



# African Immigrant Services' Fata Acquoi

## Many Minnesota Liberians face deportation if Deferred Enforced Departure program ends

A Civic Caucus Minnesota's Public Policy Process Interview

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Fata Acquoi, formerly of African Immigrant Services, discusses the impending expiration of the Deferred Enforced Departure (DED) program for Liberians, which has been in effect since the 1990s. She says many Minnesota Liberians on DED would be forced to leave the U.S. and go back to Liberia if the program, which is set to expire on March 31, 2019, is not renewed. She reviews current efforts to convince Congress to create a pathway to citizenship for Liberians on DED-something that does not currently exist.

### Present

Fata Acquoi, John Adams, John Cairns, Janis Clay (executive director), Paul Gilje, Randy Johnson, Dana Schroeder (associate director), Clarence Shallbetter, Dave Therkelsen

### Summary

Many Liberians in Minnesota are on the federal Deferred Enforced Departure (DED) program, according to Fata Acquoi, formerly of African Immigrant Services. Although DED is not a specific immigration status, individuals covered by DED are not subject to removal from the United States, usually for a designated period of time. DED is a discretionary decision made by the president, she says, and does not go through Congress. DED can be granted in response to war, civil unrest or natural disaster. Liberia is currently the only nation on DED.

DED was extended for Liberians through the Bill Clinton, George W. Bush and Barack Obama administrations, Acquoi says. It was set to expire on March 31, 2018. President Donald Trump decided to extend it for one more year through March 31, 2019, allowing for a 12-month wind-down period for the program to end.

Acquoi discussed Liberia's special relationship to the United States and the civil unrest in Liberia that compelled many Liberians to leave and come to the U.S. Once here, the Liberians received Temporary Protected Status (TPS) or DED. TPS for Liberians was revoked in 2007 and President George W. Bush extended DED to those Liberians who'd been on TPS.

Acquoi says currently, there is no pathway to citizenship for Liberians on DED, some of whom have been in the U.S. for over 30 years. She says African Immigrant Services and other groups representing Liberians in other states are now lobbying Congress to establish a pathway to citizenship.

She says immigrants contribute greatly to the state of Minnesota, noting that many Liberians work in nursing homes and many others run businesses. The workers and entrepreneurs on DED would be forced to leave Minnesota and return to Liberia if DED is not renewed after next March. Acquoi also says Liberia is not ready for an influx of people from the U.S., noting that Liberia already has a large unemployed population.

## Biography

Fata Acquoi is a graduate student in International Relations at George Washington University in Washington, D.C. At the time of this interview, she was programs director for African Immigrant Services (AIS), a community-based, nonprofit organization based in Brooklyn Park. AIS works to empower African immigrants and refugees to integrate into mainstream communities and to increase their participation in civic life.

Acquoi previously served as a field organizer for the Minnesota DFL party and as an intern for former U.S. Senator Al Franken. She is a graduate of the University of Minnesota, with a B.A. in political science and government and sociology of law.

## Background

Continuing its focus on Minnesota's competitiveness, since September 2015, the Civic Caucus has been undertaking a review of the quality of Minnesota's public-policy process for anticipating, defining and resolving major community problems. On November 27, 2016, the Caucus issued a report based on that review,  [Looking Back, Thinking Ahead: Strengthening Minnesota's Public-Policy Process](#).

The Civic Caucus interviewed Fata Acquoi, then programs director of African Immigrant Services (AIS), to learn more about Deferred Enforced Departure (DED) for Liberians and the impact of its impending expiration on Minnesota's Liberian population. The Civic Caucus previously interviewed [Abdullah Kiatamba, AIS executive director](#), on Dec. 16, 2016. The subject of that interview was turning immigrants into change-makers.

**About Deferred Enforced Departure (DED) for Liberians.** Deferred Enforced Departure (DED) may be authorized at the discretion of the president as part of the president's power to conduct foreign relations. Although DED is not a specific immigration status, individuals covered by DED are not subject to removal from the United States, usually for a designated period of time.

