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ROMNEY DIALS BACK ACCEPTANCE OF OBAMA IMMIGRATION PROGRAM

By Julia Preston
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With hours to go before the presidential candidates meet in Denver for their first debate, Mitt Romney has scaled back his acceptance of a program by President Obama to grant reprieves from deportation to hundreds of thousands of young illegal immigrants.

On Monday, after months of pressure to clarify whether he would end the program if elected, Mr. Romney said in an interview with The Denver Post that he would not cancel two-year deportation deferrals already granted by the Obama administration.

"I'm not going to take something they've purchased," Mr. Romney said.

But on Wednesday morning, campaign aides clarified that Mr. Romney intended to halt the program after he took office and would not issue any new deferrals.

"We're not going to continue Obama's program," an aide said by e-mail. "We're going to replace it and would only honor visas already issued."

Mr. Romney has said that instead of Mr. Obama's temporary measure, he would seek a long-term solution for young undocumented immigrants. He has said he would support legislation to give permanent resident green cards to illegal immigrants who serve in the military.

"He will seek from day one to work as quickly as he can for a permanent solution that will supersede what Barack Obama did," said Alberto Martinez, an adviser to the Romney campaign on immigration. "He will replace certainty and permanence for something that is uncertain and not permanent."

Mr. Martinez confirmed that Mr. Romney, as president, would not issue any new deportation deferrals. But he said Mr. Romney would not deport undocumented students who would have been eligible for a deferral.

Mr. Romney has not offered details of a broader plan to give legal status to those immigrants. An estimated 1.2 million immigrants are immediately eligible for reprieves under Mr. Obama's program.

Undocumented youth leaders said they were dismayed by Mr. Romney's turnaround. "Dreamers across the nation are disappointed to learn that if elected to the presidency, Governor Mitt Romney would dismantle the Dreamer deferred action policy," Lorella Praeli, a leader of the United We Dream Network, said Wednesday. She was referring to a group of young undocumented immigrants who call themselves Dreamers, after a bill called the Dream Act.

Mr. Romney's revision could have a major impact on the deferral program, which began to receive applications on Aug. 15. Since there is no filing deadline, many illegal immigrants have said they were holding back from applying until after the Nov. 6 elections, fearing that Mr. Romney would stop the program.

Still, more than 100,000 immigrants have applied for deferrals and work permits that come with them. After the first month officials confirmed 29 approvals, and they said the pace of decisions could slow as the volume increases.

Immigration policy analysts were perplexed that Mr. Romney referred to the deferrals as visas, noting that the program does not grant visas. Mr. Obama created the program by executive action after the Dream Act stalled in Congress.