

# Tell Congress: Deported Veterans Deserve A Path Home

Grassroots Lobbying Toolkit - Summer/Fall 2023



Southern California

<b>1. Get the Facts</b>	<b>2</b>
a. Why are veterans being deported and denied citizenship?	2
b. How Can Congress Fix the Issue?	3
<b>2. Grassroots Lobbying Goals &amp; Calendar</b>	<b>3</b>
a. June-September 2023 Checklist: Secure Republican Co-Sponsors	3
b. October-January 2024 Checklist: Build Broader Support in Congress	4
c. Grassroots Lobbying Calendar	4
<b>3. Take Action with Congress</b>	<b>5</b>
a. Have 2 minutes? Call your members of Congress	5
b. Have 10 minutes? Write your member of Congress	6
c. Have more time? Ask for a meeting	6
d. Have more time? Join a town hall	7
<b>4. Congressional Contact Information &amp; Tracker</b>	<b>8</b>
<b>5. Share Your Story: Letters to the Editor or Op-Eds</b>	<b>8</b>
<b>6. Grassroots Activism Resources</b>	<b>9</b>
a. Talking Points for Media & the Public	9
b. Personal stories	10
c. Talking Points for Communications with Elected Officials	12
d. Template Letter for Tabling/ In-Person Events	15
e. Section-by-Section Explanation of the Bill	16
f. Leave-Behind Document for Congressional Meeting	18
<b>7. Background Information</b>	<b>19</b>
Organizations Endorsing The Bill	19
Congressional Testimony, Hearings & Reports	19
News Articles & Nongovernmental Reports	20
Documentaries and Art Exhibits	20

# 1. Get the Facts

## a. Why are veterans being deported and denied citizenship?

People who are not citizens have served in the United States military since the Revolutionary War. For over 200 years, Congress has repeatedly passed laws for the purpose of ensuring that noncitizens who join the military—pledging their service and their life to defend our Constitution—can become citizens. Republicans and Democrats alike have strongly supported these laws.

Unfortunately, these laws are not enough. Over the past few decades alone, thousands of veterans have been denied the opportunity to become citizens and deported by the very country they fought to protect. **Congress must do more.** People who have served in the military have faced undue barriers to receiving naturalization in recent years:

- Many veterans were falsely told by recruiters or their chain of command that their service automatically made them citizens. As a result, they never applied to naturalize and become citizens during their service, when they were entitled to do so.
- Many other veterans applied for naturalization while serving, but the government lost or failed to file their applications.
- Some service members never received the notices to complete various steps of the citizenship process sent by the government because they were serving abroad—and no caseworker or liaison was assigned to their case. While the executive branch can temporarily fix these problems, we need Congress to step in and provide a long-lasting solution.

To prevent the deportation of any more U.S. veterans, Congress must fix a system that has led to thousands of veterans being deported:

- Many service members struggle with returning to civilian life. Some return home with serious mental health issues including post-traumatic stress disorder, traumatic brain injuries, and experiences in active combat zones that have lasting effects on them. They may struggle with substance abuse, experience homelessness, or be injured or disabled for the rest of their lives. .
- As a result, many veterans end up in the criminal legal system. An estimated [One in three](#) of the nation's 19 million veterans have been arrested or jailed at least once. While veterans who complete their criminal sentences can return home, veterans who are non-citizens face a second, life-changing punishment: deportation.
- Deporting someone means they are banished from the country—and separated from their home and family—for the rest of their life. Most of today's non-citizen veterans spent the majority of their lives in the United States. Many were brought here by their parents as small children, raised here, and went to school here. Everything and everyone they love are in the United States.

- In some cases, the government deports people without even asking if they have served in the military. In most cases, immigration judges are prohibited from even considering military service when deciding whether to deport a veteran.

## b. How Can Congress Fix the Issue?

**We are urging Congress to pass the Veteran Service Recognition Act to support noncitizen veterans and their families.** The bill would do 3 major things:

- 1) Support non-citizen service members to become U.S. citizens by directing the Department of Homeland Security (DHS) and Department of Defense (DoD) to facilitate opportunities for military recruits and veterans to apply for citizenship during basic training;
- 2) Ensure that the government considers military service in making decisions on deportation of veterans and immediate family members by requiring DHS to establish a system for identifying noncitizens who are veterans before initiating a deportation and creating a Military Family Advisory Committee to review and recommend whether discretion is warranted regarding the deportation of members of the armed forces, veterans and covered family member; and
- 3) Create opportunities for deported veterans to return home by providing non-citizen veterans who have been ordered deported and who have not been convicted of serious crimes the opportunity to apply for legal permanent resident status.

This bill does not address all the issues, but it is an important start.

