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Pentagon Reopens Program Allowing Immigrants With Special Skills to Enlist

By [JULIA PRESTON](#)

Thousands of immigrants were so eager to enlist in the American military during the last two years, despite the strong odds that they could be sent to combat zones, that they signed a petition on [Facebook](#) asking the Pentagon to let them join.

Now they will have the chance. Late last month, the Pentagon reopened a program to recruit legal immigrants with special language and medical skills, which was active for a year in 2009 but was suspended in January 2010.

The program is small; it will enlist a total of 1,500 recruits each year for two years, mainly in the Army. But military officials said the yearlong pilot program brought an unusually well-educated and skilled cohort of immigrants into the armed services.

“Their qualifications were really stellar,” said Naomi Verdugo, assistant deputy for recruiting for the Army. “And we have been very pleased about how these folks have been performing.”

The program is open to immigrants on temporary visas, who otherwise would not be eligible to enlist. Its powerful lure is that it allows them to naturalize as United States citizens quickly, in most cases at the end of basic training, which lasts about 10 weeks. Most immigrants on temporary visas, whether they are students or workers with particular skills, must wait years — for some nationalities, more than a decade — to become citizens.

Eileen Lainez, a Pentagon spokeswoman, said the program was intended to fill “some of our most critical readiness needs.” This time around, the Army is looking for dentists and surgeons, and for psychology professionals to help with the severe emotional strains soldiers have undergone in the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq.

Officials are also looking for native speakers of 44 languages, including Azerbaijani, Cambodian-Khmer, Hausa and Igbo (both spoken in West Africa), Persian Dari (spoken in Afghanistan), Portuguese, and Tamil (spoken in South Asia). Spanish is not on the list of languages.

Recruiting officers were quietly frustrated that Pentagon officials took more than two years to restart the program. The renewal became tangled in a broad security review after the shooting rampage in 2009 at Fort Hood, Tex., according to accounts from military officials. The background checks for the immigrants were scrutinized with added caution, even though the man charged in the killings, Maj. [Nidal Malik Hasan](#), is a native-born American.

In renewing the program, military officials added a new layer of security screenings, Ms. Lainez said.

To make their case to the Pentagon, recruiting officers compiled dossiers on the first class of immigrants, of whom 943 out of 1,000 were in the Army. On average, immigrants who enlisted in the Army language program scored 17 points higher (on a scale of 99) than other applicants on an entrance test, said Capt. Carol Stahl, who manages the program for the Army. One-third of the first class of recruits had master's degrees or higher.

One-third of the class went into the Special Forces, a highly selective assignment that can often lead to combat missions, Captain Stahl said. Attrition was one-quarter the rate of other soldiers who entered at the same time.

A soldier from Nepal who entered with the first class, Sgt. Saral Shrestha, just won the Army's Soldier of the Year award after a grueling four-day competition involving fighting skills at Fort Lee, Va.

"This was a boost of very high quality people," said Margaret Stock, an [immigration](#) lawyer in Alaska who is a retired lieutenant colonel in the Army Reserve and helped devise the program. Even before they enlist, she said, the immigrants have been screened because they have to pass background and occupational checks for their temporary visas.

To qualify, immigrants must have been living in the United States legally for at least two years. They must be high school graduates and pass the entrance test.

The program — known as Military Accessions Vital to the National Interest, or [Mavni](#) — is not open to illegal immigrants, who are barred by law from enlisting. In general, immigrants who are not citizens must have a permanent resident visa, known as a green card, to enlist.

The first round filled up quickly, and the Army turned away thousands of people. Many of them signed the Facebook petition and were hoping the program would start again.

Health care professionals, who enlist as officers, must serve either three years of active duty or six years in the Reserves. Immigrants who enlist based on their language skills must serve for a minimum of four years of active duty. Participants who fail to serve their term can lose their citizenship.

One of the first temporary [immigrants the Army accepted this year](#) was Dr. Amen Dhyllon, 33, a dentist practicing in Philadelphia who was born in India and came to the United States in 2006. Dr. Dhyllon said he completed a postdoctoral program at the University of Pennsylvania in June combining two dental specialties.

Dr. Dhyllon said he was eager to become an American citizen.

“Even in the position where I am today,” he said, “no one would appreciate me as much as people appreciate me here. This country does not differentiate between color or accent. Here, if you are good, people will put you to the front.”

Dr. Dhyllon said he was not worried about the risks of service. He said he was attracted to the Army because of the wide range of patients he would see.

“I can be part of the culture,” he said. “I can learn everything about this country from the root.”

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