

A commonsense idea

by The San Diego Union-Tribune

In an example of necessity colliding with common sense, the Pentagon is turning to immigrants to help offset recruitment shortfalls.

And not just any immigrants either. The effort is aimed at high-skilled immigrants who came to this country legally on temporary visas and who have lived here for at least two years. Recruits would have the chance to become U.S. citizens in as little as six months following their military service. Illegal immigrants are not eligible.

This is a great idea that should have been adopted long ago. These are people who were previously excluded from military service. Permanent resident immigrants can enlist but temporary immigrants cannot. Passing up talented people makes no sense. In fact, in a sad commentary on the quality of the domestic volunteer corps, military recruiters say they expect the temporary immigrants to have more education, foreign language ability and professional experience than many of the Americans who now enlist. The concept seems to be popular, and the only grumbling you hear is coming from the nativist fringe, where some worry that these immigrants are still loyal to their home country and not the United States.

Nonsense. Why not say the same thing about permanent residents who are currently eligible to serve? Or even U.S. citizens who were born in other countries? The fact is, the military has long welcomed legal immigrants with permanent green cards and many of these enlistees have gone on to win medals and serve their adopted country with distinction. In Iraq and Afghanistan, the American casualties include more than 100 of these green-card troops. There is little doubt about their loyalty.

The recruitment effort will be limited to about 1,000 recruits in the first year, mostly for the Army. But if the program succeeds, Pentagon officials say they plan to expand it to include all branches of the military.

Let's hope that happens. This sort of initiative is a no-brainer. It helps give legal immigrants who are holding temporary visas an on-ramp to U.S. citizenship and allows them to put down roots here instead returning to their home country as many immigrants now do. It also helps the military, which is fighting two wars and struggling to find people with language skills and other specialized expertise. And it helps the cause of condition-based comprehensive immigration by reinforcing the notion that there is no free lunch and that those who stand to benefit from a change in U.S. immigration policy should step up and look for ways to contribute.

For such a simple idea, the concept of enlisting temporary legal immigrants does a lot of good and makes a lot of sense.

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