## 2. Grassroots Lobbying Goals & Calendar

Our goal is to pass the Veteran Service Recognition Act as part of the National Defense Authorization Act for either Fiscal Year 2024 or Fiscal Year 2025. To get there, we need to ensure the bill is truly **bipartisan - not just a Democrats' bill.**

This bill passed the House in December 2022, but with only a few Republican votes. **Since the House is now controlled by a Republican majority, we need the bill to be reintroduced with Republican support** – otherwise, it will not become law any time soon.

**Veterans' groups and individual veterans' voices are crucial to getting Republican support and getting this bill passed.**

### a. June-September 2023 Checklist: Secure Republican Co-Sponsors

- GOAL: Ensure the bill is introduced in the Senate with at least one lead Republican co-sponsor by *September 2023*.
  - 10 VSO chapters/local groups meet with their Republican senators
  - 50 people write personal emails or make phone calls to their senator's staff

- 20 people set up meetings with their Republican senators
- 20 people write follow-up emails, following these meetings
- GOAL: Secure at least 3 strong House Republican to co-sponsor the bill
  - 10 VSO chapters/local groups meet with their Republican House members
  - 50 people write personal emails or make phone calls to targeted House Republican members
  - 20 people attend August congressional recess town halls or other in-district events, and ask about support for deported veterans

### b. October-January 2024 Checklist: Build Broader Support in Congress

- GOAL: Get at least 3 Republican senators and 10 Republican House members to sign on as co-sponsors of the bill, by January 2024**
  - 100 people send postcards or letters to their members of Congress
  - 200 people make calls through a phone action day (date TBD)
  - TBD In-Person DC Lobby Day

**MORE TO COME – January-October 2024:** Pass the bill as a floor amendment to the National Defense Authorization Act of 2025 and ensure it remains in the final enacted bill – Tactics TBD closer to the date

### c. Grassroots Lobbying Calendar

Date	Name	Actions Goal
June 26-June 30	<b>Recess</b>	5 Senate & House meetings w/ any activist
July 3-July 7	<b>July 4th Recess</b>	25 emails or phone calls to senators 25 emails or phone calls to House members
<b>Mid-July: Likely reintroduction of the bill in the House</b>		
July 31-Sept 4	<b>August Recess</b>	10 Senate & House meetings w/ VSO reps 5 Senate & House meetings w/ any activist 25 phone calls or emails to Senators 25 phone calls or emails to House members

		5 people attend town halls or in-district events
<b>GOAL: In September, Veteran Service Recognition Act reintroduced in Senate with Republican co-sponsor</b>		
September 29	<b>National VFW Day</b>	TBD
November 10	<b>Veterans Day</b>	TBD
November 20-24	<b>Thanksgiving Recess</b>	TBD
Dec. 15	<b>Senate target adjournment</b>	TBD
Dec. 18-29	<b>Christmas recess</b>	TBD
<b>2024</b>		
<b>GOAL: By Feb, Veteran Service Recognition Act reported out of Judiciary Committee</b>		
March 5-8, 2024 TBD	<b>VFW Lobbying Week</b>	TBD

### 3. Take Action with Congress

One of the most important things you can do is contact your member of Congress to share why this issue is personal for you, and ask for their support. Depending on your time and comfort level, you can take any (or all) of the steps below. The most important thing, in any interaction, is to show that you are concerned about this issue and you expect them to act – as *your* representative.

The first step is to identify your members of Congress – your two senators and the House of Representatives member who represents the district where you live. Enter your address here to find your representatives: <https://www.congress.gov/members/find-your-member>

#### a. Have 2 minutes? Call your members of Congress

Pick up the phone and leave a message with your members of Congress. You can reach any member of Congress through the U.S. Capitol Switchboard, at (202) 224-3121

You can use this script:

*Hello, my name is [NAME] and I am your constituent from [CITY, STATE]. I am calling to ask you to co-sponsor the Veterans Service Recognition Act, H.R. 4569, to support Armed Service members and veterans in becoming citizens, and create opportunities for deported veterans to return home. Our government has a responsibility to ensure that*

*servicemembers and veterans are able to access the full range of benefits they deserve, including a pathway to citizenship. Thank you.*

## **b. Have 10 minutes? Write your member of Congress**

**1. Write a personal letter.** A handwritten letter is best, or you can also [email](#) or type the letter.

**2. Address the letter to your member of Congress.** You can find your member of Congress' mailing address on their website. You can also use this standard mailing address for senators:

*The Honorable (Name of Representative)*

*United States Senate*

*Washington, DC 20510*

## **3. Share your convictions**

- Make sure to explain in your first paragraph why you are writing: "I am writing to ask you to co-sponsor the Veteran Services Recognition act." Feel free to use or adapt the talking points in the [Resources section](#).
- Communicate in your own words why you support the bill: because of your experiences or the experience of a person you are connected to; because it's true to your values and our nation's commitments; etc.
- Keep it personal. We know that senate staff can sniff out pre-written templates, and they value personal letters more.
- You can keep it short — just one page or even shorter.

