ON THE FRONT LINE

THE IMPACT OF IMMIGRANTS ON MILITARY FORCE READINESS

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Immigrants have a long and proud history of service in defense of our nation. In 2013, the active duty military had more than 65,000 immigrants — 5% of the force — including more than 30,000 lawful permanent residents. Those numbers are likely to rise as noncitizens account for 4% of all new military recruits. Since 2002, almost 90,000 men and women have become citizens while wearing the uniform of the U.S. military.

Yet, the U.S. military currently faces a serious recruitment challenge, exacerbated by our broken immigration system. According to a report by Mission: Readiness, an organization of more than 80 retired senior military leaders, "only one in four of U.S. young adults is eligible for military service." The Center for Naval Analyses (CNA) identified noncitizens as critical for military recruitment because they are younger than the native-born population, possess language and cultural skills critically needed for the armed forces, and have far lower attrition rates.

At the same time, "young people who lack immigration status are lining up to enlist." Active and retired high-ranking military officials — including General Colin Powell and Secretary Robert Gates — have endorsed the DREAM Act, which would allow young immigrants to earn permanent residency by completing at least two years in the military or college.

The broken immigration system also impacts our national security and the lives of those active duty military who have family members under deportation order. Margaret Stock, a Lieutenant Colonel in the Reserve Military Police Corps and a former professor at West Point, has warned that the government has created an "extremely complex and often arbitrary system of immigration laws and regulations without full attention to the detrimental impact that this system has on the readiness of the U.S. Armed Forces."

Moreover, if veterans have family members who are undocumented, they have a chance of losing their critical support system. A veteran’s family is the key to a successful transition into civilian life and adding the stress of potential deportation undermines these efforts. As our service members return home, our nation should not abandon them by forcing a family member to leave. By repairing our dysfunctional immigration system, our veterans will know that the country they defended overseas has not left them alone upon their return.

Veterans for Immigration Reform calls on Congress and the White House to fix our broken immigration system and pass comprehensive immigration reform this year. We must ensure that our service members focus on their mission and have the support of family when they return home from the battlefield. We must keep the pool of potential service members as broad as possible by including the millions of young undocumented people who came to the U.S. as children. This is the right thing to do for our national security, the future of our military, our veterans, and our nation.
The Front Line
A Long History of Immigrants Playing Vital Roles in Our Armed Forces

Since its beginning, immigrants have proudly served in our nation’s defense. Our armed forces have always benefited from the patriotism, hard work, and special skills that immigrants bring. Today our nation’s military, reserves, and veterans are infused with immigrants who continue to bring those same qualities to the country they choose to call home.

In 2013, the active duty military had more than 65,000 immigrants -- 5% of the force -- including more than 30,000 lawful permanent residents. Those numbers are likely to rise as noncitizens account for 4% of all new military recruits. Roughly 12% of all living veterans are immigrants or children of immigrants. In 2012, there were 608,000 veterans in the U.S. who were foreign-born.

More than 700 Medal of Honor recipients have been immigrants. Immigrants and children of immigrants have risen to the highest ranks in the military, including Polish-born General John Shalikashvili, who was Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff and Supreme Allied Commander as well as General Colin Powell, son of Jamaican immigrants, who served as National Security Advisor, Chairman of the Joint Chiefs, and Secretary of State.

For many years, military service has been a tool for integration into American society, where all individuals serving are counted on equally to defend their brothers and sisters on the front lines. Service members depend on the people to the left, right, front and back of them, regardless of religion, race or ethnicity. Military service offers equal opportunities for promotion, future education, and skills training.

A natural part of immigrants’ desire to serve in the armed forces is the aspiration to become U.S. citizens. Immigrants in the military are offered an expedited naturalization process. Since 2009, immigrants in the military were provided the opportunity to naturalize when they graduated from basic training.

Almost 90,000 men and women have become citizens while wearing the uniform of the U.S. military since 2002. The U.S. has offered posthumous citizenship to hundreds of immigrants who died while on active duty during time of conflict. Many immigrants have served with distinction and are among those who have received the highest honors in the armed forces.

