

Congressman Jeff Denham (CA-10)

United States Representative

July 23, 2013

“Addressing the Immigration Status of Illegal Immigrants Brought to the United States as
Children” – Judiciary Committee Hearing July 23, 2013

Dear Chairman Goodlatte, Ranking Member Conyers, Members of the Committee,

Thank you for giving me the opportunity to address you in this Hearing on the immigration status of those brought to the United States as children. These are undocumented residents who only know America as their home, and were brought into the United States not by their own will, but that of their parents or guardians.

As a resident of central California, I have spent several decades getting an education, running a business, raising children, farming, attending worship services, volunteering for school events and kid's sports events—all alongside neighbors who were immigrants from Central America, South America, Southeast Asia, Portugal, and many other parts of the world.

I have also witnessed the trials and joys of immigration through my own family. My father-in-law is a naturalized citizen from Mexico, and my wife and her siblings are first-generation Americans. Watching my father-in-law and other family members go through the process of becoming citizens and integrating their pride of their heritage seamlessly with their American patriotism has helped shape my idea of what patriotism means. I am grateful for the opportunities I have had to experience the rich heritage of immigrants in one of the most diverse regions of the world, and it is a heritage my wife and I have taken great care to share with our two children and our nieces and nephews.

Although I grew up in a very diverse environment, it was during my 16 years serving in the United States Air Force that I developed my strongest appreciation for the contribution of immigrants to our nation. I served alongside many foreign nationals who were able to earn citizenship through putting their lives on the line for Americans in the Armed Services.

Our nation has never made citizenship a requirement for service in our armed forces. Since the founding of our nation, noncitizens have been a part of our military, and Congress has seen fit to make military service a way for patriotic individuals from other countries to show allegiance to our flag and become United States citizens.

Almost half of U.S. Army enlistees in the 1840s were immigrants and more than 660,000 military veterans became citizens through naturalization between 1862 and 2000. These men and women have proven that they are prepared to make the ultimate sacrifice for their adopted country. I believe that anyone who swears an oath to defend our nation and serves out an enlistment term honorably should be entitled to the privileges afforded to American citizens.

Currently, citizens of the Marshall Islands, Micronesia and Palau, as well as American Samoa can gain citizenship through military service. Many individuals here on student visas and employment-based visas have special eligibility to join our armed forces and earn citizenship through the Military Accessions Vital to the National Interest (MAVNI) program. Additionally, many foreign nationals and Legal Permanent Residents serve in our armed forces as a way to earn citizenship. In the 1950s, Congress passed the now-expired Lodge Act, which allowed the military to recruit from Europe and other nations overseas. Between 1952 and 1990, 34,620 Filipinos enlisted in the Navy and were granted U.S. citizenship. In all of these cases, national security is enhanced, not threatened or undermined by foreign nationals and noncitizens. Likewise, allowing undocumented immigrants to enlist would not pose any additional national security risk because they would be subject to the same screening mechanisms in place for the other foreign nationals serving in our armed forces to earn the right to be called Americans.

In order to allow undocumented Dreamers to serve our country, I introduced the ENLIST ACT, H.R. 2377, which authorizes the enlistment in the armed forces of undocumented immigrants who were brought into the United States as children and who are otherwise qualified for enlistment. This bill will provide a way for the undocumented immigrants to be lawfully admitted to the U.S. for permanent residence by reason of their honorable service and sacrifice in the U.S. military.

The ENLIST Act will not give undocumented immigrants special benefits, nor will it create an opportunity or incentive for undocumented immigrants to rush the border now. The bill will not change military naturalization law. The ENLIST Act will only affect a certain population of people who have been in the United States and are prohibited from expressing their patriotism and allegiance to the United States under current military code. The bill gives an opportunity for current undocumented immigrants who otherwise qualify for enlistment to give back to the nation that has provided them with so much, including public elementary and secondary education and, in many cases, a college degree.

For the many thousands of young undocumented immigrants who graduate from our public and private high schools each year, military service would offer an avenue for them to serve the United States and earn a legal status in the country they love. These recruits would provide the military departments with a talent pool of young men and women, many of whom would have strategically valuable language and cultural competencies.

I recently met with a constituent of mine who was recruited by the Marines to serve our country for her leadership, aptitude, skills, courage, and patriotism. Through the course of the recruitment process, she discovered for the first time that she does not have a social security number because she was brought unlawfully into the United States, even though her siblings were born here, are American Citizens, and serve our country in the military. She would have been able to serve her country had my ENLIST Act already been law. It is a shame to see siblings of our servicemen and women denied the ability to put their lives on the line for our country. Congress has an

interest in helping build up and care for our armed services, and that includes providing opportunities for patriotic young people like this young woman to enlist and serve alongside our forefathers and the greatest heroes of American history

This body is debating different approaches to fixing our broken immigration system, but one thing we should all agree on is that the approach must require those who came here illegally to give back before they can receive any additional benefit. As someone who has served, I remember the pride I felt to wear the uniform and cannot think of any better way for these young people to earn the right to fully share in the rights and freedoms of America.

I hope you will support the ENLIST Act's purpose of allowing undocumented immigrants to enlist in the regular component of the Armed Forces. Thank you for giving me the opportunity to present this testimony before you today.