

AURORA, Colo.--Today, U.S. Representative Mike Coffman (R-CO) announced that he has introduced legislation, The Military Enlistment Opportunity Act of 2013, which will broaden the pool of those eligible to enlist in the U.S. military beyond citizens and lawful permanent residents (LPR). The bill will now allow persons who have resided continuously in a lawful status in the United States for at least two years and those that are classified as Deferred Action Childhood Arrivals (DACA) by the Department of Homeland Security (DHS) to enlist. Coffman's legislation would also provide access to a path to citizenship for both categories through the current naturalization process already in place for military service.

"My late father, a career soldier, taught me that there is no higher demonstration of American citizenship than serving one's country in the military," said Coffman, a Marine Corps combat veteran.

Coffman saw the need to broaden the pool of those eligible to serve because of the increasingly high tech requirements of the U.S. military. Emerging areas like cyber warfare require the skill sets that foreign students studying in the United States can bring to the military.

"These visa holders bring everything from critical language skills to advanced technical degrees that will increase the proficiency of our military," said Coffman.

The second category in Coffman's legislation is children of illegal immigrants who came to the U.S. before age 16, have resided in the United States continuously for at least five years, and who possess an employment authorization document issued by the U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Service.

"These young people want the opportunity to serve. They grew up here, went to school here, and they ought to have an opportunity to serve the country they call home," said Coffman.

Coffman's legislation also provides access to a path to citizenship for those entering the military. They would become naturalized U.S. citizens upon entering the military -- but this status will be revoked if the individual was either discharged under less than honorable conditions or does not fulfill the five year obligation.

Coffman argues that citizenship is critical to the military because noncitizens are not allowed to hold security clearances, can never become officers, and are excluded from many career fields, limiting their assignments.

“We have an elite military today with the standards set so high that the vast majority of young people are not able to meet entrance requirements. Increasing the pool of those who can apply will further increase standards and add more competition for every opening,” said Coffman. Cesar Vargas, executive director, Dream Action Coalition, supports the bill: “Our stories illustrate our commitment to serve the country we call home as well as to show others that we are willing to defend this great nation. That is why we laud this legislative effort updating DOD policy to allow young people to enlist in the military.”

Coffman is a first Gulf War and Iraq War combat veteran with a combined 21 years of military service between the U.S. Army, the Army Reserve, the U.S. Marine Corps and the Marine Corps Reserve.

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