## **c. Have more time? Ask for a meeting**

One of the best ways to influence your member of Congress is to request a meeting. The meeting can happen over videoconference or while the member or their staff are at home, during congressional recess periods. Email the office's "scheduler" and veterans affairs staff member using this contact information. You can adapt this template email:

*Dear [names],*

*My name is [NAME] and I am your constituent from [CITY, STATE]. I am writing to request a meeting with you and Senator/Representative [NAME] to discuss the Veteran Service Recognition Act, HR 4569. I am available [list dates and times]. Thank you for your time and consideration.*

*[your name]*

*[your email and phone number]*

You can request the meeting on behalf of yourself, you and others, or your group. You are more likely to get a meeting with congressional staff, rather than the member of Congress, and that is still helpful.

Before the meeting, make sure you have an outline for how it will go. It can roughly look like this:

1. Introductions: All the people who are joining the meeting, on your side, identify themselves by name, where they live and whether they are veterans or members of a veteran service organization
2. Each person explains why they support the bill, including any personal stories
3. Ask for the member of Congress' support. You can say, "we are asking your boss to sign on as a co-sponsor of this bill. Can you talk to your boss and let us know?"
4. Promise to follow-up in two weeks, to find out if the member will be co-sponsoring the bill.

You will have 20 minutes or less with a staff person, and as little as 10 minutes if you meet with your elected official. Make the most of that brief time by sticking to your topic. You can view more tips [here](#).

#### d. Have more time? Join a town hall

When members of Congress are at home in their states or districts, they sometimes host "town hall" events. You can attend a town hall to share your experiences and push your member of Congress to support deported veterans. Here are the steps:

1. Find a town hall event: Visit your member of Congress' website and sign up to receive updates; or visit websites that compile information on town halls such as [Indivisible https://indivisible.org/events?terms=town%20hall](https://indivisible.org/events?terms=town%20hall).
2. Register in advance (if required)
3. Research the member of Congress' position on this bill
  - a. If they are in the House, how did they vote on the Veteran Service Recognition Act last year? You can see that [here](#).
  - b. Are they a veteran themselves?
4. Prepare what you'll say
  - a. Introduce yourself ("My name is...") and if you are a resident of the senator's state or House member's district, say so ("I've lived here since..."). If you are a veteran or are connected to veterans, share about your/their service.
  - b. Thank the member of Congress for having the event
  - c. Share why you care about the issue of deported veterans. Feel free to use or adapt the talking points in the Resources section.
  - d. Ask a question like, "Are you willing to step up your support for veterans by co-sponsoring the Veterans Service Recognition Act, which will make it easier for people serving in our military to become citizens and create fair opportunities for deported veterans to return home?"

- e. Depending on how the member of Congress responds, say that you would like to follow up with their staff to share more.
5. After the event, email [deported-veteran-coalition@googlegroups.com](mailto:deported-veteran-coalition@googlegroups.com) to share what happened. Together we can come up with a plan for next steps.

## 4. Congressional Contact Information & Tracker

We have compiled contact information into a tracker with all members of Congress serving on the Veterans Affairs, Judiciary and Armed Services Committees.

Access the tracker [here](#).

You can use this tracker to:

1. Email requests for in-district meetings – email the staff listed as “scheduler” as well as “district director” or “state director”
2. Phone the office to find out about local town hall events
3. Find the local mailing address for letters or postcards
4. Let us know if you are able to take any of these actions – so we can identify the gaps and figure out next steps.

## 5. Share Your Story: Letters to the Editor or Op-Eds

Letters to the editor (LTEs) and op-eds are important ways to share stories and reach key audiences. LTEs respond to a news or opinion article and are very short (generally under 200 words), while op-eds are independent opinion articles that are longer (between 500-800 words) but still often require some news hook to place. When writing a LTE or an op-ed, consider these guidelines:

