

Vetting Delays Snarl Path to Citizenship for Thousands in Military

By Frances Robles

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MIAMI — Thousands of immigrants who joined the United States military with promises of a fast track to citizenship are stuck in limbo as new screening measures have taken far longer than expected, leaving some military members around the nation unable to become citizens or even go to basic training.

In the Army alone, about 4,300 people are awaiting the completion of their background checks, said Hank Minitrez, a spokesman for the Army. Until they are cleared, they cannot enter basic training or deploy overseas, leaving them stuck on bases if they are on active duty.

Immigrants must be in the United States legally in order to enlist. But the new vetting measures, begun in the waning months of the Obama administration, have taken so long that by November, the legal status of up to 1,500 people who enlisted in active duty or the Reserve had expired while they waited for clearance, the Army said.

They cannot legally drive or find work, a problem for reservists, who do not draw a full-time military paycheck. Although the Army is granting some extensions, they could eventually be subject to deportation, the Army said.

Some enlistees who were at the doorstep of citizenship have had the door slammed shut at the last minute.

One Army reservist in South Florida who had been scheduled for her citizenship oath on Thursday was turned away. A trauma surgeon in Springfield, Ill., who signed up for the Army Reserve was scheduled to become a citizen on May 5, then learned that his case was delayed.

Anbazhagan Chinnappillai, who came to the United States from India in 2013 on a student visa, lost the visa when the university where he was studying discovered he had enlisted. His original ship-out date has been postponed indefinitely.

“I thought joining the military was going to help me have a better life, like an American dream,” he said.

Mr. Chinnappillai had signed up for Military Accessions Vital to the National Interest, known as Mavni, an immigrant recruiting program created by the George W. Bush administration to bring more foreign-language speakers and trained doctors into the armed forces. Some 10,000 people, most of them in the Army, have joined with the promise of a quick path to citizenship, which many have received.

So-called Dreamers, immigrants who came to the United States illegally as children and have been granted a reprieve from deportation, are eligible, as are immigrants with valid visas at the time they sign up. Legal permanent residents, or green-card holders, have been able to enlist and win speedy citizenship for years under a separate program.

President Trump has voiced support for letting noncitizens serve in the military, but some — including Attorney General Jeff Sessions, when he was a senator — have expressed security concerns. So did officials in the Obama administration, who added additional screening beginning last fall.

United States Citizenship and Immigration Services referred calls to the Pentagon. The Department of Defense acknowledged that the new screening methods had caused “some delays.”

The scrutiny is extensive. According to a lawsuit filed by seven Mavni members who said the Defense Department was improperly stalling them, the investigation covers at least 10 years of finances, education and professional activities, on top of credit and criminal background checks. The individual must complete an exhaustive questionnaire and is interviewed by an investigator, often for several hours. Close relatives, references, employers, neighbors and colleagues are also interviewed.

The process involves various agencies, including the Defense and Justice Departments, and the sheer volume of applications has resulted in delays, said Mr. Minitrez, the Army spokesman.

“These background checks are quite extensive and time consuming,” he said in an email, “but are absolutely necessary.”

Naomi Verdugo, a retired senior recruiting official in the Army who helped create Mavni, said one soldier she knew had an M.B.A. and spoke Ukrainian and Russian, but was sitting around his base with little to do because the military had not completed his background check.

“He is sitting there, painting rocks,” she said.

Margaret D. Stock, a retired lieutenant colonel in the Army Reserve who also was involved in creating Mavni, said she believed the government was violating a segment of the law that says Army reservists are eligible for citizenship as soon as they begin serving.

Ms. Stock, a lawyer who represents some Mavni members and is the author of “Immigration Law and the Military,” said, “This looks to me like mindless bigotry and anti-immigrant feeling at the Pentagon: ‘We don’t think you deserve the citizenship Congress gave you.’”

Sagar Dubey, 31, a computer consultant in Minneapolis who runs a Facebook page for Mavni recruits, said hundreds of reservists had posted desperate messages about running out of money or being unable to leave the country to attend a parent's funeral because they were no longer in the United States legally and might not be allowed to re-enter. Mr. Dubey, who is from India, joined the Reserve a year ago but still has not been allowed to attend basic training.

The Army reservist who was turned away from a citizenship ceremony on Thursday had learned just hours earlier that her case was stalled.

“To come this far and not be able to do it?” said the woman, a 29-year-old Brazilian who did not want her name published because she feared it would hurt her citizenship application. “We have contracts we signed. We are honoring our part. Are they honoring theirs?”

Nicholas Kulish contributed reporting from New York.

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