

# The Benefits of Commonsense Immigration Reform

## Recognizing the Contributions of Immigrants in the Armed Forces



*“Some of you came here as children, brought by parents who dreamed of giving you the opportunities that they had never had. Others of you came as adults, finding your way through a new country and a new culture and a new language. All of you did something profound: You chose to serve. You put on the uniform of a country that was not yet fully your own. In a time of war, some of you deployed into harm’s way. You displayed the values that we celebrate every Fourth of July—duty, responsibility, and patriotism.”*

**-President Barack Obama, July 4, 2012**

Immigrants serving in the United States Armed Forces are a shining example of the American dream. Though they were born outside our borders, they have dedicated their lives to defending our citizenry and most cherished values. Foreign-born servicemen and women secure shipping lanes in international waters, protect bases and embassies around the world, provide medical assistance, and conduct humanitarian missions, risking their lives abroad, all in the name of their adopted country. Today, immigrants voluntarily working for all branches of the U.S. military are recognized as vital assets by the Departments of Defense and Homeland Security.

As the nation celebrates its veterans, President Obama remains committed to supporting the foreign-born who are currently serving in our military, their families who also make sacrifices, and the veterans who have served our nation with courage. As of May 2013, more than 30,000 lawful permanent residents were serving in our Armed Forces. Too many of these service members feel the negative effects of our broken immigration system, experiencing delays in obtaining visas for family members, and fearing for the well-being of loved ones who may lack immigration status. Indeed, many undocumented individuals who call this country home and contribute to its success also desire to serve with pride and honor in our military, yet lack the legal status to do so. Fixing our broken immigration system would address these challenges; it is

the right thing to do for our economy, for our nation's security, and for the future of our Armed Forces.

This Veteran's Day, we highlight the Administration's current immigration services for foreign-born service members and their families and recognize that the time to act on immigration reform is now.

### **Immigrants in the Armed Forces: A History of Service and Sacrifice**

Immigrants contribute to the diversity of our armed forces, commendably performing their duties. Much of the future growth of our recruitment population will come as a result of immigrant enlistment.<sup>1</sup>

- Since 2002, more than [92,700](#) men and women have become citizens while wearing the uniform of the U.S. military. During times of war, the number of immigrants naturalizing have been their highest.<sup>2</sup>
- As of May 2013, there were 22,105 non-citizens serving on active duty. At the same time, the Selected Reserve had 9,023 non-citizens serving.<sup>3</sup>
- In 2011, the Department of Defense data indicated that Mexico (12 percent) and the Philippines (10 percent) were the leading countries of origin for immigrants in the military, followed by Jamaica, Colombia and the Dominican Republic.<sup>4</sup>
- Of the millions of men and women who have served in America's Armed Forces, only a few thousand have received the Medal of Honor, the nation's highest military decoration for those who have risked their lives and acted beyond the call of duty. Over 700 of the Medal of Honor recipients have been immigrants.<sup>5</sup>
- In 2012, 608,000 veterans, or 3 percent of the living U.S. military veteran population in the United States, were foreign-born.<sup>6</sup>

### **Our Commitment to Foreign-Born Servicemen and Families**

In 2002, then-President Bush issued an Executive Order that allowed for immediate naturalization eligibility for active-duty U.S. military service members or those recently discharged. The Obama Administration has built on this initiative. In recognition of important sacrifices made by permanent residents serving in the Armed Forces and their families, U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services (USCIS) has streamlined procedures to help qualified individuals navigate our complex immigration system and apply for naturalization and other immigration benefits.

- Special provisions of the Immigration and Nationality Act authorize [USCIS](#) to expedite the naturalization process for current members of the U.S. Armed Forces and their

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<sup>1</sup> Margaret D. Stock, *Immigrants in the Military 8 Years After 9/11*, (Washington, DC: Immigration Policy Center, November 2009).

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>3</sup> Defense Manpower Data Center, May 2013

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>5</sup> United States of America Congressional Medal of Honor Recipients and Their Official Citations (Columbia Heights, Minnesota: Highland House II, 1994), xi, in *Immigration*, Stuart Anderson, 2010.