- *Timeliness*: For an **op-ed**, a strong news hook is essential for preferred placement, but remember that current events can be woven into an evergreen/existing piece. For a **letter to the editor** there is a limited window to pitch the LTE before the news becomes stale and the LTE loses its impact.
- *Content*: For both an **op-ed** and **letter to the editor**, ensure what you are saying is original, informative, compelling, and personal. Outlets often won't publish two op-eds or LTEs that say substantially the same thing, nor will they place op-eds or LTEs that are poorly written or overly technical. When deciding between two similar op-eds or LTEs, outlets will almost always choose the one with a personal story or connection.
- *Technical requirements*: Ensure you are following all the technical requirements for an op-ed or letter to the editor. This includes word count, formatting, author details, etc. **Op-eds** should generally be 500-800 words, and some outlets do not accept bullet points, certain hyperlinks, or attributions to more than two authors. **Letters to the editor** almost always require a reference to a recent news or opinion story, and rarely are accepted if longer than 200 words.
- *Pitching*: You should keep your pitch short and compelling. It should include a brief synopsis of the op-ed or letter to the editor you are pitching, but the entire pitch should generally not exceed 2 short paragraphs. For **op-eds**, find the appropriate editor to pitch if possible, you have a higher likelihood of response if sent to a person rather than a general opinion email. For **letters to the editor**, outlets often have a dedicated email address to send letters to. You can ask someone else to pitch an op-ed or LTE for you if you are not comfortable.

- *Placement:* For an **op-ed**, placement is how we ensure the right people are seeing the article. If you only have capacity to pitch one outlet, choose the one with the highest likelihood of placement. Smaller community papers are often easier to pitch and still can reach the intended audiences. However, if you have more time you can start with the highest tier publication on your list and work down from there if you don't secure placement. Don't pitch to more than one outlet at a time, and reevaluate the tactic or your op-ed if three or more outlets decline. For a **letter to the editor**, placement is a given.

## 6. Grassroots Activism Resources

### a. Talking Points for Media & the Public

**Value:** America's veterans and servicemembers deserve our respect and gratitude. A grateful nation recognizes that its soldiers have earned their place and ensures they can become citizens — citizens who can return after their service to their families and communities like every other veteran. A grateful nation does not deport its veterans from the nation they fought to protect and the only country they know as home. Banishing United States veterans is unconscionable and cruel. Our government has a responsibility to ensure that servicemembers and veterans can access the full range of benefits they deserve, including a pathway to citizenship.

**Problem:** For more than two centuries, people serving in the military who are not citizens have been entitled to an expedited naturalization process, affording them a pathway to citizenship soon after their enlistment. Since 2002, the U.S. has naturalized more than 158,000 military members. Unfortunately, bureaucratic hurdles and misinformation have prevented many other service members from naturalizing while in the service, even though they were eligible to do so. Many were incorrectly told by their superiors that their service made them automatic citizens, so they did not file naturalization applications.

With some exceptions, a noncitizen may only enlist in the armed forces if they are a lawful permanent resident (or "green card" holders) under 10 U.S.C. 504. Most noncitizens that enlist and serve in our military are longtime lawful residents who immigrated to the United States as babies or young children. They were raised here, went to school here, and all of their family is here in the United States. Many have nothing to return to in their birth countries and do not even speak the country's language.

Many veterans face post-traumatic stress disorder and other mental illnesses upon returning to civilian life. As a result, many end up arrested instead of getting the care they need – an estimated one in three of the nation's 19 million veterans have been arrested or jailed at least once. But unlike citizen veterans, after noncitizen veterans complete their criminal sentences, many face a second, lifelong punishment: deportation. In the 1990s, Congress passed draconian laws blocking immigration judges from exercising discretion to consider military service when deciding whether to deport a non-citizen. As a result, thousands of veterans have been denied the citizenship promised to them, and many have faced an extreme fate: deportation from the nation they swore to protect and, for most, the only country they know.

**Solution:** We need Congress to act to ensure that service members and veterans get the respect and assistance they deserve.

The Veteran Service Recognition Act would support noncitizen service members and veterans in becoming citizens, would ensure that the government considers military service in decisions on deportations of veterans and immediate family members, and create opportunities for deported veterans to return home.

**Visualization:** Under the VSRA, noncitizen service members would be given accurate information and the assistance they need to naturalize expeditiously during their service. They would return home to their families and communities as citizens and not face the threat of deportation and banishment from the country they know as home and have pledged their allegiance to. Veterans who have already been deported due to the government's past failures to protect its military members would have the chance to return home to the United States.

## b. Personal stories

### **Hector Barajas, 82nd ABN veteran, deported in 2004 and repatriated as a U.S. Citizen in 2018**

*"Our deported veterans are as American as any American-born citizen. I dare say, they have gone above and beyond by service. We are no less American because of our imperfections."*

Hector Barajas-Varela came to the US with his family when he was 7, growing up in California. He enlisted in the U.S. Army in 1995 at age 17, after graduating high school.

"I wanted to serve my adopted country, and I saw the service as a way to leave the environment in Compton and possibly to afford to go to college," he said. He arrived in Fort Bragg and soon volunteered for Airborne School, serving in the 82nd Airborne from 1996 to 1999. "We were all Paratroopers, ready and willing to fight for our country and our values. We risked our lives on many days, performing dangerous air evacuations and dealing with multiple injuries as a result," he said. He re-enlisted and served until his Honorable Discharge in 2001.

