



September 2022

# MILITARY NATURALIZATIONS

Federal Agencies  
Assist with  
Naturalizations,  
but Additional  
Monitoring and  
Assessment Are  
Needed

# GAO Highlights

Highlights of [GAO-22-105021](#), a report to congressional requesters.

## Why GAO Did This Study

Noncitizens have a long history of serving in the military. Over 100,000 noncitizens joined the military from fiscal years 2010 through 2021. The Immigration and Nationality Act authorizes the expedited naturalization of current and former servicemembers.

GAO was asked to review issues related to the military naturalization process. This report examines (1) servicemember naturalization application data from fiscal year 2010 through 2021; (2) the extent DOD, the services, and USCIS developed and implemented military naturalization policies and procedures; and (3) the extent DOD, the services, the VA, and USCIS assist with military naturalizations and assess these efforts.

GAO analyzed USCIS data on servicemember naturalization applications and processing times. GAO also reviewed DOD, service, and USCIS military naturalization policies and procedures. GAO interviewed DOD, service, VA, and USCIS officials to determine the extent they assist with and assess military naturalization efforts.

## What GAO Recommends

GAO is making 11 recommendations including that the services develop procedures to collect information on military service certification processing timeliness; DOD establish a policy to ensure the services inform noncitizen servicemembers about naturalization assistance; and DOD, VA, and USCIS develop plans to regularly assess their military naturalization assistance efforts. DOD, VA, and USCIS agreed with our recommendations.

View [GAO-22-105021](#). For more information, contact Rebecca Gambler at (202) 512-8777 or [gambler@gao.gov](mailto:gambler@gao.gov).

September 2022

# MILITARY NATURALIZATIONS

## Federal Agencies Assist with Naturalizations, but Additional Monitoring and Assessment Are Needed

### What GAO Found

Servicemember naturalization applications fell by 78 percent from approximately 11,000 in fiscal year 2017 to approximately 2,500 in 2018. These applications returned close to pre-fiscal year 2018 levels by fiscal year 2021. The percentage of these applications that U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services (USCIS) approved also fell in fiscal years 2017 and 2018. According to USCIS and Department of Defense (DOD) officials, these temporary declines were due in part to DOD policy changes, such as longer service requirements to obtain military service certification.

To improve military naturalization efforts, DOD, the services, USCIS, and the Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) should:




**Develop procedures to ensure timely processing of military service certifications.** Four of the five services lack procedures to ensure the timely processing of servicemember requests for certification of honorable military service. DOD policy directs the services to process these requests—a key step in the naturalization process—within 30 days.

**Establish a DOD policy to ensure the services inform noncitizen servicemembers about naturalization assistance.** The services offer military naturalization assistance. The Navy, Air Force, and Coast Guard have processes to inform noncitizen servicemembers of such assistance. The Army also recently emailed noncitizen servicemembers about naturalization, but the Marine Corps has no such process.

### Processes Services Use to Inform Noncitizen Servicemembers about Military Naturalization and Related Resources, as of April 2022



#### Legend

-  Email to servicemembers
-  Recruiting policies or guidance
-  Information on website

Source: GAO analysis of related documents and interviews with officials from the military services. | GAO-22-105021

<sup>a</sup>Marine Corps does not have a process to inform noncitizen servicemembers about military naturalization resources.

**Develop plans to assess military naturalization assistance efforts.** DOD, USCIS and VA have taken coordinated actions, but they have not assessed their military naturalization assistance efforts.

Addressing these issues would help ensure that servicemembers do not face unnecessary delays, and provide insights into whether noncitizen servicemembers, veterans, and their families receive appropriate information about the military naturalization process.

