

LAWRENCE: League weighs in on immigrant tuition dilemma

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While Marisol Conde-Hernandez's friends were filling out college applications during their senior year at South Brunswick High School, she quietly stood off to the side.

It wasn't because Ms. Conde-Hernandez did poorly in school. She had earned a 3.5 grade point average and was active in many extracurricular activities.

Ms. Conde-Hernandez could not fill out college application forms because she lacked a Social Security number. That's because she is an undocumented immigrant who, at 18 months old, came to the United States when her parents sneaked across the border from Mexico.

The 22-year-old told the Lawrence League of Women Voters on Monday night that she is the product of a teen pregnancy. Her mother was 17, and her father was 19 when she was born. Both came from poor families in Puebla, Mexico. There was no future for them in Mexico so they crossed the border into the United States.

The family settled in Princeton, but her parents divorced when she was 9 years old. For the next few years, she moved from Princeton to Lawrence to West Windsor and finally to South Brunswick, all while trying to deal with the emotional trauma of the divorce.

"I liked school," Ms. Conde-Hernandez said. "School was an outlet from the misery at home. My teachers helped me. They were parental figures. (But) I almost didn't graduate (from high school). I assumed I would go to college, but my status stopped me. I couldn't fill out my Social Security number."

But one of her teachers suggested she apply to a community college.

Ms. Conde-Hernandez graduated from Middlesex County Community College and now is a senior at Rutgers University where she is majoring in sociology. But it has been a financial struggle for Ms. Conde-Hernandez, who works two jobs and lives with housemates so she can afford the \$7,000 tuition for two courses.

Why is Ms. Conde-Hernandez's tuition so costly? She is a New Jersey resident.

"I'm a Jersey girl through and through," she told the League.

The reason it costs \$7,000 is because she is being charged out-of-state tuition because of her undocumented status.

In New Jersey, undocumented immigrants who choose to attend a two-year or four-year public college are charged out-of-state tuition — the amount a student who lives in another state but who attends a New Jersey public college would pay. The lower in-state tuition rate is not available to undocumented immigrants.

The difference is substantial. New Jersey residents pay \$2,000 to \$4,000 in annual tuition at one of the 19 community colleges while nonresidents pay \$6,000, according to information compiled by the New Jersey League of Women Voters. In-state tuition at the four-year schools is \$7,000 for four courses. The out-of-state tuition cost is \$13,000.

But 10 states do not make such a distinction and allow undocumented immigrants to pay in-state tuition rates, provided the immigrant has attended at least one year of high school in that state and has graduated from a high school in that state or received a graduate equivalent diploma.

Those 10 states are California, Illinois, Kansas, Nebraska, New Mexico, New York, Oklahoma, Texas, Utah and Washington, according to the NJLWV. The 10 states also require the undocumented immigrant to file an affidavit stating he or she intends to become a legal resident.

New Jersey is seeking to become the 11th state to extend in-state tuition rates to undocumented immigrants, according to the NJLWV. Legislation is pending in the state Legislature that would make it a reality. Gov. Jon Corzine appointed a panel to study immigration issues, and the panel supported charging in-state tuition for undocumented immigrants who live in New Jersey.

Although about 2,000 undocumented immigrants graduate from New Jersey high schools every year, only 200 actually would use in-state tuition, the NJLWV said. Nationally, 5 to 10 percent of undocumented immigrants who graduate from high school go

on to college.

The NJLWV is studying the issue of extending in-state tuition to undocumented immigrants and expects to reach consensus on it next month. It has asked each of its chapters to weigh in on the topic.

The Lawrence League of Women Voters chapter agreed Monday night that New Jersey should extend in-state tuition to undocumented immigrants who graduate from a New Jersey high school and who attend a New Jersey public college.

And what of Ms. Conde-Hernandez?

She is continuing her studies at Rutgers even though her options after graduation are limited because of her undocumented immigrant status. She said she would like to pursue graduate studies, but she can't afford it.

"If the opportunity came up, I might go to Mexico," Ms. Conde-Hernandez said. "I want to be a doctor. My heart is in medicine. I might just do that (move to Mexico), and maybe come back to the United States."

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