

## **U.S. Military Will Offer Path To Citizenship**

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### **Body**

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Stretched thin in Afghanistan and Iraq, the American **military will** begin recruiting skilled immigrants who are living in this country with temporary visas, **offering** them the chance to become **United States** citizens in as little as six months.

Immigrants who are permanent residents, with documents commonly known as green cards, have long been eligible to enlist. But the new effort, for the first time since the Vietnam War, **will** open the armed forces to temporary immigrants if they have lived in the **United States** for a minimum of two years, according to **military** officials familiar with the plan.

Recruiters expect that the temporary immigrants **will** have more education, foreign language skills and professional expertise than many Americans who enlist, helping the **military** to fill shortages in medical care, language interpretation and field intelligence analysis.

"The American Army finds itself in a lot of different countries where cultural awareness is critical," said Lt. Gen. Benjamin C. Freakley, the top recruitment officer for the Army, which is leading the pilot program. "There **will** be some very talented folks in this group."

The program **will** begin small -- limited to 1,000 enlistees nationwide in its first year, most for the Army and some for other branches. If the pilot program succeeds as Pentagon officials anticipate, it **will** expand for all branches of the **military**. For the Army, it could eventually provide as many as 14,000 volunteers a year, or about one in six recruits.

About 8,000 permanent immigrants with green cards join the armed forces annually, the Pentagon reports, and about 29,000 foreign-born people currently serving are not American citizens.

Although the Pentagon has had wartime authority to recruit immigrants since shortly after the Sept. 11 attacks, **military** officials have moved cautiously to lay the legal groundwork for the temporary immigrant program to avoid controversy within the ranks and among veterans over the prospect of large numbers of immigrants in the armed forces.

A preliminary Pentagon announcement of the program last year drew a stream of angry comments from officers and veterans on **Military.com**, a Web site they frequent.

Marty Justis, executive director of the national headquarters of the American Legion, the veterans' organization, said that while the group opposes "any great influx of immigrants" to the **United States**, it would not object to recruiting temporary immigrants as long as they passed tough background checks. But he said the immigrants' allegiance to the **United States** "must take precedence over and above any ties they may have with their native country."

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The **military** does not allow illegal immigrants to enlist, and that policy would not change, officers said. Recruiting officials pointed out that volunteers with temporary visas would have already passed a security screening and would have shown that they had no criminal record.

"The Army **will** gain in its strength in human capital," General Freakley said, "and the immigrants **will** gain their **citizenship** and get on a ramp to the American dream."

In recent years, as American forces faced combat in two wars and recruiters struggled to meet their goals for the all-volunteer **military**, thousands of legal immigrants with temporary visas who tried to enlist were turned away because they lacked permanent green cards, recruiting officers said.

Recruiters' work became easier in the last few months as unemployment soared and more Americans sought to join the **military**. But the Pentagon, facing a new deployment of 30,000 troops to Afghanistan, still has difficulties in attracting doctors, specialized nurses and language experts.

Several types of temporary work visas require college or advanced degrees or professional expertise, and immigrants who are working as doctors and nurses in the **United States** have already been certified by American medical boards.

**Military** figures show that only 82 percent of about 80,000 Army recruits last year had high school diplomas. According to new figures, the Army provided waivers to 18 percent of active-duty recruits in the final four months of last year, allowing them to enlist despite medical conditions or criminal records.

**Military** officials want to attract immigrants who have native knowledge of languages and cultures that the Pentagon considers strategically vital. The program **will** also be open to students and refugees.

The Army's one-year pilot program **will** begin in New York City to recruit about 550 temporary immigrants who speak one or more of 35 languages, including Arabic, Chinese, Hindi, Igbo (a tongue spoken in Nigeria), Kurdish, Nepalese, Pashto, Russian and Tamil. Spanish speakers are not eligible. The Army's program **will** also include about 300 medical professionals to be recruited nationwide. Recruiting **will** start after Department of Homeland Security officials update an immigration rule in coming days.

Pentagon officials expect that the lure of accelerated **citizenship will** be powerful. Under a statute invoked in 2002 by the Bush administration, immigrants who serve in the **military** can apply to become citizens on the first day of active service, and they can take the oath in as little as six months.

For foreigners who come to work or study in the **United States** on temporary visas, the **path** to **citizenship** is uncertain and at best agonizingly long, often lasting more than a decade. The **military** also waives naturalization fees, which are at least \$675.

To enlist, temporary immigrants **will** have to prove that they have lived in the **United States** for two years and have not been out of the country for longer than 90 days during that time. They **will** have to pass an English test.

Language experts **will** have to serve four years of active duty, and health care professionals **will** serve three years of active duty or six years in the Reserves. If the immigrants do not complete their service honorably, they could lose their **citizenship**.

Commenters who vented their suspicions of the program on **Military.com** said it could be used by terrorists to penetrate the armed forces.

At a street corner recruiting station in Bay Ridge in Brooklyn, Staff Sgt. Alejandro Campos of the Army said he had already fielded calls from temporary immigrants who heard rumors about the program.

"We're going to give people the opportunity to be part of the **United States** who are dying to be part of this country and they weren't able to before now," said Sergeant Campos, who was born in the Dominican Republic and became a **United States** citizen after he joined the Army.

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Sergeant Campos said he saw how useful it was to have soldiers who were native Arabic speakers during two tours in Iraq.

"The first time around we didn't have soldier translators," he said. "But now that we have soldiers as translators, we are able to trust more, we are able to accomplish the mission with more accuracy."

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## Graphic

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PHOTOS: Staff Sgt. Alejandro Campos, in Bay Ridge, Brooklyn, became a citizen after joining the Army.(PHOTOGRAPH BY ROB BENNETT FOR THE NEW YORK TIMES)

Lt. Gen. Benjamin C. Freakley heads Army recruitment.(PHOTOGRAPH BY MIKE GROLL/ASSOCIATED PRESS)(A30)

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