According to the [U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services website](#), in 2007, President George W. Bush directed that DED be provided for 18 months for certain Liberians in the United States whose

Temporary Protected Status (TPS) was expiring on Sept. 30, 2007. Bush directed Homeland Security to issue procedures for granting work authorization to DED-covered Liberians. DED has continued to be extended for Liberians since that initial period and was set to expire on March 31, 2018.

President Donald Trump originally proposed ending DED for Liberians on that date, but eventually decided to extend it for one more year to March 31, 2019. In a March 27, 2018, memo, Trump said, "conditions in Liberia no longer warrant a further extension of DED." He directed Homeland Security Secretary Kirstjen Nielsen to begin a 12-month wind-down period of DED for Liberians, ending on March 31, 2019, and to provide for continued work authorization throughout the wind-down period.

Trump said the 12-month wind-down period "is appropriate in order to provide Liberia's government with time to reintegrate its returning citizens and to allow DED beneficiaries who are not eligible for other forms of immigration relief to make necessary arrangements and to depart the United States."

## Discussion

Liberia was founded by freed American slaves who were sent back to Africa. Fata Acquoi, formerly of African Immigrant Services (AIS), said Liberia's motto is "The Love of Liberty Brought Us Here." She noted that Liberia's flag resembles the U.S. flag—it's red, white and blue with one star—and its national anthem is very similar to "The Star Spangled Banner." She said Liberia has a lot of pride in its relationship with the United States versus other African nations.

**As civil unrest erupted in Liberia in the early 1980s and into the 1990s, a lot of people left to go to the United States.** Acquoi said granting Deferred Enforced Departure (DED) is a discretionary decision made by a president. It does not go through Congress. DED, she said, protects a class of immigrants and has only been used five times in U.S. history—all of them since the 1990s. Liberia is now the only nation on DED. She said DED can be granted in response to war, civil unrest or natural disaster.

DED differs from Temporary Protected Status (TPS), which can go through Congress, Acquoi said. Liberia also has been granted TPS at certain times, but TPS was revoked for Liberia in 2007. DED for Liberians started in the early 1990s and has been extended since then. Acquoi called it a bipartisan program, since it's been granted by both Republican and Democratic presidents.

In September 2016, President Barack Obama renewed DED for Liberians for 18 months, until March 31, 2018. In doing so, he wrote that since 1991, the U.S. has been a safe haven for Liberians who were forced to leave their country because of conflict and widespread civil strife, in part by using TPS. The armed conflict in Liberia ended in 2003 and TPS ended for Liberians in 2007. When it was determined that it was still unsafe for Liberians to go home, President George W. Bush extended DED to those Liberians who had been on TPS.

**There are very limited ways a person on DED can become a U.S. citizen.** Acquoi said one way is for the person on DED to marry a U.S. citizen and file for citizenship through marriage. The second way is if the person on DED has a child over the age of 21 who's a native-born U.S. citizen and files for his or her parent's citizenship. Acquoi said the majority of people on DED don't meet either of

these requirements for citizenship. She said people on DED are vetted every year and must renew their work permits and driver's licenses. "We're the most vetted immigrants in the U.S.," she said. "They're always tracking you."

**Many Liberians in Minnesota have DED.** Acquoi said that the number counted for DED does not include children who have been born in the U.S. She said if their parents were deported, these children would potentially be put in foster care or they would have to leave the United States with their parents. Many Liberian immigrants have been on DED for so long, she said, that they just expect it to be renewed.

Acquoi said there are thousands of Liberians in the U.S., with a large Liberian population on the east coast, in New Jersey and the Philadelphia area, as well as a large Midwest population in Minnesota, Fargo and Iowa. She said the governing organization for the Liberian community in the United States is the Union of Liberian Associations of the Americas. They have statutes and bylaws, she said. Every state has its own association, which, in Minnesota is the Organization of Liberians in Minnesota (OLM). "These are the groups that we look toward to help us during these times," Acquoi said.

