

# Military to allow undocumented immigrants to serve

Andrew Tilghman, *Military Times* 5:22 p.m. EDT September 25, 2014



(Photo: AFP/Getty Images)

A small number of undocumented immigrants in the U.S. will have [an opportunity to join the military](#) ([/article/20140925/NEWS05/309250074/DoD-policy-will-allow-some-immigrants-U-S-illegally-serve](#)) for the first time in decades under a new Department of Defense policy unveiled Thursday.

The new rules will expand an existing program allowing recruiters to target foreign nationals with high-demand skills, mostly rare foreign language expertise or specialized health care training.

For the first time, the program — known as Military Accessions in the National Interest, or MAVNI — will be open to immigrants without a proper visa if they came to the U.S. with their parents before age 16. More specifically, they must be approved under a 2012 Obama administration policy known as Deferred Action for Child Arrivals, or DACA.



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The new Pentagon policy may be the first phase of a broader government-wide effort to ease pressure on immigrants and create new paths to citizenship. President Barack Obama, frustrated with the failure of Congress to pass any substantial immigration reform, has vowed to aggressively use his presidential authority to change the way immigration policies are carried out.

The Pentagon program is capped at 1,500 recruits per year. Officials say it's unclear how many of those might be unlawful DACA status immigrants as opposed to others who are also eligible for military service under MAVNI, including those with legal, nonpermanent visas such as students or tourists.

Estimates suggest between 1.2 million and 2.1 million children, teenagers and young adults in the U.S. have no legal immigration status but meet the criteria for the DACA program. Those targeted by recruiters under the MAVNI program likely will be immigrants with language skills critical to national security, such as Arabic, Chinese, Pashto or Persian.



USA TODAY

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(<http://www.usatoday.com/story/news/nation/2013/11/15/immigration-deportations-military-members/3585577/>)

But Pentagon officials don't know how many of those immigrants have actually learned their ancestral language to the proficiency required by the military.

"We're just not sure how many within that existing population of DACA would have the linguistic skills to qualify," said one defense official familiar with the policy change. "These are kids who entered the country at a fairly young age and have basically grown up in the United States, so the limit of their language talents would probably be the language that they received at home."

DACA status is granted by the Department of Homeland Security and includes a background check.

On average, the military recruits about 5,000 noncitizens each year, nearly all of them permanent U.S. residents, or so-called "green card" holders. Starting in 2006, the military began accepting some foreigners with nonpermanent visas, such as students or tourists, if they had special skills that are highly valued.

After entering military service, foreigners are eligible for expedited U.S. citizenship. Since 2001, more than 92,000 foreign-born service members have become citizens while serving in uniform.

The MAVNI program began in 2008 and remains a pilot program. The Pentagon notified Congress on Thursday that the program, which was due to expire at the end of this fiscal year, will be extended for another two years and will for the first time include DACA-status immigrants.

The military services are not required to accept recruits under MAVNI. In recent years, the Army has been the only service to accept a significant number of recruits under the program. The Air Force has accepted only a few and the Navy and Marine Corps have not sought MAVNI recruits in recent years.

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