Hector could have applied for naturalization at the time he enlisted, but army recruiters led him to the mistaken impression that honorable service in the military automatically made him a citizen.

Hector struggled upon his re-entry to civilian life and entered a plea of no contest in 2002 to a charge of shooting at an occupied vehicle. After spending two years in prison and nearly a year in detention, he was deported to Mexico. With his family in the U.S. and difficulties finding employment in Mexico, he re-entered the U.S. and was again deported in 2010 after being pulled over in a traffic stop.

In April 2017, Barajas was granted a full pardon in 2017 by Gov. Jerry Brown. He was granted U.S. citizenship in 2018, reuniting him with his daughter, his parents, his siblings, and his extended family.

He testified before Congress: "I want to emphasize that I am a firm believer in people being held accountable. Being a veteran does not mean that you get a free pass and never have to pay the consequences for your actions. At the same time, it does not make sense to me to deport our veterans after they have completed their sentence and paid for their actions. For veterans, deportation is a double punishment."

Sources:

VICE News, "Hector Barajas Served in the American Military. He Was Deported Just the Same," Sept. 11, 2019

ACLU of Southern California, "Hector Barrajas," <https://www.aclusocal.org/en/biographies/hector-barajas>

Testimony of Mr. Hector Barrajas, Hearing on "The Impact of Current Immigration Policies on Service Members, Veterans, and their Families," Senate Judiciary Subcommittee on Immigration and Citizenship, Oct. 29, 2019, <https://www.congress.gov/116/meeting/house/110150/witnesses/HHRG-116-JU01-Wstate-Barajas-VarelaH-2019-1029.pdf>

### **Mauricio Hernandez Mata, U.S. Army combat veteran, deported in 2009 and sworn in as a citizen in 2023**

*"Now I am an American citizen, but I have always been an American"*

Mauricio Hernandez Mata came to the US at age 7. He enlisted in 2001 and believed that by swearing the oath upon his enlistment, he was becoming a citizen.

Mauricio served in more than 100 combat missions for the U.S. Army. He suffered post-traumatic stress disorder after he returned home. He said: "When I got out of the Army, I was hearing voices in my head and I couldn't look at anyone. I lived by myself, painted my windows black and got rid of all the mirrors because I couldn't look at myself. It was such an extreme, I felt everyone wanted to harm me."

He was deported after being convicted of drug possession. He was able to get the felony conviction in his case vacated. An immigration judge reinstated his green card and in 2022, he returned to the US for the first time in ten years, reuniting with his mother.

"If I had a second chance I would gladly do it all again – fight for my country in any conflict," Mauricio told media. "I have always considered myself and I am an American."

Sources:

The San Diego Union-Tribune, "'We are not forgotten': Formerly deported veterans become U.S. citizens in special San Diego ceremony," Feb. 8, 2023, <https://www.sandiegouniontribune.com/news/immigration/story/2023-02-08/formerly-deported-veteran-becomes-u-s-citizen>

QCNews, "Deported Army vet reunited with mom on Valentine's Day after 10 years," Feb. 15, 2022, <https://www.qcnews.com/news/national-news/deported-army-vet-reunited-with-mom-on-valentines-day-after-10-years/>

"A Portrait of Exile: Mauricio Hernandez Mata," Vietnam Veterans Against the War, <http://www.vvaw.org/veteran/article/?id=3382>

## **Laura Meza, U.S. Army combat veteran, deported in 2009 and repatriated in 2023**

*"I committed a crime and I've served my time for it. All I want now is to come home and be a mother to my daughter and rebuild my life in the ONLY country I know as my own"*

Laura Meza came to the US at age 5 and grew up in Maryland. In 2001, she became a permanent U.S. resident and in 2003 she enlisted. She was sexually assaulted by a fellow soldier in Germany before deploying to Iraq during the 2003 invasion. There, she witnessed multiple bombings and deaths of fellow soldiers.

After her honorable discharge and return in 2004, she suffered undiagnosed post-traumatic stress disorder and began to self-medicate with drugs. She was arrested multiple times and pled guilty in 2007 to attempted robbery and possession of marijuana with intent to distribute. She received a 30-day prison sentence and a 2-year suspended sentence from a judge, who also ordered drug abuse treatment.

In 2009 she was deported. " She was separated from her family, from her child. She missed the entire childhood of her daughter and was separated from her family for 14 years. That is a profound punishment," said her lawyer, Lindsay Toczykowski. She returned to the United States in 2023 on humanitarian parole.

