

**NEW JERSEY**

# Buoyed by Joe Biden win, immigration activists rally for path to citizenship in NJ

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WEST NEW YORK — Ridgewood's Fidelina Alfaro cried tears of joy when former Vice President Joseph Biden was declared the winner of the presidential race this past weekend. Maybe this president would give her and thousands of others a chance to become permanent legal residents in the U.S., she thought.

Alfaro, who emigrated from El Salvador in 1995, is among more than 400,000 immigrants across the country who have a fragile protection from deportation through a program known as Temporary Protected Status, or TPS. The federal program provides citizens of countries ravaged by natural disasters, armed conflict or other catastrophes an opportunity to stay without being deported, as well as work permits and Social Security numbers.

But President Donald Trump, whose administration has focused on curbing both illegal and legal immigration, has tried to end TPS for several countries, including El Salvador.

"We now have hope that there will be a law that will give us all citizenship or at least legal residency," said Alfaro, who has been covered by the program since 2001. "We don't want to be separated from our families, from our children."

On Monday, Alfaro was among dozens of New Jerseyans who joined a caravan of immigration activists and TPS beneficiaries, also known as "Tepesianos," who have traveled the country by bus since September to bring attention to their plight. They rallied in New Jersey with a cautious sense of optimism, after the results of last week's vote.

The group began its demonstration in Newark, followed by a march on Bergenline Avenue in West New York. They waved flags and were followed by the bus, painted with images of

immigrants working in health care and other jobs deemed essential during the coronavirus pandemic. They chanted in both English and Spanish as music blared from the colorful bus.

The group was scheduled to end its day in Morristown, organizers said. They planned to head south to Maryland and possibly Delaware, Biden's home state, in the coming days.

"We are uplifting the voices of TPS families and their demands for permanent residency, and spreading awareness of COVID-19, which has significantly impacted immigrant communities," said Erik Villalobos, communications manager for the National TPS Alliance, which organized the caravan. "We are trying to get all those demands across, and we were also trying to get people to vote, and we were in every state doing just that."

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When announcing its plans to end TPS in El Salvador in 2018, the Trump administration said the decision was made after an inter-agency review that considered conditions in the country and its ability to receive the returning citizens. Those who support the end of the program say protections offered under TPS had been extended beyond reason.

The caravan began its journey in Pasadena, California, on Sept. 21, a week after the 9th U.S. Circuit Court of Appeals ruled that the administration's termination of temporary protected status for El Salvador, Haiti, Nicaragua, and Sudan could proceed.

In the last few weeks, the journey took them through battleground states including Florida, Georgia, North Carolina and Pennsylvania.

"We are relieved by the results, but we are still not celebrating. We understand now that we have to keep going," Villalobos said. "If we achieved anything in the midst of the Trump administration it's because of this, because we have organized."

Biden plans an "immediate review" of TPS, according to his immigration platform on his campaign website. The Democrat also supports a legislative solution that would offer TPS

holders a path to citizenship, the website says.

Currently, citizens from 10 countries have protected status and can seek renewal from the federal government. Besides El Salvador and Honduras, the countries are Haiti, Nepal, Nicaragua, Somalia, Sudan, South Sudan, Syria and Yemen.

The secretary of the Department of Homeland Security decides whether to extend TPS for each country. Since Trump became president, his administration has moved to end the programs for El Salvador, Honduras, Haiti, Nicaragua, Nepal and Sudan.

New Jersey is home to 10,370 TPS holders from El Salvador, more than 4,600 from Honduras, 2,900 from Haiti, 446 from Syria, and 222 from Nepal, according to 2018 figures from U.S. Citizen and Immigration Services. Many work in health care, cleaning and other jobs labeled essential during the pandemic, advocates said.

Alfaro, who works as a health care aide, said one of the patients she took care of died of the coronavirus in March, and Alfaro later tested positive for COVID-19 antibodies. Alfaro said she is not working now but hopes to find employment in the near future.

Madelia Cartagena, 43, of Newark said she's employed in a factory in Bergen County and has continued to work since the start of the pandemic. She moved to New Jersey in 1999 from El Salvador and received TPS protections in 2001.

"With Trump we were so worried, but now we have hope," Cartagena said.

Elba Perlera, 49, of Orange said she left El Salvador in the late '90s in search of a better future for her son. After receiving TPS, she said, she was able to get a better job and a driver's license, allowing her to become more independent. A few years ago, she started her own business cleaning houses, and now employs one other worker, Perlera said.

Perlera said she has lived in fear, and even sought therapy, since the Trump administration announced its intentions to terminate TPS. She also joined the movement to fight those changes.

With Biden's win, "I feel alleviated, but you can't have full confidence in them, because they don't govern alone," she said. "We know that for us to get legal residency, there are going to be a lot of steps through Congress, so we need to find more allies to help us."

*Monsy Alvarado is the immigration reporter for NorthJersey.com. To get unlimited access to the latest news about one of the hottest issues in our state and country, please*

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