



Aurora, Colo.--Congressman Mike Coffman proposes bill that would allow immigrants without green cards to enlist in the military.

The particulars flow with striking detail.

Amanuel Wubneh clearly remembers the day he came to the United States, July 7, 2005. He remembers clearly the day he joined the U.S. Army, Feb. 27, 2006.

"Everyone wants to come to America. It's a wonderful opportunity. That's a fact. Everybody knows that," he said.

Now, with a Congressional proposal that would allow more immigrants to enlist in the U.S. military, Wubneh said he hopes that more foreign-born migrants can follow his path — but others say it falls short of resolving a need for better immigration policy.

At 24, Wubneh emigrated from Ethiopia after securing a green card from that country's lottery. Although registration for the draft wasn't compulsory at his age, Wubneh said the idea of joining the military piqued his interest.

"I had many reasons to join the army, to pay some kind of price for the freedom I'm sharing. For good benefits," he said. His green card ushered him into the military without a glitch. He wished the same opportunity was given to his friend, a bus driver who wanted to enlist but couldn't because he didn't have a green card, also known as an "alien resident" card, currently the only way an immigrant can join the military and become a U.S. citizen.

Japneth Adomah-Kyereh, who lives in Aurora, has a similar story. He joined the military after emigrating from Ghana to help pay for school. Like Wubneh, he had a green card when he joined and was fast-tracked for citizenship after basic training.

“I remember I started the (citizenship) process in basic training ... a lot of people did it to get their citizenship,” Adomah-Kyereh said.

U.S. Rep. Mike Coffman, R-Aurora, says even more immigrants wanting to become citizens could join the military’s rosters if his Congressional measure is voted into law.

The bill, introduced in Congress in late January, would allow immigrants who have lived in the U.S. for at least two years with an immigrant visa to enlist in the military and go through the country’s current naturalization process. The bill would also allow young immigrants who have been brought to the U.S. by their parents and are classified as Deferred Action Child Arrivals to enlist.

There is not currently a way for these two categories of immigrants to enlist in the military and become naturalized U.S. citizens.

Coffman says the bill is particularly significant for children of immigrants who have grown up in the U.S.

“A lot of these young people are so patriotic,” he said. “They really love this country and they shouldn’t be denied this opportunity. The highest expression of being an American is serving in the military.”

Some foreign-born Aurora residents are glad to see a bill that would expand the number of eligible immigrants allowed to enlist in the army, but they say it’s not enough.

“It’s interesting,” said Fabian, a 22-year-old undocumented Aurora resident who did not want to disclose his last name. “It’s a different proposal than what has been proposed before, and it has some interesting qualities about it, but it really isn’t what we’re fighting for at the moment.”

Fabian, a community leader with the Denver-based immigrants rights organization Together Colorado, said immigrants are looking for a clear-cut path to citizenship for all undocumented residents, not just those who want to join the military.

“We’re fighting for citizenship for 11 million people,” said Fabian, who joined about 800 immigrants-rights advocates at a meeting Feb. 10 to ask Coffman and other members of Congress to pass comprehensive immigration reform.

He said he doesn’t personally know any immigrant who would enlist in the military to gain U.S. citizenship.

Aurora resident Mike Whitbeck, also a leader with Together Colorado and a former U.S. Army veteran, said he’s sure there are some immigrants who would take advantage of Coffman’s bill, but the population is probably miniscule.

“There are 11 million people trying to be citizens, and this might affect about one-sixteenth of them,” said Whitbeck, who is married to a Mexican immigrant. Whitbeck says getting into the military is also harder for anyone nowadays. The military requires a candidate to pass several tests and since thousands of military service members are coming back from the Iraq and Afghanistan wars, the demand for military service members isn’t as high as it used to be.

Coffman doesn’t have an estimate on exactly how many immigrants would benefit from his proposal, but he says he’s had conversations with Aurora immigrants who have expressed interest in the program. Coffman, who himself enlisted in the U.S. Army in high school and went on to become an officer in the Marine Corps, said he’s glad to be able to offer immigrants the same opportunities he had.

“It gives them something to aspire to,” he said.

According to the Department of Defense, about 24,000 non-citizens served on active duty as of May 2012 and about 5,000 green card holders enlist into active duty each year.

The bill, officially dubbed the Military Enlistment Opportunity Act, includes a provision that will revoke citizenship from anyone discharged from the military under “less than honorable conditions” or anyone that does not serve in the military for at least five years. But Coffman said that five-year obligation doesn’t mean a person has to be on active duty for five years, and the bill allows immigrants to serve in any branch of the military including the National Guard.

The proposal, while it could benefit some immigrants, was designed primarily for national security reasons, Coffman said. Currently, many foreign-born members of the military are not allowed to hold security clearances, can never become officers, and are excluded from several military career fields, Coffman said.

“When we’re going into areas like cyber warfare, we need very technical people,” he said. Many foreign-born immigrants are exceptional in the fields of science, technology, engineering and math, he said.

However, some foreign-born immigrants to the U.S. are enlisting into the U.S. Army because of their unique language and science skills. Under the Military Accessions Vital to National Interest (MAVNI) program, authorized by the Secretary of Defense last year, immigrants who have critical skills, including physicians, nurses and experts in foreign languages can apply to be in the military. Coffman’s bill could possibly extend this type of program to all branches of the military instead of only the U.S. Army.

Coffman’s proposal has already garnered bipartisan support, with some Congressional Democrats signing on to cosponsor the bill. But he could face criticism from right-wing Republicans and Tea Partiers that he’s being too soft on immigrants. He said he “absolutely” thinks he’s moving toward a more center-right view on issues including immigration after Congressional redistricting split his district almost evenly among Democrats, Republicans and Independents.

“I think it’s simply because of the fact that I’ve got a new district and I’m listening to people,” he said. “These are not the issues of the district I had before, but these are issues that are critical to people in the new district.”

*Staff writer Aaron Cole contributed to this report.*

By Sara

[Aurora Sentinel](#)

February 14, 2013