Sources:

"Veteran returns to the U.S. after 14-year exile under Biden effort to rectify 'unjust' deportations," April 21, 2023, <https://www.cbsnews.com/news/deported-veteran-returns-to-us-biden-laura-meza/>

"LULAC Urges Return of Deported MST Survivor, Iraq Veteran, and Mother," [https://lulac.org/news/pr/LULAC\\_Urges\\_Return\\_Of\\_Deported\\_MST\\_Survivor\\_Iraq\\_Veteran\\_And\\_Mother/](https://lulac.org/news/pr/LULAC_Urges_Return_Of_Deported_MST_Survivor_Iraq_Veteran_And_Mother/)

### **c. Talking Points for Communications with Elected Officials**

- We are here to talk with you today about a veterans issue and a national security issue.
- **Many of us have served alongside people who are not citizens.** Many of them were brought here as small children or as teens by their parents. They decided they wanted to serve—out of a love for this country, and a sense of duty.
- **They're an important part of our military.** An estimated 35,000 non-citizens are serving in active-duty military, and about 8,000 join each year. With the military suffering a recruitment crisis, recruitment of non-citizens remains vital. Non-citizen service members serve not only honorably, but exceptionally. Once they join, non-citizens are far

[more likely to complete](#) their enlistment obligations than their U.S.-born counterparts. 20% of all Congressional Medal of Honor recipients are non-citizens.

- **One critical part of military recruitment is the promise of a path to citizenship.** Our laws have long promised service members an expedited path to citizenship. But due to increasing bureaucratic hurdles over the past few decades, that hasn't happened.
  - Many veterans never applied to naturalize and become citizens during their service because they were incorrectly told by recruiters or their chain of command that their service automatically made them citizens.
  - Many other veterans applied for naturalization while serving, but the government lost or failed to file their applications.
- **Because they never became citizens, thousands of veterans have been deported after leaving service.** They served the time for their punishment, just like anyone else would, but instead they were doubly punished for the rest of their lives by being deported.
  - As you know, many veterans struggle with reintegrating to civilian life. Many have mental health, PTSD and substance abuse issues. As a result, many veterans end up in the criminal legal system. An estimated [one in three](#) of the nation's 19 million veterans have been arrested or jailed at least once.
  - While veterans who complete their criminal sentences can return home, veterans who are non-citizens face a second life-long punishment: deportation
  - In many cases, the government deported veterans without even asking if they had military service. And in many cases, immigration judges are prohibited from even considering military service when deciding whether to deport a veteran.
- **We need Congress to step in to fix these issues**
  - While the Executive Branch is tackling some of the barriers to people becoming citizens while serving, we need a durable solution that only Congress can provide—that will guarantee that service members get access to the benefits they deserve
  - Our laws currently prevent judges from considering military service when deciding whether to deport someone. We need to fix that, it's just common sense that military service would be an important consideration to this decision.
- **We are asking you to co-sponsor the Veteran Service Recognition Act, which is endorsed by the American Legion.** This year, the head of the American Legion testified and urged that Congress re-introduce and pass this bill.
- This is a a modest bill, and it's a step in the right direction. The bill would do 3 major things:
  - [Support non-citizen service members to become U.S. citizens](#) by directing the Department of Homeland Security (DHS) and Department of Defense (DoD)

to facilitate opportunities for military recruits and veterans to apply for citizenship during basic training;

- Ensure that the government considers military service in making decisions on deportation of veterans and immediate family members by requiring DHS to establish a system for identifying noncitizens who are veterans before initiating a deportation and creating a Military Family Advisory Committee to review and recommend whether discretion is warranted regarding the deportation of members of the armed forces, veterans and covered family member; and
- Create opportunities for deported veterans to return home by providing non-citizen veterans who have been ordered deported and who have not been convicted of serious crimes the opportunity to apply for legal permanent resident status.

#### d. Template Letter for Tabling/ In-Person Events

DATE: \_\_\_\_\_

**Re: Co-sponsor the Veteran Service Recognition Act**

Dear Senator/Representative \_\_\_\_\_,

I am writing to urge you to co-sponsor the Veteran Service Recognition Act, H.R. 4569, a bill that would support members of the Armed Services to become citizens and create opportunities for deported veterans to return home.

For over 200 years, Congress has repeatedly passed laws to encourage noncitizens to join the military by expediting their road to citizenship—with bipartisan support. Unfortunately, these laws are not enough. In recent years, thousands of veterans have been deported from the nation they swore to protect.

I am a constituent. I care about this issue because

Thank you for your time and attention to this matter.

Sincerely,

\_\_\_\_\_  
Contact information:

## e. Section-by-Section Explanation of the Bill

If you are asked in a congressional meeting, you can provide this section-by-section explanation of the bill:

### SECTION 1- “SHORT TITLE”

This section states the title of the bill.

