

STATEMENT BY

STEPHANIE P. MILLER

DIRECTOR, OFFICER AND ENLISTED PERSONNEL

POLICY FOR DEPARTMENT OF DEFENSE

BEFORE THE

HOUSE JUDICIARY COMMITTEE

SUBCOMMITTEE ON IMMIGRATION AND CITIZENSHIP

ON

ACTIVE MILITARY AND VETERAN IMMIGRATION

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Good afternoon Chairwoman Lofgren, Ranking Member McClintock, and members of the Subcommittee – it is an honor to be with you today. I serve as the Director, Officer and Enlisted Personnel Management within the office of the Under Secretary of Defense for Personnel & Readiness. In this capacity, I am responsible for the oversight of all matters pertaining to officer and enlisted military personnel policy, and by extension, the recruitment and accession of military personnel throughout the Department. Part of my responsibilities also include oversight of the Department’s military naturalization program which is managed in partnership with the Department of Homeland Security’s U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services. Since the founding of America’s military, the United States has strongly supported and actively promoted the recruitment and naturalization of persons who are not U.S. Nationals or citizens. The Department has a long tradition of welcoming non-citizens into the profession of arms as critical members of our fighting team, and supporting their efforts to obtain U.S. citizenship on the basis of hard won, honorable military service. This includes appropriately 10,000 individuals recruited annually who bring unique knowledge, skills, and abilities that directly support national security priorities. Most recently, the Department has been a meaningful participant of the Immigrant Military Members and Veteran Initiative (IMMVI), the interagency working group which formed after the signing of Executive Order 14012 in February 2021. In collaboration with Department of Homeland Security and the Department of Veterans Affairs, the Department has continued to expand and improve essential services which support naturalization of qualifying non-citizen Service members who choose to apply for U.S. citizenship.

Well prior to the establishment of the IMMVI, the Department has worked hand-in-hand with U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Service to improve the naturalization process. For example, to address the challenges associated with the Coronavirus 2019 pandemic, our two agencies collaborated to establish a pilot process for secure “virtual,” or video interviews with Service members seeking naturalization rather than relying on the traditional in-person interview requirement. By connecting military installation legal services offices with U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services officials, we were able to resume the naturalization process and address a backlog of approximately 400 qualifying military applicants effectively stalled in the naturalization process by the pandemic. Due to the success of the pilot, secure virtual interviews have become a standing option available for qualifying applicants to ensure a streamlined means to provide citizenship opportunities around the world. The completion of the 1,000th naturalization oath of an overseas military Service member earlier this month demonstrates the value of this innovative process. The success of this program has recently led to offering “virtual” interview and oath options to several domestic bases and installations with the U.S., which will further expedite the path to citizenship for members of the Armed Forces and their qualifying dependents.

Within the Department, we continue efforts to refine and improve notification to non-citizen Service members of their eligibility for naturalization. The Department is working to implement the requirement in Section 523 of the Fiscal Year 2022 National Defense Authorization Act, to “ensure that a military recruit, who is not a citizen of the United States, receives proper notice of

options for naturalization,” and is informed of “existing programs or services that may aid in the naturalization process.” We expect to have implemented policy in place soon to provide such notice at recruitment and prior to separation from Service. While pursuing naturalization is and always will be a personal choice, the Department is committed to proactive and regular engagement with non-citizen Service members about their eligibility to naturalize, naturalization pathways for their qualifying dependents, and the support services within the Department in order to do so.

As you well know, the processing of naturalization applications is ultimately the purview of U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services, and its mission is critical to the Department and the sustainment of the All-Volunteer Force. To that end, I would like to take this opportunity to publicly thank U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services for the years of partnership and progress toward improving the Military Naturalization program. Their dedicated employees who work tirelessly to facilitate the naturalization of military members and help support naturalization and immigration for military family members makes a difference in the lives of our Service members and families every day.

Thank you for the opportunity to address the subcommittee today and for your continued support of the Service members who volunteer to serve our great Nation. I look forward to answering your questions.