



By Rebecca Plevin

[KVPR](#)

National Public Radio

□ □

Pablo Reyes-Morales' dream to serve in the United States military was stoked when he was in high school.

“Since I was in ninth grade, when I saw the slogan for the Navy, and it said, “a global force for good,” I was instantly interested,” he said.

But that dream shattered when Reyes-Morales attempted to enlist. He says it wasn't until that moment, that he learned he was undocumented, and therefore unable to serve the country.

“When I came out of the office of the Navy, I cried,” he recalled. “My dad is a very proud person – I've never seen him cry, but that time, he cried with me, and he told me was sorry he'd never told me before.”

Reyes-Morales counts himself among the ranks of the 'Dream Army' – or, young, undocumented people who are currently barred from serving in the U.S. military. 'Dream' refers to the federal DREAM Act, which would permit certain immigrant students who have grown up in the U.S. to gain a path to citizenship, if they go to college or serve in the U.S. military. The bill was first introduced in Washington in 2001, but has failed to pass several times since then.

Reyes-Morales, now a student at West Hills College in Lemoore, recently spoke with reporters in Hanford. He explained that his interest in joining the Navy is not solely motivated by his desire to become a U.S. citizen.

"I'm not doing it because I want something for me, but I'm doing it because I want to give something back," he said.

He has already obtained a temporary work permit, through a federal policy called Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals. This policy, announced by the Department of Homeland Security last summer, allows certain young, undocumented people to remain in the country and work. But it doesn't provide a path to citizenship, and recipients can't join the military.

"I want to give back to the country that raised me, basically," he explained. "I want to make sure that they know that even though we weren't born here, we're patriotic and we want to serve the U.S."

Cesar Vargas says that's the case for thousands of other young, undocumented people, too. He is the director of the DRM Action Coalition, a national organization that advocates for the right to citizenship for immigrant youth.

"For many of us, it's about a commitment to the country that has given us so much," Vargas said.

Vargas came to the U.S. from Mexico when he was 5. Today, he is a law school graduate, and is interested in becoming a military lawyer.

"I live in New York City, and September 11 was very personal for me," Vargas explained. "It was so close to me, and I actually tried to enlist right after September 11, but of course I couldn't, because they told me I could not because of my status."

Reyes-Morales and Vargas, and other members of their grassroots army, are urging President Obama to sign an executive order that would update the military's enlistment policy, to allow those who have qualified for Deferred Action to be able to join the service. They are also pushing for comprehensive immigration reform.

A solution could also come through legislation.

"This really needs to be seen as a national security issue first, and an immigration issue second," said Republican Congressman Mike Coffman of Colorado. "It's a national security issue because, the fact is, we need more qualified applicants to apply for the military to strengthen our armed forces."

Last week, Coffman introduced a bill that would make it possible for young people who gain a work permit through the Deferred Action program – like Reyes-Morales and Vargas – to enlist in the military and gain a path to citizenship.

"I think the greatest expression of citizenship in a country, in this country, is serving in the military," Coffman said. "I think it's great to have these young people who are not yet American citizens who are willing to serve, so let's give them an opportunity to serve."

Last week, a group of senators and President Obama laid out separate plans for comprehensive immigration reform. Neither explicitly addressed whether young people who qualified for the Deferred Action policy could serve in the military. But the president's plan does propose that young, undocumented people who go to college or serve honorably in the Armed Forces for at least two years should be given "an expedited opportunity to earn their citizenship."

*Published February 6, 2013*

□