

# Military immigrant program halted

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A popular military enlistment program for immigrants with specialized skills is now stuck in bureaucratic limbo — after the Pentagon announced last month it would begin allowing some young immigrants without legal status into the program.

Army officials confirmed Thursday that the program, called Military Accessions Vital to the National Interest, has been suspended while the service tries to finalize screening procedures for the immigrants who want to enlist.

That means no applications have been accepted since earlier this month — leaving would-be Army recruits in flux as the Army sorts through the complications created by the Pentagon's decision to allow beneficiaries of the Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals directive into the program.

“It's a major bureaucratic screw-up by the Obama administration,” Margaret Stock, a retired lieutenant colonel in the Army Reserve who first came up with the MAVNI program, said in an interview.

Immigration advocates on and off Capitol Hill had lobbied the Pentagon to allow young undocumented immigrants who came to the United States as children — commonly known as Dreamers — to join the military. Congress briefly mulled including a measure to do that in the annual defense authorization bill earlier this year, but that legislation, pushed by Rep. Jeff Denham (R-Calif.), blew up in the face of conservative opposition.

Instead, the Pentagon announced last month it would begin allowing some young immigrants shielded from deportations through DACA — the 2012 Obama administration directive — into the military but only through the specialized MAVNI program. Because of the skills required to enlist through MAVNI, such as a medical background or fluency in a particular language, it was highly unlikely that many DACA recipients would be able to join, experts said.

Even a change that only affects a small group of immigrants has created a bureaucratic headache.

Vaneet Goyal, 23, moved to the United States from India in August 2012 to attend graduate school at North Carolina State University in Raleigh. He graduated with his master's degree in industrial engineering in May and began taking preliminary steps to join the military through the MAVNI program.

But Goyal, who speaks Punjabi, was told by a recruiter and through an official Facebook page for Army translators and interpreters that MAVNI is on hold. Now he's working at a company in Georgia until the MAVNI application process reopens.

“It’s been very frustrating for me,” said Goyal, who [started a petition](#) on the White House website last week that urges Defense Secretary Chuck Hagel to reopen the MAVNI program “immediately.”

An Army spokesman, Wayne Hall, said the Army anticipates MAVNI will reopen by late November to immigrants who would have qualified before the Pentagon changed its policy to include DACA beneficiaries.

“From the Army’s standpoint, the MAVNI Program is currently on hold while Army officials sort out final details on screening MAVNI candidates,” Hall said in an email. “Procedures to enlist DACAs require additional coordination (not limited to security screening) which is ongoing at this time.”

A defense official said it’s not yet clear whether DACA-approved immigrants would be able to apply by late November.

One powerful lawmaker pushing the Pentagon to allow young undocumented immigrants into the military was Sen. Dick Durbin (D-Ill.), who has sponsored legislation for more than a decade to give Dreamers legal status and was a member of the Senate Gang of Eight that wrote the comprehensive reform bill last year. Durbin also chairs the Senate subcommittee that oversees funding for the Pentagon.

“Our office has spoken with DOD and confirmed that the program has been put on hold,” Durbin spokesman Ben Marter said. “Sen. Durbin is disappointed, and we are looking into the matter further.”

The MAVNI program was created by the Army as a one-year pilot program in 2008 to recruit immigrants here legally with specialized skills in areas where the military faced a shortfall and, in turn, offer the immigrants an expedited path to citizenship.

In all, 2,900 recruits have signed up for the military through the program, according to Pentagon spokesman Lt. Cmdr. Nathan Christensen. The Army takes the lion’s share of the available MAVNI slots, with 1,301 out of 1,303 recruits last fiscal year, according to Pentagon data (the other two were in the Air Force). Of that number, 101 were health care professionals, Hall said.

The program was halted in 2010 but restarted in 2012 and authorized to run for two more years with a 1,500-person cap. It was set to expire last month, but the same memo that allowed DACA recipients into the MAVNI program also extended the program through fiscal 2016.

But that memo included a caveat: that the military departments “shall review and ensure that all program guidelines have been implemented and are in effect before commencing” with MAVNI applications for this fiscal year.

Stock, the retired Army officer, said there were several complications created by including DACA recipients in the MAVNI program.

For example, almost all DACA recipients have relatives who are undocumented, Stock noted, and the Pentagon bars recruits who have family members without legal status. Also, to enlist through MAVNI, applicants must provide an I-94 card, which is a government document that is completed when foreigners enter the United States. But DACA recipients — who were brought to the United States illegally as children — would not have that card.

And a new requirement instituted in 2012 mandates that all MAVNI applicants go through a high-level security check, called a single-scope background investigation. But DACA recipients would not be able to pass that test, Stock said.

“The MAVNI program is not designed for DACA at all,” Stock said. “It was rather alarming to see DACAs being put into MAVNI. Someone didn’t know what they were doing.”

<http://www.politico.com/story/2014/10/pentagon-immigration-112152.html>