immigrants the ability to live and work in the U.S. if they are fleeing widespread violence or disasters. The TPS program applies to immigrants from El Salvador, Honduras, Haiti, Nicaragua, Sudan and other with countries with strife and unrest.

After years of living in a destabilized country, the program gave her mother and aunt a chance for a new life.

"The reason everyone wants to come here to America," Villacorta said, "is the chance to escape violence and poverty — and live."

The two have lived a quiet life since, working in the service industry and renting an apartment in Easton. Villacorta and her six siblings live with them. All seven were born in the U.S.

"They've built families here," Villacorta said. "And a life."

But a Sept. 14 ruling by the Ninth Circuit Court of Appeals could upend all they've achieved, along with 400,000 TPS immigrants in the country.

The Court ruled 2-1 that President Donald Trump's administration has the power to end the Temporary Protected Status program for some countries, including El Salvador, which he has been aiming to do since 2017. Trump has wanted to pull back on immigration and asylum programs. Hardline immigration stances were part of Trump's 2016 campaign and continue to grab support among GOP voters. Lauren Witzke, for example, won the GOP U.S. Senate primary on Sept. 15. One of her main campaign themes is a 10-year moratorium on immigration to the U.S.

Immigration groups will likely appeal the decision to the U.S. Supreme Court, but it's uncertain whether the high court will take the case.

Villacorta said she and her family were "shocked" when she heard about the decision.

“It’s kind of like you’re just stuck with the news,” she said, “and you’re wondering what’s going to happen to all the work you’ve done. We’re just trying to cope with the news, but it’s very emotional and mentally draining trying to think about it.”

Though the family has lived here for years, TPS immigrants are not allowed to obtain citizenship unless they leave the country and reapply for a citizenship review. This “departure to have a visa interview would trigger bars to re-entry (into the U.S.) for up to 10 years,” according to the American Immigration Council.

El Salvador is still listed as a critical threat nation, the U.S. Department of State said in a 2020 report, and El Salvadorans make up more than a quarter of all TPS immigrants in the nation.

But El Salvador’s official TPS designation is set to expire in January 2021, and Villacorta’s mother and aunt will have to leave the country before the end of 2021.

The pair provide for many of their family members back in El Salvador. Besides the danger of violent crime, they worry about making ends meet for the entire family — children, aunts, uncles, grandparents and cousins.

“It’s very stressful trying to live in a place where you can’t make much income,” Villacorta said. “My grandparents, they’re very sick, so they’re really counting on us to help them over there. My cousins have small jobs but they’re not jobs like here, they get paid a dollar an hour.”

And Villacorta, who was born in the U.S. and is a citizen, could be left to take care of her younger siblings by herself. She works as a communications coordinator for the nonprofit Chesapeake Multicultural Resource Center, which assists the immigrant community on the Eastern Shore and throughout Maryland.

Matthew Peters, the director at ChesMRC, will continue to aid Villacorta and all immigrants during this process, he said. According to the last U.S. Census in 2010, there were 123,789 Salvadorans in Maryland. A number of Central American and other TPS immigrants work in the agriculture, poultry, seafood, tourism and service industries on the Eastern Shore.

Peters said he is outraged by the court decision.

“The hardship that this administration has now placed on these families with no plan in place on how to deal with the fallout of such a decision is truly reprehensible,” he said in a statement. “Immigrants do not live in a vacuum, and such actions taken on immigration should first and foremost take into consideration the most important resource and building blocks of our community: families.”

Trump argues that programs allowing immigrants to live here without acquiring citizenship, like TPS, give a free ride to criminals and take jobs away from legal citizens.

“Mass, uncontrolled immigration is especially unfair to the many wonderful, law-abiding immigrants already living here who followed the rules and waited their turn,” he said at a White House event in 2018.

Trump has also sought to wind back protections for immigrant children, or Dreamers, brought to the U.S. by their families at a young age but the Supreme Court ruled against that earlier this year.

U.S. Sens. Chris Van Hollen and Ben Cardin, both D-Md., are pressing for new protections for Central American and other TPS immigrants after the federal appeals court ruled the Trump administration could move forward with ending a program that gives them safe harbor.

Cardin and Van Hollen want new TPS protections to be part of the next COVID-19 relief package being considered by Congress.

“There are over 400,000 TPS recipients in the United States and the majority have lived in the United States for over two decades. They have started businesses and families and are integral members of their communities. Approximately 131,000 TPS recipients from El Salvador, Haiti and Honduras are essential critical infrastructure workers. These TPS recipients are critical to our pandemic response. They are putting themselves at risk to ensure the safety and health of our nation,” Sens. Cardin and Van Hollen along with U.S. Sen. Dianne Feinstein, D-Calif., wrote in a letter to U.S. Senate leadership. “TPS employment authorization documents should be automatically extended during the pandemic in order to minimize disruption while these essential workers help our nation through this crisis.”

Villacorta said she has few options left. Since she is a citizen, she could bring her mother back as a green card holder when she turns 21, but that would still leave her aunt in El Salvador.

The best thing to do is vote in the November presidential election, she said. A new administration would likely reverse the ban. Still, all her family has fought for and achieved is now threatened.

“It’s just — we’ve been here for so many years,” Villacorta added. “We relied on this (country), and it’s now such a huge setback to us.”

Executive Editor Mike Sunnucks contributed to this story.