---

# Contents

---

---

Letter		1
	Background	8
	Servicemember Naturalization Applications and Approvals Fell from 2016 to 2018 and Rose in 2019	13
	DOD, Most Military Services, and USCIS Have Policies to Expedite Military Naturalizations, but Lack Procedures to Ensure Timely Completion	21
	Federal Agencies Offer Assistance, but Do Not Assess Military Naturalization Efforts	28
	Conclusions	44
	Recommendations for Executive Action	45
	Agency Comments and Our Evaluation	47
Appendix I	Comments from the Department of Homeland Security	50
Appendix II	Comments from the Department of Defense	54
Appendix III	Comments from the Department of Veterans Affairs	57
Appendix IV	GAO Contact and Staff Acknowledgments	59
Table		
	Table 1: Naturalization Applications by Status and Type, as of March 2022	17
Figures		
	Figure 1: Noncitizens Entering U.S. Military from Fiscal Years 2010 through 2021, by Service	9
	Figure 2: Naturalization Application Process for Noncitizen Servicemembers and Veterans	12
	Figure 3: Servicemember Naturalization Applications Filed with U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services by Military Service, Fiscal Years 2010 through 2021	14

---

---

Figure 4: Military Servicemember Naturalization Applications Filed with U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services by Ten Most Frequent Countries of Nationality, Fiscal Years 2010 through 2021	20
Figure 5: Annual Average of Monthly Median U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services Processing Times for Naturalization Applications Completed in Fiscal Years 2010 through 2021	25
Figure 6: Processes Military Services Use to Inform Noncitizen Servicemembers about Military Naturalization and Available Resources, as of April 2022	30
Figure 7: Example Email the Coast Guard Legal Assistance Office Sends to All New Servicemembers that Includes Resources on the Military Naturalization Process	32

---

**Abbreviations**

CLAIMS	Computer Linked Application Information Management System
DHS	Department of Homeland Security
DOD	Department of Defense
ELIS	Electronic Immigration System
Kendell Frederick Act	Kendell Frederick Citizenship Assistance Act
MAVNI	Military Accessions Vital to the National Interest
NBC	National Benefits Center
USCIS	U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services
Naturalization Application	USCIS Form N-400
VA	Department of Veterans Affairs

This is a work of the U.S. government and is not subject to copyright protection in the United States. The published product may be reproduced and distributed in its entirety without further permission from GAO. However, because this work may contain copyrighted images or other material, permission from the copyright holder may be necessary if you wish to reproduce this material separately.



September 14, 2022

The Honorable Richard J. Durbin  
Chairman  
Committee on the Judiciary  
United States Senate

The Honorable Tammy Duckworth  
United States Senate

The Honorable M. Michael Rounds  
United States Senate

Throughout U.S. history, noncitizens have served in the U.S. Armed Forces. Approximately 111,000 noncitizens entered the military from fiscal years 2010 through 2021.<sup>1</sup> Special provisions of the Immigration and Nationality Act authorize the expedited naturalization of current and former members of the U.S. Armed Forces.<sup>2</sup> In some instances, noncitizens in the U.S. military were killed during the course of their service. For example, in 2005 U.S. Army Reserve Specialist Kendell

---

<sup>1</sup>For the purposes of this report, we refer to noncitizens in the military as “noncitizen servicemembers,” and noncitizens who are former members of the military and were honorably discharged or otherwise separated under honorable conditions, as “noncitizen veterans”. Servicemembers and veterans who apply for naturalization are noncitizens seeking U.S. citizenship.

<sup>2</sup>8 U.S.C. §§ 1439-40, 1443a. Qualifying military service includes active or reserve service in the military services—U.S. Army, Navy, Marine Corps, Air Force, Coast Guard, or service in a National Guard unit. A person who has served honorably in the U.S. Armed Forces for 1 year during peacetime may be eligible to apply for naturalization. The Department of Defense determines if a servicemember meets the qualifying service requirement. In addition, during designated periods of hostilities, such as World War I and World War II and the current global war on terrorism, members of the U.S. Armed Forces who serve honorably in an active duty status, or as members of the Selected Reserve of the Ready Reserve, are eligible to apply for naturalization without meeting any minimum required period of service. The spouse of a member of the U.S. Armed Forces may be eligible for expedited naturalization, and such member’s child(ren) may be eligible to naturalize or automatically obtain citizenship. 8 U.S.C. § 1430-31. On December 20, 2019, the United States Space Force Act, enacted as part of the National Defense Authorization Act for Fiscal Year 2020, established the United States Space Force as a new branch of the Armed Forces within the Department of the Air Force. Pub. L. No. 116-92, div. A, title IX, subtitle D, 133 Stat. 1198, 1561-1568 (2019) (codified at 10 U.S.C. §§ 9081 & note, 9082 & note, 9016 note, 9021). There were no noncitizens serving in the Space Force as of August 2021, according to Air Force officials. As a result, we do not discuss the Space Force in this report.

