

**Statement of Cadet Command Sergeant Major Mario
Rodriguez**

Phoenix Military Academy, Chicago, Illinois

**“Immigrant Enlistment: A Force Multiplier for the
U.S. Armed Forces”**

**United States Senate Committee on Appropriations
Subcommittee on Defense**

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Thank you Chairman Durbin for inviting me to testify today.

I am Cadet Command Sergeant Major Mario Rodriguez. I'm a Cadet in Chicago's Phoenix Military Academy High School and I am an American. I do not possess the official documents required by the Department of Homeland Security, but I am an American. I'm an American because I love my country. I'm an American because I have respected and followed all of my country's laws. I'm an American because I've dedicated myself to doing all I can to make my community and county better. I'm an American because I'm ready and willing to support and defend our nation's Constitution against all those who threaten it. I'm an American because citizenship rests more in one's devotion and love for their country, than mere accident of birth.

My becoming an American began when I was eight years old. Upon arriving in the United States, my parents turned their backs on everything they had secured for their family in Mexico and decided to raise my brother and me with the mere notion of earning a higher paycheck so that they could provide us with a better life.

Like many young children, I had visions of becoming an astronaut or a cowboy, but I always knew that I wanted to become someone who positively influenced and impacted the lives of others. At that point of my life however, I was afraid to be different and stand out from my peers. Later, I learned to utilize my weaknesses as guides for my academic and social transformation.

Living in the United States, I had the misfortune of seeing my parents struggle due to their lack of identification. This has cost them jobs and raises at work, and prevented them from fully participating as citizens. Recently, this lack of paperwork or forms of identification prevented me from expanding my own education: I had the grades, the GPA, and the extracurricular activities to apply to summer programs, but upon applying for financial aid, the organizations asked questions I could not answer to. I could not prove my status, provide official identification, or produce the necessary paperwork for aid.

With the help of my mentors from a college preparatory program called Minds Matter, my counselors, and librarian, I sought to create my official identity. The few months after turning eighteen were busy: I obtained an ID from the Mexican Consulate, a bank account, Deferred Action status, my work permit, and a Social Security number. These accomplishments signify not only my determination to excel in a country where the law becomes a challenge for immigrants from becoming active participants in its government and economy. They also demonstrate my ability to accomplish so much in a short period of time.

It is not the end, however; next in line are my driver's license, state I.D., my passport, and, beyond that, the pursuit of the American status that will grant me an identity other than that of an "alien" immigrant. I've learned to utilize the available gateways to solve my problems legally and, though it has been a rough path, I'm glad that I'm preparing myself for what is to come.

My goal has been to join the Armed Forces. I want to serve my country in the Navy's Service and Safety community to help keep our nation's sailors prepared and protected. I hope to earn degrees in Business Administration in Project Management and Operations Management, Culinary Arts, and Human Resource Management. As a result, I will be fulfilling my aspirations of leading others into impacting the lives of many more.

Unfortunately, for me, my dream cannot be accomplished due to the lack of legal documents that would otherwise enable me to expand my potential for self-improvement as a leader in our nation's Armed Forces and in the civilian world. This impediment cannot be overcome without the consideration of Congress to pass a comprehensive immigration reform or with the Defense Department authorizing the enlistment of Dreamers.

In the words of Dr. Martin Luther King Jr., the arc of the moral universe is long but it bends towards justice. It bends towards justice, but here is the thing: it does not bend on its own. It bends because each of us in our own ways put our hand on that arc and we bend it in the direction of justice. Senator Durbin, I ask that you and the Congress act in "all deliberate speed" to start bending that moral arc toward the direction of justice, so that I and my fellow Americans sharing this common predicament can live our dreams and start bending that moral arc for others.

I ask that you grant us these opportunities –these dreams– to show our true potential and patriotism to this country, our nation.

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