

# Pentagon Plan to Enlist Young Immigrants Is Delayed at White House's Request

By [JULIA PRESTON](#)

MAY 31, 2014

A Pentagon plan to allow a small number of young immigrants who grew up in the United States without legal status to enlist in the military has been delayed by the White House, senior officials there said Saturday, to avoid any conflict with House Republicans considering whether to move on immigration legislation.

The Pentagon proposal would create a first but very limited pathway to citizenship for those who call themselves Dreamers.

In a letter to a number of senators that was drafted Wednesday, Defense Secretary [Chuck Hagel](#) said he had "taken initial action to allow for the enlistment" of the young immigrants.

But the White House asked Mr. Hagel to hold off taking any further steps on the new policy until August, after Congress's summer session, the administration officials said.

President Obama said last week that he would not take any executive action on immigration during the next two months, to give Republican leaders in the House a chance to move forward on legislation that could grant legal status to illegal immigrants.

Mr. Hagel also received swift and critical responses from several senators, including Richard Durbin of Illinois, the second-highest-ranking Democrat in the Senate and a leading proponent of legislation to give citizenship to undocumented youths, which is known as the Dream Act. Mr. Durbin urged Mr. Hagel to allow enlistment of a much broader group of those youths.

To be eligible under the new Pentagon policy, young immigrants would have to have deportation deferrals under a program Mr. Obama started in 2012, known as Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals. Mr. Hagel said those youths would be allowed to apply to enlist under a separate Defense Department program for certain temporary immigrants who have special medical or language skills.

Legal experts and immigrant leaders said the new Pentagon policy would provide at best only a very narrow path to citizenship, with perhaps no more than a handful of youths qualifying. More than 550,000 young immigrants have received deportation deferrals.

But White House officials said the president did not want any action from the executive branch that might rile Republicans during the period when they might hold votes on immigration measures. Republican leaders have accused Mr. Obama of overreaching his constitutional authority with some executive measures, including the deferred action initiative. Mr. Obama also

asked Jeh C. Johnson, the secretary of Homeland Security, to postpone action on a deportations review he has conducted.

“These are both modest steps, neither of which we are taking at this time,” said Cecilia Muñoz, the White House domestic policy adviser. “We will reassess once we see what Congress does or doesn’t do.”

She added: “The president is convinced there is a legislative opportunity, and that gives us the best chance to fix what is broken in our immigration system. He wants to leave no stone unturned to let the House do what it should do.”

The youths would apply under an existing Defense Department program called Military Accessions Vital to the National Interest, known by its acronym, MAVNI, which currently allows immigrants with certain temporary visas to enlist if they are doctors or have other advanced medical skills, or if they speak strategic languages including Arabic, Farsi, Hindi, and a number of African languages. The new policy would add youths with deportation deferrals to the list of those who could join the military under that program.

The Pentagon program offers an expedited path to naturalization for immigrant recruits, who can become citizens in as few as three months. Generally immigrants who are not legal permanent residents with green cards cannot enlist. Youths with deportation deferrals do not have any resident status.

But the current program has an annual quota of 1,500 places, and already is struggling with backlogs. In addition, very few immigrant youths would have the medical skills or speak the languages required for the program.

Margaret Stock, an immigration lawyer in Alaska who helped to create the immigrant enlistment program when she was an officer in the Army Reserve, said it was unclear that any of the youths would qualify for enlistment under the current terms of the Pentagon program. A more important obstacle, she said, was that they have to pass a stringent background check. Having been in the United States for any period of time without immigration papers has been a disqualifying factor for that investigation.

Cesar Vargas, a leader of the Dream Action Coalition, a youth group, who has been pressing the Pentagon to allow young immigrants to enlist, said he was heartened that Mr. Hagel had taken action, but was disappointed by the limited scope of the plan. “This policy does not fully tap into the great potential of Dreamers who want to serve this country in uniform,” he said.

<http://www.nytimes.com/2014/06/01/us/politics/pentagon-puts-off-a-plan-to-enlist-young-immigrants.html>