

**Prepared Statement**

**of**

**The Honorable Jessica Wright**

**Acting Under Secretary of Defense (Personnel and Readiness)**

**Before the**

**Senate Appropriations Committee**

**Defense Subcommittee**

**Immigrant Enlistment: A Force Multiplier for the U.S. Armed  
Forces**

**May 19, 2014**

Senator Durbin, thank you for inviting me to join you here today to discuss our mutual desire to develop a path to military service for Deferred Action for Childhood Arrival (DACA) recipients, an initiative that you have long championed. It is also a great honor to be a part of this engagement here, at the Phoenix Military Academy, one of the many Junior Reserve Officer Training Corps (JROTC) programs in the city of Chicago. I value this opportunity to join you in demonstrating for this student body, many of whom have studied civics and leadership as a part of their involvement in JROTC.

Since its inception in 1916, JROTC has been and remains the Department of Defense's (The Department's) largest youth development program in our secondary schools and communities across the Nation. Currently, JROTC has over 554,000 students enrolled in over 3,400 units across the country where students like those joining us here today gain valuable lessons in leadership, teamwork, and self-discipline. And, right here in Chicago, the Chicago Public School system has the largest JROTC presence in the nation with 37 traditional units and over 10,000 students participating. I commend each of you for being a part of such a great program and am confident you will gain valuable lessons that will impact the rest of your lives. While you benefit from JROTC, it is also important to realize that our society gains too. The societal benefits of JROTC are significant and long lasting as well.

I would like to take this opportunity here at the Phoenix Academy to commend the JROTC instructors as well as the entire faculty and staff. The commitment that each of you have to providing a tremendous learning environment for these young people is outstanding. My sincere thanks to each of you for your service, and for your stalwart commitment to these students and our program.

Our military depends on a strong and diverse society to sustain the All-Volunteer Force. For more than 13 years of protracted conflict, the All-Volunteer Force has shown its resolve and continues to be the strongest and most-respected military force in the world. Our people are **THE** reason for this success. Our Service Recruiting Commands have sustained the All-Volunteer Force by recruiting the best and brightest of America's youth from across our nation. Their diverse backgrounds aid immeasurably in finding solutions to the many complex national security issues with which the Department is charged from around the globe. The continued success of our All-Volunteer Force begins with recruiting, and the viability of the force is assured with successful retention. Both recruiting and retention have been easier in some years than in others. The support of Congress has clearly helped facilitate our success. While we are currently achieving our recruiting goals, there are indications that the recruiting environment may become more challenging in the future as the economy continues to improve.

To support initiatives that would expand the number of youth eligible to enlist in the military, the Department continues to be on record as supporting the "Development, Relief, and Education for Alien Minors" (DREAM) Act, which was largely incorporated in the bipartisan immigration reform bill that passed in the Senate last June, and has been vocal about the potential positive impact of this legislation on our Armed Forces.

The DREAM Act, legislation which you have tirelessly supported, would provide an opportunity for those individuals who came to the United States at 15 years of age or younger and have lived here for at least 5 years to earn a legal status, to enlist in the United States Military, if otherwise qualified, and earn the right to become a U.S. citizen. Legislation like this would also help the military and our recruiting efforts by expanding the pool of youth eligible for enlistment.

While the DREAM Act would create a larger pool of potential enlistees, it would also assist the Department in furthering our diversity goals. Just a few weeks ago, the Secretary of Defense and other top leaders across the Department signed the Human Goals Charter, a cornerstone document that affirms the Department's commitment to diversity and equality throughout the military. Diversity is more than race, gender, and religion. It is a variety or mixture of thought, ability, background, language, culture, and skill. Passage of the DREAM Act would expand our ability to become a more diverse force and afford a group of young people the opportunity to join the military and become part of a rich tradition of service.

Our Armed Forces of this great Nation, a nation of immigrants, have a long and distinguished record of valor and sacrifice on the part of those who call the United States "home," but are not yet citizens.

The history of noncitizens serving in the U.S. Armed Forces has been significant over time. The Lodge Act of the 1950s, for example, permitted noncitizen Eastern Europeans to enlist between 1950 and 1959. We officially began recruiting Filipino nationals into the U.S. Navy in the late 1940s, when it signed the Military Bases Agreement of 1947, allowing U.S. military bases in the Philippines. In total, over 35,000 Filipinos enlisted in the Navy through the program between 1952 and 1991. The DREAM Act would similarly expand the opportunity to serve in the military to those young people brought to our country as children who are currently in an undocumented status through no fault of their own.

Each year, it is estimated that approximately 65,000 undocumented students graduate from U.S. high schools and many are at the top of their class. However, they have difficulty affording college; cannot enlist in the military; legally work in the United States; apply for U.S. Citizenship; or otherwise pursue their dreams. These young men and women often mirror

exactly the “high quality” youth the Department seeks for enlistment. They may be scholars, student leaders, and athletes. They are often “Americans” in every cultural sense of the word, having grown up in the United States and pledging allegiance to our flag. Passage of the DREAM Act would offer this very specific subset of young adults the opportunity to serve the nation in which they grew up, and a path to becoming productive citizens and contributing members of our society.

As you know, in June 2012, the Department of Homeland Security (DHS) announced the establishment of the Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals process. As then DHS Secretary Napolitano stated, “Our nation’s immigration laws must be enforced in a firm and sensible manner. But they are not designed to be blindly enforced without consideration given to the individual circumstances of each case. Nor are they designed to remove productive young people to countries where they may not have lived or even speak the language. Discretion, which is used in so many other areas, is especially justified here.” Speaking from the Rose Garden that same day, President Obama remarked, “these are young people who study in our schools, they play in our neighborhoods, they’re friends with our kids, they pledge allegiance to our flag. They are Americans in their heart, in their minds, in every single way but one: on paper. They were brought to this country by their parents -- sometimes even as infants -- and often have no idea that they’re undocumented until they apply for a job or a driver’s license, or a college scholarship.”

The Department recognizes the positive attributes of the population of young people that has received deferred action through the Department of Homeland Security’s DACA process. To that end, the Department continues to examine the laws and policies that address the eligibility of noncitizens to serve in the military in order to determine if and how our programs

could be applied to DACA recipients. The Department also supports legislative proposals that would expand enlistment to include additional non-citizens.

Additionally, the Department is working with DHS regarding its parole-in-place policy so that lawful permanent residents and citizens with undocumented family members may enlist in the military and resolve issues pertaining to their undocumented family members. I look forward to working with DHS on immigration issues important to enlistees and current Service members, as well as to veterans.

Today, more than 25,000 noncitizens in documented status serve in the military (active and reserve) and about 5,000 more enlist each year. They serve worldwide in all of the Services and in a variety of jobs. They swear allegiance to the United States and represent our Nation both at home and abroad – even on the front lines of our current overseas contingency operations. Nearly 93,000 have been granted citizenship through military service since September 11, 2001, and over 125 who entered military service since then have made the ultimate sacrifice, having given their lives for our country in a time of war.

Noncitizens have been, and continue to be, a vital part of our country's military. Those who serve are patriotic, and data shows that over 80 percent complete their initial enlistment obligation. Noncitizen recruits continue to provide the Services with a richly diverse force in terms of race/ethnicity, language, and culture.

In conclusion, noncitizens have served and continue to serve honorably in the military. Throughout past and current conflicts, those who are not yet citizens, but call the United States of America “home,” have answered the call to defend their adopted Nation. I thank you for the opportunity to appear here with you today and look forward to your questions.