



**Testimony of Athulya Rajakumar**  
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**Before the Senate Judiciary Committee**  
**Subcommittee on Immigration, Citizenship and Border Safety**

**“Removing Barriers to Legal Migration to Strengthen our Communities and  
Economy”**

**Tuesday, March 15, 2022**

Chairman Padilla, Ranking Member Cornyn, and members of the subcommittee, thank you for the opportunity to share my story.

My name is Athulya Rajakumar. I am a recent graduate of The University of Texas at Austin and currently reside in Dallas, Texas. I am also a member of Improve The Dream, a youth-led organization that supports and advocates for the over 200,000 young immigrants, who have grown up in the United States as child dependents of long-term visa holders, but face self-deportation after aging-out of the immigration system. I am a Documented Dreamer.

I was born in India, and when I was four and my brother was six, my mother left India and an abusive marriage behind, in search of a better life for us. After completing her master's at the Queensland University in Australia, she was chosen to come to America on a cultural exchange student visa with us as her J-2 dependents. After graduating, she secured a full-time job at Microsoft, which then sponsored her H-1B work visa, with her children as H-4 dependents. Eventually, in 2012, she was finally able to apply for her green card with me and my brother as her dependents. After nearly a decade in the green card backlog, I aged out of that application in January of 2020, when I turned 21.

My single mother worked hard to support me and my brother on her own. Things were hard, yes, but still I remember making happy memories<sup>1</sup> while building our new life here. I remember waiting in line at midnight for the fourth Harry Potter movie release; eating red, white, and blue Bomb Pop original popsicles on the Fourth of July; driving through neighborhoods to look at Christmas lights; and watching my first baseball game at the Nationals Stadium just a few miles from here. I still remember knocking my nachos and soda all over me as I stood up to cheer

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<sup>1</sup>American Immigration Council, "Documented Dreamers: An Overview", 2021, available at <https://www.americanimmigrationcouncil.org/research/documented-dreamers-overview>

when the Nationals hit a homerun. These experiences, uniquely American, are not only unforgettable but a part of who I am today.

As a child, I did not always understand the meaning behind the letters and numbers surrounding our immigration status, but it was clear to me that they were imperative to legally remaining in this country. I learned very young that every aspect of my entire life would be controlled and overshadowed by my visa status. I became used to opportunities being taken away by a factor out of my control. I could not participate in my high school's AP French exchange program even though I was president of the French Club, because I could not legally leave the country with a guaranteed ability to return. When I applied to colleges, I was considered an international student, even though I completed first through 12th grade in America. I had to take additional tests and write extra essay prompts that asked questions like "What can you contribute to our institution as a resident from your country?" – to which my only response was, "I grew up in Seattle, Washington; Starbucks was founded here. I don't know how much more American I can get." I did not qualify for any federal or university financial aid, though my mother was a single parent and we lived within financial circumstances that should have qualified us for aid.

Regardless, I worked hard, earned good grades, took every test, and wrote every essay, to get direct admission not only to my dream university, but my dream program at The University of Texas at Austin's Moody College of Communication's prestigious journalism program - to pursue my long-term goal of becoming a journalist, and to use my voice to advocate and bring awareness to issues I was passionate about.

As my brother and I grew up, we were essentially forced to raise ourselves because my mother was working overtime to make sure she kept a roof above our heads and food on the table, but most importantly retained our visa status. But this constant uncertainty and anxiety eventually caught up to us in our adolescence. We both faced severe mental health issues, my older brother to a much worse extent. His mental health began to rapidly decline once he hit high school. For ten years, we - as a family - struggled to navigate his severe depression and mood swings. My brother should have been pulled out of school. He should have been given proper medication and counseling. At times I felt he should have been institutionalized. However, as H-4 dependents, my brother and I legally needed to be enrolled as full-time students in order to comply with our visa status and remain in the country lawfully. Taking a leave of absence from school to address serious mental health concerns was not an option. And though all my mother wanted to do was quit her job and stay home to care for my brother, risking her job meant risking our entire lives here—everything we had worked so hard for. Thus, we soldiered on. My brother attended the most academically rigorous high school in the state, graduated from college, and we encouraged him to pick a career path that would serve him well for future visa sponsorship because, being older, he was closer to aging out of status while on my mother's green card application than I was. He took the LSAT, scored in 98th percentile and got into some of the best law schools in the country. We thought, if we cannot fight the immigration system that is constantly testing us, maybe we can study it, maybe we can be a part of it. His goal was to become an immigration lawyer and speak out for this group of children that America cannot see and, to this day, refuses to recognize. However, the day before his orientation at the University of Washington, my brother took his own life.