<sup>6</sup> Catherine N. Barry, *New Americans in Our Nation's Military*, <http://www.americanprogress.org/wp-content/uploads/2013/11/ImmigrantVets-brief-3.pdf> November 8, 2013.

families, as well as discharged service members. Qualified members of the Armed Forces are exempt from some naturalization requirements, including residence and physical presence in the United States.

- USCIS has established a [toll-free military help line](#) exclusively for members of the military and their families stationed in the United States or abroad. Specially trained USCIS customer service specialists are available to answer calls and provide assistance on immigration-related matters.
- Since September 2002, USCIS has naturalized [92,742 members of the military](#), with 10,992 of those service members becoming citizens during USCIS naturalization ceremonies overseas in 33 countries.
- Since 2008, USCIS has naturalized [2,039 military spouses](#) during ceremonies in 30 countries. In addition, spouses of service members who are or will be deployed may be eligible for expedited naturalization.
- Since 2009, USCIS has presented [82 children of members of the military](#) with citizenship certificates during ceremonies in Italy, Germany, Japan, South Korea and the United Kingdom.
- The [Military Accessions Vital to the National Interest \(MAVNI\)](#) is a pilot program that allows the military services to recruit legally present non-citizens, who do not have green cards, but whose skills are considered to be “vital to the national interest” and who fill “critical to military readiness” needs. Those holding critical skills – physicians, nurses, and certain experts in language with associated cultural backgrounds –are permitted to enlist in the U.S. Armed Forces and naturalize shortly after enlistment. Since the pilot program began in 2009, there have been approximately 1,850 MAVNIs accessed in the Active and Reserve Components.

### **Common sense Immigration Reform and the Armed Forces**

On January 29, 2013, President Obama outlined his proposal for common sense immigration reform. The President’s priorities call for creating an earned path to citizenship, continuing to strengthen border security, holding employers accountable, and streamlining the legal immigration system for families, workers and employers.

Earlier this year, the Senate passed the Border Security, Economic Opportunity and Immigration Modernization Act (S. 744) with strong bipartisan support. This legislation is largely consistent with the President’s priorities. A growing number of Congressional Republicans are urging the House to act quickly. For the first time, some of them have joined Democrats and endorsed a bill based on the one the Senate already passed and bipartisan House legislation. Key provisions of these bipartisan bills would have significant and lasting benefits for foreign-born members of the military as well as veterans who are seeking to more quickly reunite with their family members. Immigrants with diverse cultural backgrounds and language skills make exemplary candidates for our 21<sup>st</sup> Century Armed Forces. Creating a modern, accountable, and fair and immigration system can enable our country to recruit new talented service members to the ranks of the military.

- The legislation passed by the Senate would provide a lengthy but fair path to earned citizenship, bringing millions of undocumented immigrants out of the shadows.

- Undocumented young people who were brought our country as children and consider the U.S. their home (“DREAMers”) are provided an expedited path to citizenship under the legislation. Providing a path to citizenship for DREAMers would enable the Armed Forces to increase their “pool of high quality, motivated youth with a potential for military service.”<sup>7</sup>
- The Senate bill would also reunite families by eliminating the backlog of family-based visas. Current family immigrant visa backlogs can separate family members for years and even decades.
- Adapting to an increasingly globalized world, the U.S. Armed Forces will also be able to recruit more entrepreneurial individuals who can contribute their innovation and talents to expand our research capabilities and improve our technology, expand our ability to communicate effectively in foreign languages and provide critical analysis of foreign intelligence.
- Finally, the legislation will enable the Departments of Defense and Homeland Security to establish a program to actively recruit members of the reserve components of the Armed forces and former members of the Armed Forces to serve in Customs and Border Protection and Immigration and Customs Enforcement, providing recruitment incentives such as student loan repayments.

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<sup>7</sup> Testimony of Clifford L. Stanley Under Secretary of Defense (Personnel and Readiness) Senate Judiciary Committee DREAM Act June 28, 2011