

Statement of Colonel (Ret.) Kevin Kelley
Director of Military Instruction, Chicago Public Schools

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

United States Senate Committee on Appropriations
Subcommittee on Defense

Monday, May 19, 2014, 9:30 a.m.

Phoenix Military Academy
145 S. Campbell Ave.
Chicago, IL

Thank you Mr. Chairman for holding this hearing and for inviting me to testify today.

I am Kevin Kelley and I am honored to be here to provide my testimony and relate my experience in working with high school students who are DREAMers.

I am a retired Colonel in the United States Army and am currently the Director of Military Instruction for Chicago Public Schools. In this role, I oversee the Junior Reserve Officer Training Corps programs in 45 public high schools in Chicago Public Schools. Four military services are represented among those Junior ROTC programs, with 36 of the programs Army Junior ROTC, four Navy, three Marine Corps and two Air Force sponsored. Six of these programs are in public school military academies. We serve nearly 11,000 students enrolled in these Junior ROTC programs, making Chicago the largest Junior ROTC presence in any school district in the country.

I have worked with Junior ROTC in Chicago for eleven years. I taught Junior ROTC for eight and a half years at Roberto Clemente High School and two and a half years ago moved to my current position overseeing all the Junior ROTC programs for the school district. I am also a state certified teacher in Illinois.

I think it is important at this point to note that the purpose of JROTC is to instill in students the values of citizenship, service to the nation, personal responsibility and a sense of accomplishment. Junior ROTC is well-suited to this mission with its teaching corps of retired military instructors who model these values and teach them to our students through a robust curriculum and numerous co-curricular activities that include leadership development camps, academic and drill competitions, and service learning projects that support our communities. Our cadets provided over 125,000 hours of service to the Chicago community over the past year.

Students enroll in Junior ROTC in Chicago Public Schools for many reasons: some see the structure and opportunity for leadership development and are attracted to it; some have aspirations to serve the nation in one of the armed services and see this as preparation for that; and some take it as an alternative to physical education. Whatever the reason, the benefit they gain from the curriculum and participating in co-curricular activities support the mission of motivating them to be better citizens.

And while it is not our purpose to recruit young people for military service, when there are young men and women who express a desire to serve, we are ready and willing to assist them in achieving that goal. Our most recent analysis shows that about five percent of our 1,600 graduating seniors last year chose to serve in the military, either by enlisting directly into the active or reserve forces, by applying and receiving an appointment to one of our nation's prestigious military academies, or by receiving a Senior ROTC Scholarship at the college they plan to attend.

Every year we are confronted with the reality that a certain segment of our graduating seniors will be unable to fulfill their dreams of serving the nation in this way. We know of several students, some who are present in this school today, who would be qualified, based on their test scores, physical fitness, and extracurricular participation, to be competitive for appointment to a service academy such as West Point, but are unable to apply because of their immigration status. They would meet the highest enlistment quality benchmarks that are set for our military recruiting force, but if they approach the recruiter, they are told they cannot even apply.

These are students who have lived in the United States all through their school years, many having arrived in this country as infants. They have accomplished great things in our schools, becoming leaders, scholars, and star athletes. But for many, when they graduate from high school, the road blocks to their future pop up. We do not have the exact count on the number of undocumented students in our programs, but our estimate is that it is about 10 percent.

When we deny them the opportunities they have earned on their own merits – academic achievement, leadership and service in their community – we may tie them to bonds of poverty they would otherwise escape. We increase the chances that they become a segment of society that draws on our social resources that, had they been given the chance, they would be contributing to in their own right.

Let me tell you about one of our stellar Junior ROTC graduates who wants to serve in the Marine Corps. Alejandro Morales was our highest ranking cadet in the city, earning the position of City Corps Commander. When he graduated in 2012 he dreamed of joining the Marine Corps. His status prevented him from fulfilling that dream. Today, Alejandro works a night shift from 10 PM to 2 AM to earn money to attend a Chicago City College to continue his education. A young

man with a work ethic like this and the drive to succeed would without a doubt be an outstanding Marine. But he cannot get past the front door of the recruiting station and lives in a virtual no-man's land because he does not have citizenship. And while he is disappointed, he is not deterred and he continues to pursue his dream with the hope that one day the DREAM Act and immigration reform will be passed.

Recent testimony by the Department of Defense stated that nearly 75 percent of our nation's youth are not qualified for military service largely due to medical conditions and weight. The witness further stated that only 14 percent of our youth express a propensity for military service. (DoD Testimony to House Armed Services Committee, Military Personnel Subcommittee, January 16, 2014). One way to expand the pool of highly qualified applicants with a propensity to service is to offer DREAMers the opportunity to serve.

I believe that if Dreamers were authorized to enlist, the path for these students would open up and they would become outstanding servicemen and servicewomen for the country they love. They would have pathways to be all they want to be, and our nation – their nation – would be stronger and safer because of their service.