**Liberians have been advocating for a pathway to citizenship.** Acquoi said Liberians have been asking whether Congress could create a pathway to citizenship for people on DED people as it has for people on TPS. Some Liberians on DED have been here for 20 or 30 years with no way to become citizens.

She said when she and other Liberians were in Washington talking to Congress members this spring, some Congressmen and Congresswomen believed the pathway to citizenship should be a possibility. But the one-year extension of DED for Liberians granted by President Trump is a wind-down, she said. "You have one year to prepare yourself to leave," she said.

"The need assessment on Liberia that the Trump administration did on the ground is not the same as what we know the situation is," Acquoi said. "They're saying everything is fine, everything is peaceful. But we just had a new president come into office in January 2018. There's shaky ground and a period of transition for the new president." She said President George Weah is the first indigenous president of Liberia since the 1980s. People are saying it's not safe yet to go back, she said. And others are saying they have no ties to Liberia anymore after living in the U.S. for 20-plus years.

**African Immigrant Services (AIS) is part of a coalition with all immigrants affected by Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals (DACA), TPS and DED.** Acquoi said there were two bills before Congress that failed. They were DACA bills that included a pathway to citizenship for people on TPS and DED. They were defeated because of DACA, she said. When TPS for Haitians, which included more people than Liberians on DED, was not renewed, Acquoi said Liberians knew their DED status would not be renewed.

**Immigrants contribute greatly to the state of Minnesota.** Acquoi made that statement and an interviewer said Minnesotans see immigration as an opportunity, not a problem. "Minnesota needs people desperately to come here to work," the interviewer said. He asked if the state could do anything to help with the immigration issue.

Acquoi responded that Minnesota is a very welcoming state for immigrants. She said many Liberians work in nursing homes and many others own businesses. The workers and entrepreneurs on DED would be forced to leave Minnesota and return to Liberia if DED is not renewed after next March.

She said Minnesota could possibly become a sanctuary state, so that immigrants would feel safe here. "But it's such a federal issue that all the power one state has will not move the ball," she said. "A lot of our effort is targeting a national push."

**It appears that the Liberians are caught in what's emerging as a national discussion about the role of the federal government and its follow through on policies.** An interviewer made that statement and said there is no clear federal policy on immigration. "It's a mess that we've inherited," the interviewer said. "People are saying that Congress should get its act together, make some clear policies and get rid of this mess."

He said the federal government is the only one that has the real effective ability to fix the situation. "You're caught historically in the effort to straighten out immigration," he said. "It's a scandal of the federal government and its inability to do this."

"You've hit the nail on the head," Acquoi responded. She said DED was in place in the 1980s and 1990s, long before DACA. "Since then, Liberians have been lobbying Congress for a pathway to citizenship," she said. "Then we've had to continually plead to the president for an extension of DED."

Now Trump has turned it over to Congress, she said, so its members can be held responsible for deciding whether or not to grant Liberians on DED a pathway to citizenship. "So he was telling Liberians they have a year to get Congress to do what they should have done in the first place," she said.

**All of the 15 or 16 states growing rapidly in population are magnets for immigrants.** An interviewer made that statement and noted that we're looking ahead to the 2020 Census, which will provide the data for determining how many Congressional representatives each state will have. "The senators and representatives in the states that are shrinking or stable have no interest in accommodating immigration law that will give any advantage to growing states," he said. "All of the arguments over the ethical, humane and economical thing to do are overcome by the political debate over how we can hang onto our power."

The interviewer noted that if Minnesota didn't have immigrants coming into the state and having children, we'd be below average in terms of growth.

**Nationally, states are reluctant for federal immigration reform.** Acquoi made that statement and said many states are asking, "How will it benefit my state if we have a large influx of immigrants?" They're looking at the tradeoff of having a clear immigration system, she said.

She noted that in Minnesota, the majority of new businesses started here are immigrant-focused and the state has a huge percentage of people in the health care field who are immigrants.

