

Military Path Opened for Young Immigrants

By [JULIA PRESTON](#)

SEPT. 25, 2014

A small number of young immigrants who grew up in the United States without legal status will be allowed to join the military and have a fast-track pathway to citizenship, Pentagon officials announced Thursday, the first time those young people have been able to enlist.

Undocumented young people who have been granted deportation deferrals by the Obama administration will be eligible to apply for the military under a recruitment program for immigrants with special language and medical skills, according to a memo issued Thursday by Jessica L. Wright, under secretary of defense for personnel and readiness.

But administration officials emphasized that the number who would succeed in enlisting would be very small, probably not more than a few dozen. The requirements are stringent and the program is currently limited to 1,500 recruits each year, and already has a huge backlog of applicants.

Advocates for the young people, who call themselves Dreamers, have been pressing the administration to allow all of them with deferrals to enlist, and they were both heartened and sharply disappointed by the Pentagon decision.

“This is a first step, and we commend the administration for recognizing the skills and talents a lot of us do have,” said Cesar Vargas, a leader of the Dream Action Coalition, who has said he would like to join the military. “But it definitely needs to be expanded.”

Senator Richard J. Durbin of Illinois, the second-ranking Democrat in the Senate, who has urged President Obama to allow far broader enlistment of young people with deferrals, called the decision a “missed opportunity.”

Last spring Pentagon officials were considering whether to open recruitment to the young people with deferrals under a two-year-old program known as Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals. The deferrals do not confer any resident status, but they do allow the young people to remain in the country legally. More than 580,000 young people have received them.

The White House instructed military officials to hold off, saying the president was waiting to see if House Republicans would move forward on immigration overhaul legislation.

That legislation died over the summer, and the president is now weighing executive action he could take to halt deportations for more immigrants who are here illegally. But administration officials said the Pentagon’s decision was separate from the president’s deliberations and was not a preview of the measures he might take, which he has said will come after the November midterm elections.

Pentagon officials said they acted to change the recruitment rules because the immigrant program, known as Military Accessions Vital to the National Interest, or Mavni, was set to expire next Wednesday. It was renewed on Thursday for two years.

The Pentagon program was created for temporary immigrants who speak one of about three dozen languages including Arabic, Hindi, Korean, Pashto, Nepalese, Russian, Uzbek and Swahili — but not Spanish, the language of the majority of the undocumented young people. It also accepts licensed doctors and dentists in certain specialties. Immigrants must pass rigorous security checks to be accepted.

Those who enter the program can apply for citizenship within months after they enlist.

In general, immigrants must be legal permanent residents or American citizens to be eligible to enlist.

Jeh C. Johnson, who is now secretary of Homeland Security, made a determination in 2012 when he was legal counsel at the Pentagon that it would be problematic to expand the immigrant recruitment program to large numbers of young people with deferrals. Now, in his new role, Mr. Johnson is charged with figuring out how the president can offer deportation protections to many more illegal immigrants, including perhaps expanding military enlistment for Dreamers.

<http://www.nytimes.com/2014/09/26/us/military-path-opened-for-young-immigrants.html>