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HOMELAND SECURITY NOMINEE SAYS 'DREAMERS' WON'T BE TARGETED FOR DEPORTATION

In Senate hearing, Kirstjen Nielsen offers limited details on views of DACA program protections set to expire

By Laura Meckler
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WASHINGTON – President Donald Trump's nominee to lead the Department of Homeland Security offered a degree of assurance to Senate Democrats critical of the administration's tough immigration enforcement agenda during a confirmation hearing Wednesday.

Kirstjen Nielsen told members of the Senate Homeland Security and Governmental Affairs Committee she would prioritize the arrest of undocumented immigrants who have committed crimes, and said contact information about so-called Dreamers – young people brought to the U.S. illegally as children – whose protections from deportation are set to expire won't be shared routinely with immigration enforcement officers.

Ms. Nielsen also said she doesn't favor the construction of a wall along the entire southern border, echoing recent statements by administration officials and by Mr. Trump himself, whose call for a border-length barrier had been a staple of his presidential campaign.

"There is no need for a wall from sea to shining sea," she said, responding to questions from two Democrats on the panel. "Technology, as you know, plays a key part and we can't forget it. There's a lot we can do with technology to secure our border."

Ms. Nielsen wasn't specific on the course of action she favors for the Dreamers. About 690,000 of them are now protected by the Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals program, or DACA. Mr. Trump has ordered an end to the program, deeming it unconstitutional and challenging Congress to enact legislation in its place. The Dreamers' protections begin expiring in March.

Sen. Kamala Harris (D., Calif.) asked Ms. Nielsen if she agrees that legislation should be passed by the end of the year to replace the administrative protections.

Ms. Nielsen didn't reply directly but said, more generally, "We owe it to them to find a permanent solution."

She said the Dreamers wouldn't be targets for deportation and that their personal information would only be used for enforcement in "extraordinarily limited circumstances" that involve public safety threats. A spokesman for Ms. Harris said she was somewhat reassured by Ms. Nielsen's remarks on the Dreamers.

If confirmed, Ms. Nielsen, 45 years old, would be the sixth secretary of Homeland Security and would enter the job with by far the lowest profile. An expert in cybersecurity, she was chief of staff at the department under former Secretary John Kelly earlier this year. She

followed him to the White House when he was named chief of staff and serves as principal deputy chief of staff there.

Members of the committee didn't say how they would vote, but it didn't appear that her nomination, which needs 51 yes votes in the Senate, was in any jeopardy. A committee vote is scheduled for Thursday.

Ms. Nielsen's nomination has stirred only minimal controversy, with some blowback from conservatives who fear she is insufficiently tough on immigration enforcement. She has drawn wide support, though, from former Homeland Security officials in both parties who praise her experience.

At her hearing, Ms. Nielsen didn't respond directly to questions from Democrats about several politically sensitive issues.

Responding to a query from Sen. Gary Peters (D., Mich.), she said she would need to learn more before commenting on whether local law enforcement authorities' practice of checking the immigration status of individuals they suspect are in the U.S. illegally amounts to racial profiling.

She also said she didn't know whether human activity was primarily responsible for a warming climate, an issue relevant to the root causes of natural disasters for which the agency provides relief and recovery services. Upon further questioning, she said, "You have my commitment to review the science," responding to Sen. Maggie Hassan (D., NH), who called Ms. Nielsen's comments on climate change disturbing.

One member of the panel, Sen. Tom Carper (D., Del.) questioned whether Ms. Nielsen's background prepared her to lead the sprawling agency.

He said the DHS secretary job is overwhelming even for experienced leaders, and asked her how she can be ready given that she "has never led an organization of even 100 people, much less 240,000."

Ms. Nielsen said that her leadership skills are "scaleable."