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# A military route to citizenship

## Plan for undocumented youths stirs debate

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Hundreds of thousands of undocumented-immigrant youths could become eligible to join the military to offset shortages of qualified recruits under a bill pending in Congress.

Intense public opposition forced the Senate in June to abandon an immigration bill that included a path to citizenship for undocumented youths.

The proposal still has a strong chance of passing if backers in Congress are successful in attaching it to the annual defense-authorization bill this fall.

The Development Relief and Education for Alien Minors Act would allow undocumented high-school graduates to gain citizenship if they either attend college for two years or serve two years in the military.

Undocumented immigrants now are not permitted to serve.

Military analysts say the DREAM Act would help the armed forces find qualified recruits, whose numbers have dwindled because of the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq.

Some immigrant groups, however, say the DREAM Act amounts to a "de facto draft."

Using immigrants to boost the ranks of the military is not new.

With the demands in Afghanistan and Iraq, the United States began offering legal immigrants a chance to expedite citizenship applications for themselves and relatives if they enlisted.

Roughly 70,000 immigrants serve in the military, and about 40,000 are non-citizens. Immigrants make up about 5 percent of the total 1.4 million men and women on active duty.

A 2005 study by the Center for Naval Analysis reported that non-citizens are less likely to drop out of the military shortly after enlisting than are citizens and that non-citizens are significantly less likely to drop out after three years.

The bill was proposed six years ago as a way for undocumented minors brought to this country by their parents to get an education so they could achieve their full potential as tax-paying members of society.

With the military having trouble meeting recruiting goals and the public wary about any bill resembling amnesty for undocumented immigrants, supporters of the DREAM Act are playing up the bill's military provisions over its educational benefits. Unlike legal immigrants with permanent residency green cards, undocumented immigrants are barred from enlisting in the military.

"The DREAM Act would address a very serious recruitment crisis that faces our military," Sen. Dick Durbin, the bill's author, said on the Senate floor in July while trying to muster support for the DREAM Act to be attached to the annual defense-authorization bill.

Durbin wasn't successful, but Sandra Abrevaya, a Durbin spokeswoman, said that the Illinois Democrat will try again, possibly as early as this month.

The DREAM Act has broad bipartisan support in Congress.

U.S. Rep. Raul Grijalva, D-Tucson, is a co-sponsor of the bill in the House. He said the legislation has a better chance now that the military aspect is being played up.

"I think it is being emphasized more because it makes it politically more palatable for some of my colleagues in Washington," Grijalva said.

If Durbin is successful in attaching the DREAM Act to the defense-authorization bill, the proposal is almost assured of passing.

"Given the current climate over illegal immigration, the calculation has been to emphasize the military aspect to get more Republicans to vote for it," said Brent Wilkes, national executive director of the League of United Latin American Citizens, a Latino advocacy organization in Washington, D.C.

Wilkes said joining the military would be "very attractive" to a large number of undocumented youths, the majority of whom are Hispanic. Latinos have a long history of serving in the military, which they view as a way of climbing into the middle class and gaining leadership skills.

"There is a lot of pride among the community over their (military) service," he said. "We are happy that (the military) option exists."

The DREAM Act's new emphasis on military service, however, does not sit well with some advocacy groups.

The Association of Raza Educators, a teachers group in California, for example, is opposed to the bill because of the military provision.

Poor educational conditions and inadequate schooling make military enlistment the only option for many undocumented youths, the group says.

"We are afraid that it's going to cause a de facto military draft for our undocumented youth," coordinator Jose Lara said. "We fully support the college part of it, but the reality is Latino college rates are low, so the majority will pick the military part of it."

Luis Avila, 25, a student at Arizona State University, organized a weeklong hunger strike at the end of July to raise public support for the DREAM Act in Arizona. He said he is troubled by the increased emphasis on the bill's military provision.

"The DREAM Act is not really for them to join the Army, it's for them to get their education," Avila said.

Still, many undocumented immigrants he spoke with during the fast said they would prefer to join the military.

"I told them they should go to college and then join the military so they can enter as an officer rather than be put on the front lines," Avila said.

If it passes, the DREAM Act would create a substantial pool of potential recruits. The Migration Policy Institute, a nonpartisan research organization in Washington, D.C., estimates about 360,000 undocumented high-school graduates in the United States are of military age, between 18 and 24.

Another 715,000 undocumented youths are between the ages of 5 and 17, according to the institute.

Military analyst Margaret Stock, an immigration lawyer from Anchorage, Alaska, teaches at West Point about immigrants in the military. She said fears that the DREAM Act would turn into a "back-door draft" are unfounded.

That's because the military would need only a fraction of the undocumented immigrants made available by the DREAM Act to help offset shortages of qualified recruits.

Stock said the DREAM Act would help the military "a great deal." The wars in Afghanistan and Iraq make it hard for armed forces to find qualified recruits, and the military has been forced to pay bonuses and, in some cases, lower standards to meet recruitment goals, she said.

"Yes, they have met their goals, but at a cost in tax dollars and diminished quality of recruits," she said.

Studies show that Latinos do well in the military, she said. For one, they have a higher propensity to join the military. About 44 percent of Latino males of eligible age think joining the military would be a good idea.

For White males, it's about half that, she said.

Latinos have more success getting through boot camp than do other ethnic groups. They also stay in the military longer and have fewer disciplinary problems, Stock said.

"The modern military needs a lot of smart, successful people, and a lot of the DREAM Act kids are like that," she said.

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