Story Line -- Sylvestre Herrera

After Sylvestre Herrera received his draft notice in 1944, he was shocked to find out that he was actually born in Mexico and was not required to join the service. But Herrera loved his country and thought, “I don’t want anybody to die in my place.” Herrera joined the Texas National Guard and was sent to Europe. While fighting in France, Private First Class Herrera was also studying to become a U.S. citizen. On March 15, 1945, Herrera advanced with his platoon along a wooded road until stopped by heavy enemy machinegun fire. As the rest of the unit took cover, Pvt. Herrera made a one-man frontal assault and captured eight enemy soldiers. When the platoon resumed its advance and was subjected to fire again, Pvt. Herrera moved forward, disregarding the danger of exploding mines, to attack the position. He stepped on a mine and had both feet severed, but despite intense pain and unchecked loss of blood, he continued with accurate rifle fire and pinned down the enemy. Pvt. Herrera’s incredible heroism and courage earned him the Medal of Honor, the nation’s highest award.
The U.S. military faces a serious recruitment challenge. According to a report by Mission: Readiness, an organization of more than 80 retired generals, admirals, and other senior military leaders, only one in four of young adults in the U.S. is eligible for military service. The report, entitled, “Ready, Willing, and Unable to Serve,” presents “startling statistics released by the Pentagon showing that 75 percent of young people ages 17 to 24 are currently unable to enlist in the United States military. Three of the most common barriers for potential recruits are failure to graduate high school, a criminal record, and physical fitness issues, including obesity.”

Many leaders have recognized that non-citizens are a vital and valuable pool of potential recruits for the military. The Center for Naval Analyses (CNA) catalogued this data in an influential 2011 report listing three reasons for immigrants’ importance: 1) the number of non-citizens in the U.S. in the desired age range is quite large (approximately 1.2 million); 2) immigrants possess skills critically needed for the armed forces including language diversity and cultural competencies that support our strategic interests; and, 3) non-citizen recruits have far lower attrition rates and are much less likely to leave early in their service, which saves our armed forces critical time and money.

U.S. military leaders have also realized that much of the future growth of the armed forces recruitment population will come as a result of immigrant enlistment and commissions and that it is critical to allow young undocumented immigrants who have lived here for many years into this applicant pool. Many current and former high-ranking military officials have endorsed the DREAM Act, which would allow young immigrants to earn permanent residency by completing at least two years in the military or college. Endorsers include: General Colin Powell, former Joint Chiefs of Staff and Secretary of State; Robert Gates, former Secretary of Defense; David S.C. Chu, former Undersecretary of Defense for Personnel and Readiness; and Bill Carr, former Acting Undersecretary of Defense for Military Personnel Policy.

At the same time, young people who lack immigration status are lining up to enlist. Hundreds have formed organizations calling for the Congress to pass the DREAM Act and allow them to serve (see letusserve.org). Young people, many of whom arrived here as small children and only know the U.S. as their home, have participated in ROTC and other military programs only to have their dreams dashed when they find out that they are unable to enlist or be commissioned.

STORY LINE — MARISOL CAMACHO

Marisol Camacho came to the U.S. with her parents when she was seven. Marisol was on the honor roll and was also a member of the Wilcox Police Explorer program, which helped her to develop discipline. Since high school, her goal has been to join the Navy and become a nurse, but she was barred from joining because of her immigration status. She is currently in college in a nursing program but still hopes to someday serve in the Navy and to serve the country in which she was grew up.
Just as in the general population, members of our military may have family who are undocumented immigrants. These family members desperately want to attain legal status in this country, but the option doesn’t exist because of our broken immigration system. When service members are stationed thousands of miles away from family, they feel powerless to help. The stress over a parent, spouse, or sibling who has no legal status weighs heavily on them and may adversely affect their ability to focus on mission.

Margaret Stock, a Lieutenant Colonel in the Military Police Corps, US Army Reserve and a former professor at West Point, has warned that the government has created an “extremely complex and often arbitrary system of immigration laws and regulations without full attention to the detrimental impact that this system has on the readiness of the U.S. Armed Forces.” She went on to state that this could affect thousands of service members.

The U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement echoed these remarks, noting that, “Military preparedness can potentially be adversely affected if active members of the U.S. Armed Forces … worry about the immigration status of their spouses, parents and children.”

The Obama Administration has heeded these warnings by implementing a new policy in November 2013 allowing family members of active military, reserves, and veterans who are undocumented to stay in the U.S. This process, called “Parole in Place,” is a welcome relief to many service members but is only a temporary solution and could be removed at the direction of the administration or the upcoming change in the White House.