Our entire family was torn apart, our worlds turned upside down. I flew home and went from writing a school paper to writing my brother's obituary in less than 24 hours. The most cruel part of this whole tragic situation was that we were not even given the proper time to mourn, process or heal. Within one week, I was back in college, and by the end of the month, my mother had to be back at work. Once again, our visa status controlled our lives - even when one of us was dead.

I can only describe this life as simply existing – not living, but surviving. I am 23 years old. I should be excited to go out into the world and start my life, but I am scared. I am scared to make goals and find my passions, because I am sick of them being taken away from me by something I cannot control. Suddenly the degree I worked so hard for is not good enough for me to stay in this country; because it is not STEM, it is not considered as “high-skilled.” Recently I received a prestigious full-time employment offer from a major news corporation in Houston, a top ten media market — something virtually impossible to achieve as a new graduate in this field — but the same company that saw my dedication and potential withdrew their offer the second they heard about my visa status, and in their view, investing in someone who needs visa sponsorship would just be too much of a risk. I did not have a Social Security number until last month. I do not have a credit card, savings, or any paid work experience, because I was not legally allowed to make money. But worst of all is to be considered an alien, an outsider, in the only place you know to call home. That is a different kind of pain that only me and the 200,000 other children in my position share.

Without congressional action that creates a clear, reliable pathway for me to apply for permanent residency, in eight months, I will be forced to leave not only the country I have called home for

nearly 20 years, but also my mom, who is my only family left. Over 5,000 other Documented Dreamers face this possibility every year, despite having maintained a documented status.<sup>2</sup> And this is not just a hypothetical. Erin, a nursing graduate from Florida, was forced to self-deport last summer in the midst of the pandemic. Rutha was forced to self-deport two months ago, even though she aspired to go to graduate school to become a data analyst. Summer will be forced to self-deport in four months, even though her family has legally resided in the United States since she was a baby. Members of Improve The Dream hope that one day, everyone who grows up in America will have a clear opportunity to become an American citizen, pursue their passions, and fully contribute to our country. As members of this subcommittee, you can help make this a reality by passing the bipartisan [\*America's Children Act\*](#), led by Chair Padilla and Senator Paul.<sup>3</sup> This bill would permanently end the problem of aging out and ensure that children like me who are raised and educated with a documented status receive a clear opportunity to apply for permanent residency. This legislation would create the reality that most Americans assume already exists. Moreover, the subcommittee should also address the root causes that lead to aging out, including the green card backlog and the flaws in our broken immigration system that allow for families to be lawful long-term residents of the country with no clear pathway to citizenship.

Though the immigration system has constantly tested my faith, I am thankful my mom brought me here. We are patriotic because we grew up loving our country and believe in the American

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<sup>2</sup>David Bier, "100,000 Children in the Employment-Based Green Card Backlog at Risk of Family Separation", 2020, available at <https://www.cato.org/blog/100000-children-employment-based-green-card-backlog-risk-family-separation>

<sup>3</sup>Alex Padilla, "Padilla, Paul Introduce Bipartisan Bill to Protect Thousands of 'Documented Dreamers'", 2021, available at <https://www.padilla.senate.gov/newsroom/press-releases/padilla-paul-introduce-bipartisan-bill-to-protect-thousands-of-documented-dreamers/>

Dream. We are hardworking, skilled young Americans, and we hope to be recognized as that — as Americans — and to finally give meaning to the lives we have lived here so far. I hope you can improve the dream for all of us.