

Hello everyone. First, I want to thank Chairman Padilla and Ranking Member Cornyn for the opportunity to speak on this important issue. The time has come for Congress to demonstrate our loyalty and service to the immigrant servicemembers and Veterans who have demonstrated their loyalty to the Constitution in serving our country... proud Americans who simply wish to become citizens of the Nation whose uniform they've proudly worn in service.

There is no doubt that immigrant servicemembers are a critical part of our military. Since the Revolutionary War, immigrants have enlisted in the U.S. Armed Forces and fought to defend our Nation and its ideals. Now, the United States relies on immigrant servicemembers in all sectors of the Armed Forces, and they are powerful assets in strengthening our national security and protecting our homeland.

Making sure that immigrant servicemembers, Veterans and their families can access naturalization services is not just the right thing to do... it's a wise strategic policy decision that empowers our military to selectively recruit from broad and diverse talent pools – which ultimately enhances military readiness. That is why, for over 200 years, Congress has provided servicemembers an expedited path to citizenship, and both Democratic and Republican administrations have worked to streamline the naturalization process for servicemembers. Especially in times of conflict, Congress specifically intended for servicemembers to naturalize as soon as they entered service and prior to their deployment.

Theoretically, naturalizing through military service should be a seamless process—especially as it serves our national security interests. In reality, far too many servicemembers never gain the citizenship they've earned through their service. Some of our servicemembers are fighting overseas only to fear that they – or a loved one – could be detained and deported by the same country they are defending.

Or worse, some don't even realize they're not citizens—and like many Americans, mistakenly believe that citizenship automatically accompanied honorably serving in uniform. And coming home presents a new set of challenges, with many Veterans turning to self-medication rather than seeking proper treatment or care... leaving them vulnerable to the unforgiving nature of our criminal justice system and immigration laws.

Take for example the case of combat Veteran Miguel Perez. After serving two tours of duty in Afghanistan as a part of Operation Enduring Freedom, Miguel returned to the United States suffering from undiagnosed post-traumatic stress disorder and without legal status. The U.S. Army failed to help Miguel naturalize on two separate occasions: prior to his deployment and upon his return to the United States.

The system also failed to make sure Miguel was provided proper support and care after suffering a traumatic brain injury from a blast in Afghanistan, and he fell into a spiral of self-medicating with drugs that ultimately resulted in his becoming entangled with the criminal justice system. Now let me be clear – Miguel never dodged accountability for his mistake. He accepted responsibility and served his time in prison. Miguel's cruel removal from this country originated with the civil – *not* criminal – violation of being present in the U.S. without proper status. And it did not begin until after Miguel served his time and paid his debt to society.

In effect, Miguel was punished twice by the country that deployed him twice to Afghanistan where he risked his own life engaging in intense combat. Once deported, Miguel was separated from his family and support network... was unable to access his full VA healthcare benefits... and faced even greater challenges seeking the naturalization he should've earned through his service and sacrifice.

I wish that I could say that Miguel's case was an anomaly... but the truth is we don't even know how many Veterans have been deported because the United States Government fails to even maintain a detailed record of the Veterans and military family members it callously removes from our country. Just a few years ago, I spent Veterans Day in Tijuana, Mexico meeting and talking to some of these

Veterans in a community created and run by this incredible organization, the Deported Veterans Support House. These Veterans are asking for our help... asking for us to live up to our obligation to support and protect our Nation's Veterans—regardless of their immigrations status.

We in Congress have the ability to take substantive, concrete action that could bring these Veterans home and make sure that no other individual who served our country honorably is deported again. That is why I've introduced several bills to protect and support immigrant servicemembers, Veterans and their families, like the *Veterans Visa and Protection Act*, *HOPE Act* and *I-VETS Act*. My legislation would prohibit the deportation of Veterans who are non-violent offenders, give legal permanent residents a path to citizenship through military service and strengthen VA healthcare services for Veterans.

Our country has a duty to support our military members, Veterans and their families, and I look forward to working with you all to make sure we fulfill that duty. Again, thank you for inviting me to speak today on this critical issue, and I hope that today's conversation inspires more solutions in this area.