**STORY LINE – ARMY STAFF SGT. ALEX JIMENEZ**

Army Staff Sgt. Alex Jimenez’s wife, Yaderlin, was being processed for deportation to Guatemala while he was serving in Iraq. At the same time in 2007, Jimenez was captured by enemy forces following a firefight. Though Jimenez had previously filed paperwork seeking legal status for his wife, the Department of Homeland Security rejected it because Yaderlin had entered the country illegally. Even after he went missing, DHS held firm on their position. It took the intervention of a U.S. Senator and media stories to pressure the DHS Secretary to use his authority to grant ‘discretionary parole’ to Yaderlin. Two months later, and more than a year after he went missing, Jimenez’s body was found in the so-called “Triangle of Death” south of Baghdad. Because Yaderlin now had legal status, she was able to claim the benefits in which she was entitled as the widow of a fallen American soldier.
**PART 4**

**THE LIFE LINE**

Members of the Military Have Earned Our Respect and We Need to Keep Their Families Together

When our service members return home, they often rely on their families to help them reintegrate into their daily lives. They may suffer from combat stress or other mental health issues. They may have physical injuries that need time to heal. As they leave the service, they will need to find jobs, health care, and manage the maze of veterans' benefits. Most veterans count on their family for care and emotional support during this adjustment time.

The National Center for PTSD at Boston University School of Medicine found that there is a growing body of literature showing that family plays an important role in a service member's readjustment after deployment. They found that social support from family protects against PTSD, depressive symptoms, and suicidal ideation.

If members of the military or veterans have family members who are undocumented, they risk losing a vital support system during a crucial time. A veteran's family is the key to a successful transition into civilian life and adding the stress of potential deportation undermines these efforts. Family members have to worry not only about the future of the returning service member, but they also have daily concerns about their own future in the U.S. As our service members return home, our nation should not abandon them by forcing a family member to leave. By fixing our broken immigration system, many of our veterans will know that the country they defended overseas has not abandoned them upon their return.

Members of our military and veterans have risked their lives for our country and have earned America’s respect. We should honor them by ensuring their families stay together. They have fought for our country and we must fight for them.

**STORY LINE – DAVID AND FANNY LOPEZ**

David and Fanny Lopez were married in 2008. David, a U.S. citizen and in the Army Reserves, hoped to sponsor his new wife for a green card but Fanny was ineligible because she had entered the U.S. without authorization when she was a child. Two years later, David was deployed to Afghanistan, leaving him with uncertainty about whether Fanny would be there when he came home. Fanny heard about an opportunity to be granted parole in place by the USCIS, although at the time, it was offered very rarely. In addition, she found that her husband actually needed to be in the U.S. at the time of application, which was impossible while he was deployed. When he returned home, as with many veterans, David had a difficult time readjusting to civilian life. He leaned on Fanny for emotional and other support but also worried about her future in the U.S. Fanny believes that regardless of her immigration status, as an Army wife, she has provided a service to this country. Only after hiring a persistent lawyer, were the couple able to fight through the maze of red tape and eventually succeeded in getting parole for Fanny. Today, Fanny has her legal residency and helps to support her husband and her family, but she worries about other immigrants who are in the same position.
National security leaders have called for comprehensive immigration reform and the passage of the DREAM Act. The voices of our military leaders have been strong on the need for a permanent solution to our broken immigration system.

Robert Gates, Former Secretary of Defense: “The DREAM Act represents an opportunity to expand this pool [of non-citizen military service men and women], to the advantage of military recruiting and readiness. The expansion of the pool of eligible youth that would result from the DREAM Act provides an important opportunity to selectively manage against the highest qualification standards.”
9/21/10, Letter to Senator Durbin

General Colin Powell, Former Joint Chiefs of Staff and Secretary of State: “We can’t be anti-immigration because immigrants are fueling this country. Without immigrants, America would be like Europe or Japan with an aging population and no young people coming in to take care of it. We have to educate our immigrants … the DREAM Act is one way we can do this.”
9/18/10, Meet the Press

David S. C. Chu, Former Bush Administration Undersecretary of Defense for Personnel and Readiness: “If their parents are undocumented or in immigration limbo, most of these young people have no mechanism to obtain legal residency even if they have lived most of their lives here. Yet many of these young people may wish to join the military, and have the attributes needed - education, aptitude, fitness, and moral qualifications.”
7/10/06, Congressional Hearing on Immigrants in the Military

Major General Alfred Valenzuela: “I’ve seen the sacrifice that these immigrant men and women make to this country. They come here with the dream of becoming citizens and sign up to die for the country they call home but yet are never granted citizenship. We should pass the DREAM Act so that those individuals willing to give their lives to the U.S. can also be called citizens of the U.S.”
9/17/10, Press conference call

Joining with these esteemed military leaders, Veterans for Immigration Reform calls on Congress and the White House to fix our broken immigration system and pass comprehensive immigration reform this year. We must ensure that our service members focus on their mission and have the support from their family when they return home from the battlefield. We must keep the pool of potential service members as broad as possible by including the millions of young undocumented people who came to the U.S. as children. This is the right thing to do for our national security, the future of our military, our veterans, and our nation.