

Plainfield schools help out their 'dreamers' and their parents

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By [Taylor Tiamoyo Harris](#)
tharris@njadvancemedia.com,
NJ Advance Media for NJ.com

PLAINFIELD -- As she walks through the halls of Plainfield's public schools, Gloria Montealegre hears the concerns of students who have come into the country with their parent or on their own. Will they be deported? Will their parents have to leave the country? Will they be able to go to college?

As the issues for these students became even more complex, Montealegre began to hold discrete information sessions for these students and their parents, sessions that included legal information. The most recent session was held last week.

"This is beneficial because dealing with issues like these, parents can get depressed and stressed, as well as the students, which affects how they are in school," said Montealegre, the district's community relations liaison. "I knew we needed something to help the people in our community."



Rutgers' Jason Hernandez, left, and Plainfield's Gloria Montealegre, right, talk in the hallway of Plainfield High School after the conclusion of their session for parents of undocumented children on Saturday.

Previously, Make the Road New Jersey, an immigration advocacy organization, hosted the clinics. This year the Rutgers Immigrant Community Assistant Project, which includes [attorneys](#), professors and law students, hosted.

Twice a year, clinics provide information about how to apply for the federal DACA (Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals Act) program, what to do if you are arrested by Immigration and Customs Enforcement and what your rights are as an unauthorized immigrant. As the sessions became more popular, Montealegre has considered expanding the number of sessions and bringing in more organizations, as well.

"We can never find information like this for free, so I'm very grateful we had an event like this," said Edith, 61, of Plainfield, who has students in Plainfield schools and declined to give her last name because she is an unauthorized immigrant. "Something like this keeps our spirits up, and this is information we can pass along."

Edith was one of about 70 people who attended the clinics last week. After the sessions, the director of the Rutgers program, Jason Hernandez, and other volunteers stayed behind to offer students and parents private consultations. Hernandez also encourages his clients to pass the information along to their friends families and neighbors.

"It's like a game of telephone information gets passed from one to another, which is good, but we're glad people have the chance to come to events like this so they can hear it from the main source." Hernandez said.

Montealegre says it's unknown how many students are unauthorized, but of those who are, most come from Honduras, Guatemala and El Salvador. In Union County, an estimated 49,000 people, more than 8 percent of the population, do not have legal authorization to remain as residents, [according to the Migration Policy Institute](#).

Volunteers at the informational session, such as Rutgers law student Amanda Clark, of Blairstown, worked pro bono. At the most recent session, Clark told a surprised parent that he or she could possibly be considered for a program that allowed not only their children citizenship, but the parents, as well.

"We're kind of like the first step for people that don't [have money](#) or are scared to talk to a lawyer," Clark said. "It's super rewarding to hear people's backgrounds and stories and to know something small like this can have such a big impact."

In addition to the informational sessions and private consultations, Montealegre wanted something for parents and students to be inspired by, so she asked Sara Mora, 21, to serve as the speaker.

[Mora a Hillside resident, immigrated to the county from Costa Rica](#) when she was 4. She enrolled in the Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals program known as DACA, in 2012, and is one of [more than 17,000 DREAMers in New Jersey according to the U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services](#).



Sara Mora, 21, of Hillside.

Recently, Mora hit a roadblock in her [education](#) journey. A May graduate of Union County College, Mora had her eyes set on attending Seton Hall University this fall. However, the school's \$50,000 pricetag was a deterrent, and she couldn't find a way to pay since DACA recipients are not eligible for government [student loans](#). Despite her own continuous trials, her message to Plainfield's parents was to remain resilient.

"It's O.K. to be scared. It takes a Godly strength to get through times like this," Mora said. "But in times like this if you don't feel strong enough to go out and advocate, at least make sure you take the time to educate yourself as much as you can because nobody can take that away from you."

Taylor Tiamoyo Harris may be reached at tharris@njadvancemedia.com. Follow her on Twitter [@ladytiamoyo](#). Find NJ.com on [Facebook](#).

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