

**Opening Statement of Senator Dick Durbin  
Chairman, Senate Defense Appropriations Subcommittee  
Hearing on “Immigrant Enlistment: A Force Multiplier for the Armed Forces”  
May 19, 2014**

Introduction

America is a nation of immigrants. Since the beginning of our republic, immigrants have come to our shores from around the world, leaving behind everything they know to build a new and better life for their children. And throughout our history, immigrants have proudly served in the United States Armed Forces, fighting – and dying – alongside native-born Americans in defense of their adopted country. For example, one of the first servicemen killed in combat in Iraq was Lance Cpl. Jose Gutierrez, who came to the United States illegally from Guatemala.

But today our immigration system is broken and does not reflect our heritage as a nation of immigrants. There are millions of undocumented immigrants in our country who yearn to be Americans. But under current law there is no way for them to get in line and legalize their immigration status. And, regardless of their qualifications, they are unable to participate in many sectors of our society, including the military.

The DREAM Act

Thirteen years ago, I first introduced the Dream Act. This legislation would allow immigrant students who came to the United States as children to earn their citizenship by attending college or serving in the military. The young immigrants who would be eligible for the DREAM Act call themselves Dreamers. We haven’t been able to pass the DREAM Act yet, but – thanks to President Obama – Dreamers can receive temporary legal status under the Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals program, also known as DACA.

Dreamers were brought to the United States as children. They grew up in this country and have overcome great obstacles to succeed. Dreamers are the future doctors, engineers, teachers – and soldiers, sailors, airmen, and Marines –who will make America stronger. Over the years, I’ve met many Dreamers who want nothing more than to give back to the country they love by serving in the Armed Forces. And they have the talent, the heart, and the determination to be great servicemembers.

We are going to meet some of these Dreamers later today.

Discrimination Against Immigrants & Minorities

Sadly, there have always been voices of hate who have spread fear about immigrants in our country. Today is no different. A Republican Congressman from Iowa was asked recently about Dreamers who want to serve in the military. He responded:

“As soon as they raise their hand and say, ‘I’m unlawfully present in the United States,’ we’re not going to take your oath into the military, but we’re going to take your deposition and we have a bus for you to Tijuana.”

Unfortunately, this is isn’t the first time we’ve heard xenophobic comments from this Congressman. I call on every member of Congress – Republican and Democrat – to reject this divisive rhetoric. There is no place for this kind of nativism in the debate about immigration.

Previous generations of Americans also faced racism and exclusion. But their military service played a crucial role in overcoming discrimination. During World War II, the military was still racially segregated and Jim Crow laws imposed a reign of terror on African Americans living in the South. But African-American pilots – known as the Tuskegee Airmen – served heroically in World War II – and in the fight for civil rights.

After the bombing of Pearl Harbor, tens of thousands of innocent Japanese-Americans were held in internment camps. Despite being labeled “enemy aliens,” many young Japanese Americans volunteered to fight in World War II. The 442<sup>nd</sup> Regimental Combat team, an all Japanese-American unit, suffered the most casualties in the European campaign and was also the most decorated unit of its size in the history of the United States military.

My predecessor as Chairman of this Subcommittee was Senator Daniel Inouye. Senator Inouye, who passed away in 2012, was as an American hero. He served in the 442<sup>nd</sup> and received the Medal of Honor for his heroism in a battle against the Nazis in which he lost his arm.

In 2010, I brought the DREAM Act to a vote in the Senate. We won a majority of votes, but not the 60 votes that we needed to defeat a Republican filibuster. I will never forget Senator Inouye’s reaction. He said, “By allowing the DREAM Act to sit idle, we extinguish hope for a lot of people and deny too many the opportunity I was given.”

### Comprehensive Immigration Reform

Last year, the Senate passed a comprehensive immigration reform bill on a bipartisan 68-32 vote. I was proud to be part of the “Gang of 8” Democrats and Republicans who authored this bill. Our bill would strengthen border security, reform our legal immigration system, and create a path to citizenship for undocumented immigrants.

So far, the only immigration legislation the Republicans in the House of Representatives have passed is an amendment to deport Dreamers. Just last Friday, the House Republican Majority Leader announced that he will block a vote on an amendment that a fellow Republican wanted to offer to simply allow Dreamers to enlist in the Armed Forces.

Today, I again call on the Republican leadership of the House of Representatives to bring the Senate immigration reform bill to the floor of the House. If Speaker Boehner gives us a vote, I’m confident immigration reform will pass with a strong bipartisan majority and the President will sign it into law.

### Enlisting Dreamers

If the House Republicans refuse to act, then the Administration can use the authority it has under current law to fix some of the problems with our broken immigration system.

For example, the Defense Department can authorize the enlistment of non-citizens when it is “vital to the national interest.” This determination is entirely in the discretion of the Defense Department. It is clear that enlisting Dreamers is “vital to the national interest” because it would make the Armed Forces more diverse and inclusive, and it would allow the Armed Forces to access a well-qualified, educated, homegrown talent pool.

Dreamers who have received DACA have been thoroughly vetted by the Department of Homeland Security, are linguistically and culturally diverse, and are well-educated and integrated into American society. As we will see today, many DACA recipients have shown a great aptitude for military service through service in Junior Reserve Officers' Training Corps (JROTC). In 2010, Secretary of Defense Robert Gates said that authorizing the enlistment of Dreamers "will result in improved recruitment results and attendant gains in unit manning and military performance."

While the Armed Forces are reducing in size, the services still need to enlist tens of thousands of well-qualified recruits every year. And many fewer Americans meet enlistment standards and are interested in enlisting. As a Defense Department official recently testified: "Today nearly 75 percent of our youth are not qualified for military service with medical conditions and weight accounting for most of the disqualifications. Compounding eligibility concerns is the lack of youth interested in military service."

The question is this: Will America be a stronger country if we deport our Dreamers to countries they barely remember or if we allow them to contribute more fully to the country they love? The answer is clear. I am confident that Dreamers will soon have the chance to serve honorably in the Armed Forces. On that day America will be stronger and better country.