### SECTION 2- “SENSE OF CONGRESS”

Expresses the sense of Congress that 1) military service to the United States demonstrates loyalty to the nation 2) a noncitizen who takes an oath of enlistment or an oath of office to join the United States military in an effort to protect and defend against all enemies deserves facilitated access to naturalization (3) a noncitizen and their family members deserve the exercise of prosecutorial discretion during potential immigration removal proceedings; and (4) a noncitizen veteran who is deported should be entitled to full veteran benefits.

### SECTION 3- “STUDY AND REPORT ON NONCITIZEN VETERANS REMOVED BY THE UNITED STATES”

Directs DOD, DHS, and VA to jointly conduct and carry out a study on noncitizens that were former members of the Armed Forces and deported since January 1, 1990. The study and report must be completed no later than one year after enactment.

### SECTION 4- “INFORMATION SYSTEM ON VETERANS SUBJECT TO REMOVAL”

Directs the Homeland Security Secretary to create protocol for identifying noncitizens who are or may be veterans and create a system for maintaining information about noncitizen veterans. The information in this system must be shared across all components of the Department of Homeland Security.

If the Secretary determines that an individual may in fact be a veteran, the Secretary must notify the Military Family Immigration Advisory Committee concurrently while initiating removal proceedings. Further requires ICE training on the protocol on an annual basis.

### SECTION 5- “MILITARY FAMILY IMMIGRATION ADVISORY COMMITTEE”

Directs DHS to establish a Military Family Immigration Advisory Committee tasked with providing recommendations to the Homeland Secretary on the exercise of discretion on whether an individual should be granted: termination of removal proceedings, parole, deferred action, stay of removal, administrative closure, authorization to pursue another type of relief, or continued removal of such individual.

Requires DHS to issue quarterly reports to the Advisory Committee regarding the actions taken in response to the Advisory Committee’s recommendations.

### SECTION 6- “PROGRAM OF CITIZENSHIP THROUGH MILITARY SERVICE”

Directs DHS and DOD to establish a joint program to ensure members of the Armed Services have a pathway to citizenship. Each eligible noncitizen is allowed to apply for naturalization at any point on or after the first day of active service or first day of service in Selected Reserve.

#### SECTION 7- "INFORMATION FOR MILITARY RECRUITS REGARDING NATURALIZATION THROUGH SERVICE IN THE ARMED FORCES"

Directs the DOD and DHS Secretaries to coordinate and ensure that at each Military Entrance Processing Station there are individuals from USCIS or in the case that is determined impractical, a member of the Armed Forces or DOD trained in immigration law shall inform each military recruit that it not a citizen of the naturalization process.

#### SECTION 8- "RETURN OF ELIGIBLE VETERANS REMOVED FROM THE UNITED STATES, ADJUSTMENT OF STATUS"

Provides an opportunity for noncitizen veterans who have been removed or ordered removed and who have not been convicted of serious crimes to apply for and obtain legal permanent resident status if it is in the public interest.

The Secretary cannot waive grounds of inadmissibility based on serious crimes such as murder, rape, sexual abuse of a minor, child pornography, slavery, involuntary servitude, trafficking in persons, human smuggling (non-family members), and treason.

## f. Leave-Behind Document for Congressional Meeting

### Co-sponsor the Veteran Service Recognition Act, H.R. 4569

*Endorsed by the American Legion, VoteVets, Union Veterans Council, AFL-CIO, LULAC, Veterans of Foreign Wars Department of California, Project on Government Oversight, the ACLU and UnidosUS*

**Noncitizens have served in the U.S. military since the American Revolution and in every major war since our Nation's founding.** Tellingly, 20 percent of all individuals [awarded](#) the Congressional Medal of Honor are non-citizens. For over 200 years, Congress has repeatedly passed laws to encourage noncitizens to join the military by expediting their road to citizenship—with bipartisan support.

**Misinformation and administrative hurdles prevent noncitizens from becoming citizens while they are serving in the military.** Many veterans never applied to naturalize and become citizens during their service because they were told by recruiters or chain of command that their service automatically made them citizens. Many other veterans applied for naturalization while serving, but the government lost or failed to file their applications.

**Tragically, our nation has deported thousands of veterans**—despite their service and willingness to give their life to defend our Constitution. Draconian laws from the 1990s have blocked immigration judges from exercising discretion to consider military service when deciding whether to deport a non-citizen. And bureaucratic hurdles have prevented many individuals from taking steps toward citizenship during active service.

