

Temporary protected immigrants have no path to citizenship

By Nancy Lofholm *The Denver Post* *The Denver Post*

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RIDGWAY — Nineteen years ago, Wilfredo Matamoros escaped his war-torn and gang-ravaged El Salvador to join relatives who had already fled to the United States. He traveled through Mexico hidden under a tarp in an onion truck. He trudged for two nights to cross the U.S. border near Nogales. He was 14 years old.

Colorado has been his home since then. For the first few years, he lived in the shadows as an underage and undocumented immigrant, working at menial jobs around Telluride. For the past dozen years, he has been a legal resident of the United States. He is allowed to work and has advanced to manager at the Mountain Market grocery in this small western Colorado town.

Matamoros wants to become a U.S. citizen. But he is in an immigration-status limbo that does not allow for it — even if he is here living an exemplary life for many more years.

Matamoros is allowed to stay in the country under what is called Temporary Protective Status along with more than 300,000 other immigrants living in the U.S. — 209,000 of them Salvadorans.

TPS, as it is called for short, is a blanket status granted to immigrants who come to the United States from a changeable list of countries that have suffered major disruptions ranging from civil wars to natural disasters. El Salvador is on that list along with Haiti, Honduras, Nicaragua, Somalia, Sudan, South Sudan and Syria.

The secretary of Homeland Security decides every 18 months or so which countries should stay on the list, which should be added, and which should have protective status rescinded.

Matamoros has been lucky in that regard: El Salvador's protective status has been renewed eight times. Each renewal buys him more time in his adopted country but little peace of mind.

"I always wonder what is going to happen tomorrow. What is happening next? I am scared every time I have to renew," Matamoros said as he took a rare break from stocking and straightening shelves at the Mountain Market.

In the current groundswell of support for immigration reform, the little-understood TPS has rarely — if ever — been mentioned as one of the hundreds of pieces of a complicated immigration system in need of reform.

Kristen Lynch, a spokeswoman for Sen. Michael Bennet, who is in the core group of politicians crafting closely guarded reform measures, could say only that the wide range of topics being discussed does include TPS.

"I think we do need to do a better job to get the TPS issue more on the front burner," said Bryon Large, a Denver attorney who is chair-elect of the American Immigration Lawyers Association.

In the meantime, Matamoros' temporary status adds more than stress to his life. It costs him around

\$1,400 each time he must renew his application for TPS. That includes filing fees and the fee for having an immigration attorney handle it because he fears even a simple clerical error could result in denial.

"He has to keep his documents in order. He can't even get traffic tickets. He has to pay fees that have gone up," said attorney Richard Garcia, who described Matamoros' file as more than 4 inches thick.

In the years that Matamoros, 33, has been under temporary status, he has added a wife and child. He has never been in trouble with the law. He said he has never used any welfare services and has always paid his taxes. He has worked his way to a level of success he could only dream of in El Salvador. "I am happy and thankful to be here," he said. "But I want to be a citizen."

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