"We as an immigrant population are caught between the scissors," Acquoi said. "You can come to Minnesota and thrive, but there are things going on at the federal level that will affect you. What are the trade offs for having a great state, but not a great federal system?"

**The federal government does have an immigration policy: If you're white, you get in; if you're not white, you don't get in.** An interviewer made that remark and noted that in some states, like Texas, people of color will become a majority very soon. People of color tend to vote Democratic, he said. "The Chamber of Commerce and the National Business Roundtable have all been unequivocally supportive of changing the immigration system," he said. They're in favor of DACA and of a much more open system, he said, but they don't get anywhere with the Republicans.

He asked if there are any Republicans at all, besides U.S. Rep. Erik Paulsen (R-Minn.), who are sensitive to this issue and to the need for immigrants in the workforce. "Immigration as an issue in general, nobody wants to talk about," Acquoi responded. "Everybody feels like they're going to be cornered or it's going to be a disadvantage when they run again."

The interviewer suggested that Acquoi talk to the **Problem Solvers Caucus** in Congress, made up of 24 Republicans and 24 Democrats. Acquoi said locally, there has been "great bipartisan support of our stuff," including from the mayor of Brooklyn Park, Jeffrey Lunde, who is a Republican. "He knows immigration is the core of the community in Brooklyn Park and Brooklyn Center," she said. She said Lunde, Paulsen and some state legislators came out and spoke at a rally at the State Capitol.

What we're finding out nationally is that nobody is aware of DED. Acquoi made that statement and said people were shocked when AIS was talking about DED during a policy brief in March 2018 on Capitol Hill. "We couldn't lobby for an extension, because people didn't even know what we were trying to get extended," she said. "The majority of what we were doing was teaching, rather than advocating or trying to get anything done."

"We have to take away the invisibility status of black immigrants," Acquoi continued. "We're trying to debunk that myth that all immigrants are from Latin America, which is not true." She said AIS is forming a coalition with the **Black Alliance for Just Immigration (BAJI)** and with Haitian immigrants, so the group can talk about black immigrants as a whole.

**If DED is not renewed after March 31, 2019, Liberia is not ready for an influx of people from the U.S.** Acquoi said Liberia has a large unemployed population. Most of the people employed there work for the government, she said. "We can't apply our skills if we go back," she said, "because there are no jobs." She pointed out that the Liberian war ended in 2003 and then the Ebola crisis hit in 2014. "Liberia is trying to rebuild," she said.

**We're trying to give our community information so they can go out and advocate for a pathway to citizenship for Liberians on DED.** Acquoi said Liberians in Minnesota and other states are trying to consolidate their efforts. AIS has done forums and created packets for other states with facts on DED, frequently asked questions, how to speak on DED and how to call their senators and representatives. "We need more people doing the work," she said.

She said pastors and imams from faith communities have spoken about immigration, how Jesus was a refugee and how to be accepting of different communities. Because Liberians on DED aren't citizens and can't vote, AIS is telling its allies and people who are citizens to ask those running for office whether they would vote for a pathway to citizenship for Liberians on DED.

**Right now we're focusing all of our efforts on the Congressional push for a pathway to citizenship.** Acquoi made that statement and said Liberians on DED take Trump at his word that he won't extend DED past next March. So, she said, they'll only go back to the president and ask for an extension of DED if their efforts toward a pathway to citizenship are unsuccessful.

"We're focusing on a compromise and bipartisanship," Acquoi said. "People just want an opportunity to stay." For example, she said, once you have a green card, you can apply for citizenship after five years. "We're not saying, 'We've been here for 30 years and we want this right now,'" she said. "We're partnering with people on TPS and DACA and offering support for each other."

**Front Page Africa is an online newspaper that summarizes what's happening in Africa.** An interviewer pointed that out and Acquoi said it's the most-read African newspaper anywhere in the world. "That's where Africans go for current news on Liberia and other African countries," she said.