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Thriving Military Recruitment Program Blocked

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A highly successful program by the armed forces to recruit skilled immigrants who live in this country temporarily has run into a roadblock, leaving thousands of potential recruits in limbo.

The [Army](#) stopped accepting applications for the program last week, officials said Thursday, because the Pentagon had not completed a review required to keep the recruitment going.

The program, which started as a pilot in February, allowed recruiters to enlist immigrants, most of them in the Army, with special language or medical skills who are in this country on temporary visas. Successful recruits are offered the chance to become United States citizens within a few months.

More than 1,000 immigrants have been enlisted through the program, and hundreds more, at least, are in the final stages of approval, Army officials said. More than 14,000 immigrants have contacted Army recruiters to see if they qualified for the program and have passed a first level of vetting, the officials said.

A Pentagon spokeswoman said the program had “generated interest” but still had to be evaluated “along many performance dimensions.” After the pilot phase formally ends next month, the Defense Department will “review the results to determine if the program warrants further consideration,” said the spokeswoman, Eileen M. Lainez.

Although the program has started small, senior commanders have praised it as an exceptional success. Recruiting officials said it had attracted a large number of unusually qualified candidates, including doctors, dentists and native speakers of Arabic, Urdu, Hindi, Punjabi, Korean and other languages from strategic regions where United States forces are operating.

“We don’t see this normally; the quality for this population is off the charts,” said Lt. Col. Pete Badoian, a strategic planner at the [Army Accessions Command](#), the recruiting branch of the Army.

Set up to run through the end of 2009, and to accept 1,000 recruits, with 890 coming from the Army, the program was extended after the Army filled its slots. The Pentagon

extended the program through February by adding 120 new positions, but the Army filled those by Jan. 14, according to a notice posted on the Web site for the program, known in the military by the acronym [Mavni](#) (Military Accessions Vital to National Interest).

Other than the salaries of staff members who ran the program, the Pentagon spent no money on it, recruiting officials said.

The immigrants who have joined the Army through the program scored, on average, about 20 points higher (on a scale of 100) than other recruits on basic armed forces entry tests, and they had three to five years more education, Colonel Badoian said. One-third of the recruits have a master's degree or higher.

Naomi Verdugo, a senior recruiting official in the Army's office for manpower and reserve affairs, said the immigrants recruited for their language skills had also shown "extraordinarily high" proficiency in their languages. "We send people to language school, but it is tough to get a non-native speaker to the level of these folks," she said.

The program is open to immigrants who have lived in the United States for at least two years with temporary visas related to their jobs, or as refugees. Most temporary immigrants have already demonstrated to [immigration](#) authorities that they have technology, science or medical skills. The program is not open to illegal immigrants.

Under the program, recruits with language skills must agree to enlist for at least four years of active duty, while medical professionals must agree to at least three years.

Field officers took notice of the program soon after it started. In Congressional testimony in June, Admiral Eric T. Olson, the senior commander for Special Operations, said it had "already demonstrated a great success," based on the skills of the interpreters who had signed up.

Officials familiar with the immigrant program said that in order to obtain visas, temporary immigrants must pass several criminal and terrorism background checks. An additional security questionnaire has been part of the enlistment process, the officials said.

The prospect of speedy naturalization is a powerful draw for many temporary immigrants, who might otherwise have to wait a decade or more to become United States citizens. So far, 129 recruits have been sworn in as American citizens, Colonel Badoian said, including one dentist whose naturalization was completed in 30 days. Last year Congress gave immigration authorities \$5 million for military naturalizations.

News of the program spread among immigrants mainly by word of mouth.

"Because we are now getting the naturalizations and having guys finish their training and move out as U.S. citizens, the word is getting out and the program is gaining momentum," Colonel Badoian said.

Recruiting officials said they were waiting for senior readiness officials in the office of Defense Secretary [Robert M. Gates](#) to approve an extension of the program. They said the Pentagon's review might have been slowed by the top-to-bottom examination of security procedures after the shooting rampage in November at [Fort Hood](#), Tex., in which an Army psychiatrist, Maj. Nidal M. Hasan, has been charged.