

Congress of the United States
Washington, DC 20515

January 13, 2023

The Honorable Lloyd J. Austin III
Secretary
Department of Defense
1000 Defense Pentagon
Washington, DC 20301

Dear Secretary Austin:

We write to request that the Department of Defense (DoD) hold a briefing on steps the Department is taking to fulfil its obligations under Executive Order 14012: Restoring Faith in Our Legal Immigration System and Strengthening Integration and Inclusion Efforts for New Americans, issued by President Biden on February 2, 2021. In particular, we seek information on actions DoD is taking to ensure that all branches of the military are holding naturalization ceremonies at basic training.

The U.S. Armed Services have benefited from immigrant servicemembers for centuries and immigrants have served in every major military conflict from the Revolutionary War to the invasion of Iraq.¹ Today, an estimated 45,000 immigrants are serving in the U.S. Armed Services.² From 2009 until 2018, USCIS oversaw a Naturalization at Basic Training Initiative to facilitate the naturalization process for immigrant servicemembers at basic training.³ However, policy changes made by the previous administration led USCIS to end the initiative and made it significantly more difficult for service members to naturalize, contributing to a 78 percent decline in military naturalization applications from 2017 to 2018,⁴ and led to the deportation of veterans without appropriate review.⁵ Executive Order 14012 seeks to undo these harms and directs the Department of Homeland Security (DHS) as well as the State and Justice Departments to partner with DoD to “facilitate naturalization for... members of the military.”⁶ It is critical for

¹ Russell Contreras, AP Explains: Immigrants in U.S. Military throughout History, ASSOCIATED PRESS (July 15, 2018), <https://www.apnews.com/63693023ff5546458303b5a5e218d7de>.

² *5 things to Know About Immigrants in the Military*, FWD.US (Jan. 6, 2021), <https://www.fwd.us/news/immigrants-in-the-military/>.

³ *Military Naturalizations: Federal Agencies Assist with Naturalizations, but Additional Monitoring and Assessment Are Needed*, Government Accountability Office, (September 2022), <https://www.gao.gov/assets/gao-22-105021.pdf>.

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ *Immigration Enforcement: Actions Needed to Better Handle, Identify, and Track Cases Involving Veterans*, Government Accountability Office, (June 2019), <https://www.gao.gov/assets/700/699549.pdf>.

⁶ Presidential Action, *Executive Order on Restoring Faith in Our Legal Immigration Systems and Strengthening Integration and Inclusion Efforts for New Americans*, Executive Order, White House (Feb. 2, 2021), <https://www.whitehouse.gov/briefing-room/presidential-actions/2021/02/02/executive-order-restoring-faith-in-our-legal-immigration-systems-and-strengthening-integration-and-inclusion-efforts-for-new-americans/>.

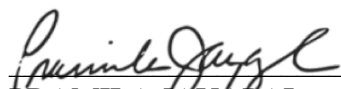
our national security that servicemembers, veterans, and their families who have put their lives on the line for our country have the opportunity to become citizens and are allowed to remain in the United States without fear of deportation.


It has been over a year since President Biden Issued Executive Order 14012 and to date, only the U.S. Navy has restarted naturalization ceremonies at basic training.⁷ On June 29, 2022, Stephanie Miller, who serves as the Director of the DoD’s Office for Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion, testified before the House Judiciary Subcommittee on Immigration and Citizenship at a hearing on “Oversight of Immigrant Military Members and Veterans.” She stated that while all service branches “work with USCIS case officers and bring them in on a periodic basis,” only the Navy has brought back some of the basic elements of the basic training program and is considering instituting a permanent establishment.

Neither DHS nor DoD require further authorization to hold naturalization ceremonies at basic training. DHS has demonstrated it has the willingness and capacity to expand access to the naturalization process. In July 2021, USCIS issued the *Interagency Strategy for Promoting Naturalization*, in coordination with 10 other federal departments, including DoD, that recognizes “granting citizenship to eligible lawful permanent residents is vital to our nation’s security [and] economic prosperity.”⁸ Therefore, it is critical that all branches of the military follow the example of the U.S. Navy to expand access to citizenship for servicemembers and veterans who have put their lives on the line to defend the United States.

We respectfully request a briefing by January 27, 2023, to explain why naturalization at basic training has not been expanded beyond the Navy. Thank you for your attention to this important issue.

Sincerely,


PRAMILA JAYAPAL
Member of Congress


JERROLD NADLER
Ranking Member
House Judiciary Committee


ZOE LOFGREN
Member of Congress

⁷ *Path to Citizenship Returns to RTC*, U.S. Navy (March 29, 2022), <https://www.navy.mil/Press-Office/News-Stories/Article/2982298/path-to-citizenship-returns-to-rtc/>.

⁸ Department of Homeland Security, U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services, *Interagency Strategy for Promoting Naturalization*, (July 2, 2021), https://www.uscis.gov/sites/default/files/document/reports/Interagency_Strategy_for_Promoting_Naturalization_Final.pdf