#### **Congress can fix this broken system through the Veteran Service Recognition Act**

Key provisions would:

- (1) Direct the Department of Homeland Security (DHS) and Department of Defense (DoD) to facilitate opportunities for military recruits and veterans to apply for citizenship during basic training;
- (2) Require DHS establish a system for identifying noncitizens who are veterans before initiating a deportation;
- (3) Create a Military Family Advisory Committee to review and recommend whether discretion is warranted regarding the deportation of members of the armed forces, veterans and covered family member; and
- (3) Provide non-citizen veterans who have been ordered deported and who have not been convicted of serious crimes the opportunity to apply for legal permanent resident status.

**With the military suffering a recruitment crisis, this bill is critical.** The number of young Americans who said they would consider military service [shrank](#) to 9 percent last year. Recruitment of non-citizens remains vital. An estimated 35,000 non-citizens are serving in the active-duty military, and about 8,000 join each year. And once they join, non-citizens are far [more likely to complete](#) their enlistment obligations than their U.S.-born counterparts.

**Many veterans were children when their parents brought them here.** Banishing them from the nation they swore to protect is unconscionably cruel. For many of them, everything and everyone they love is in the United States.

Their parents, spouses and children are nearly always U.S. citizens or lawful permanent residents living in the United States. These families deserve our respect and assistance.

The bill was introduced in the House of Representatives on a bipartisan basis in July 2023 by Reps. Takano, Lofgren, Nadler, Correa, Vargas, Ruiz, Salazar, Radewagen. Companion legislation will be introduced by Senator Alex Padilla (D-CA).

## 7. Background Information

### Organizations Endorsing The Bill

American Legion

1. Testimony of National Commander Vincent J. Troiola, March 2023 (calling for re-introduction and passage of the bill)
2. "Deported veteran finally receives overdue citizenship," March 8, 2023  
<https://www.legion.org/citizenship/258342/deported-veteran-finally-receives-overdue-citizenship>

League of United Latin American Citizens (LULAC)

1. "LULAC Stands with the White House on Bringing Home Deported Vets"  
[https://lulac.org/news/pr/LULAC\\_STANDS\\_WITH\\_THE\\_WHITE\\_HOUSE\\_ON\\_BRINGING\\_HOME\\_DEPORTED\\_VETS/](https://lulac.org/news/pr/LULAC_STANDS_WITH_THE_WHITE_HOUSE_ON_BRINGING_HOME_DEPORTED_VETS/) (endorsing the bill in 2022),

National Immigration Forum

"Bill Summary: Veteran Service Recognition Act of 2022,"  
<https://immigrationforum.org/article/bill-summary-veteran-service-recognition-act-of-2022/>

### Congressional Testimony, Hearings & Reports

The Office of Senator Tammy Duckworth, *Immigrant Veterans - Deported by the Same Nation They Sacrificed to Defend*, June 2021

<https://www.duckworth.senate.gov/imo/media/doc/Immigrant%20Veterans%20-%20Deported%20by%20the%20Same%20Nation%20They%20Sacrificed%20to%20Defend.pdf>

Senate Judiciary Committee, Subcommittee on Immigration, Citizenship, and Border Safety, Hearing: "Honoring Veterans and Military Families: An Examination of Immigration and Citizenship Policies for US Military Service Members, Veterans, and their Families," June, 23, 2021,

<https://www.judiciary.senate.gov/committee-activity/hearings/honoring-veterans-and-military-families-an-examination-of-immigration-and-citizenship-policies-for-us-military-service-members-veterans-and-their-families>

Testimony of Mr. Hector Barajas-Varela before the House Committee on the Judiciary, Subcommittee on Immigration and Citizenship, Oct. 29, 2019,  
<https://www.congress.gov/116/meeting/house/110150/witnesses/HHRG-116-JU01-Wstate-Barajas-VarelaH-20191029.pdf>

## News Articles & Nongovernmental Reports

NPR, "Deported US Veterans Feel Abandoned by the Country They Defended," June 19, 2019  
[https://www.npr.org/local/309/2019/06/21/733371297/deported-u-s-veterans-feel-abandoned-by-the-country-they-defended?fbclid=IwAR2Ximg0cPhg24RuEjfFRL91FwE30DRvwDn7OhgAbkrP\\_kAzru0tRUiNoU](https://www.npr.org/local/309/2019/06/21/733371297/deported-u-s-veterans-feel-abandoned-by-the-country-they-defended?fbclid=IwAR2Ximg0cPhg24RuEjfFRL91FwE30DRvwDn7OhgAbkrP_kAzru0tRUiNoU)

ACLU of Southern California, *Discharged, Then Discarded*, 2016,  
<https://www.aclusocal.org/en/press-releases/aclu-report-details-how-us-has-failed-deported-veterans>

## Documentaries and Art Exhibits

*Bring Them Home*, <https://www.excusemyaccent.com/bringthemhome>

*Deported Veterans, Photographs by Joseph Silva*.

<https://www.museumofsocialjustice.org/deported-veterans.html>