---

Frederick was killed in Iraq while seeking to obtain U.S. citizenship. The 2008 Kendell Frederick Citizenship Assistance Act (Kendell Frederick Act), named in his honor, includes provisions to streamline and expedite the processing of military naturalization applications.<sup>3</sup>

Executive Order 14012, issued in February 2021, established an interagency Naturalization Working Group charged with submitting a strategy to the President outlining steps the federal government should take to promote naturalization.<sup>4</sup> In response, in July 2021, the Department of Homeland Security's (DHS) U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services (USCIS), in coordination with 10 other federal departments, including the Department of Defense (DOD) and the Department of Veterans Affairs (VA), issued the Interagency *Strategy for Promoting Naturalization*.<sup>5</sup> One goal in this strategy is to eliminate barriers that prevent individuals from accessing available naturalization resources.

According to the strategy, naturalizing eligible lawful permanent residents is vital to national security and economic prosperity. Naturalization also provides individuals with additional benefits including the constitutional right to vote in U.S. elections if they are at least 18 years old, an expedited path for family members to naturalize under U.S. immigration law, and the right as a citizen to remain in the U.S. with protection from immigration enforcement and removal.<sup>6</sup> According to officials from the VA—the department responsible for administering benefits and services to veterans of the U.S. military—providing outreach and assistance with naturalization could prevent noncitizen veterans' removal from the U.S. in

---

<sup>3</sup>Kendell Frederick Citizenship Assistance Act, Pub. L. No. 110-251, 122 Stat. 2319 (2008).

<sup>4</sup>Restoring Faith in Our Legal Immigration Systems and Strengthening Integration and Inclusion Efforts for New Americans, Exec. Order No. 14012, § 5(c), (d), 86 Fed. Reg. 8277, 8279 (Feb. 5, 2021) (issued Feb. 2). The order also directed the Secretary of State, Attorney General, and Secretary of Homeland Security to develop a plan describing agency actions to, among other things, facilitate naturalization for eligible candidates born abroad and members of the military, in consultation with DOD. See id. § 5(a), 86 Fed. Reg. at 8278-79.

<sup>5</sup>Department of Homeland Security, U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services, *Interagency Strategy for Promoting Naturalization*, (July 2, 2021).

<sup>6</sup>If naturalization is subsequently revoked because it was procured unlawfully (including by fraud), the person would be subject to any applicable grounds of removability under U.S. immigration law. 8 U.S.C. §§ 1182 (grounds of inadmissibility), 1227 (grounds of deportability), 1451 (revocation of naturalization).

---

the future.<sup>7</sup> For the purposes of this report, the term “veteran” refers to any former military service member who was honorably discharged or otherwise separated under honorable conditions.

You asked us to review issues related to the military naturalization process. This report: (1) describes what USCIS data indicate about noncitizen servicemembers’ naturalization applications from fiscal year 2010 through 2021; (2) assesses the extent to which DOD, five military services, and USCIS have developed and implemented policies and procedures related to the processing of military naturalization applications for servicemembers, veterans, and their families who reside inside and outside of the U.S; and (3) assesses the extent that DOD, five military services, the VA, and USCIS assist servicemembers, veterans, and their families with military naturalization applications and assess these efforts.<sup>8</sup>

To obtain background information on military naturalization issues we interviewed officials from two nongovernmental organizations, the American Immigration Lawyers Association and the Cascadia Cross Border Law Group. We selected these two organizations based on their long-standing experience with and knowledge of the naturalization process for noncitizen service members, veterans and their families. In addition, we reviewed data from the American Immigration Lawyers Association’s Military Assistance Program to determine the number of servicemembers and their families who received naturalization application assistance through the program.

To address our first objective, we analyzed data from USCIS’s Computer Linked Application Information Management System (CLAIMS) 4 and the Electronic Immigration System (ELIS) to determine the number of naturalization applications filed by servicemembers each fiscal year from

---

<sup>7</sup>In 2019, we reported that approximately 250 veterans were placed in removal proceedings or removed from the U.S. between fiscal years 2013 and 2018. See GAO, *Immigration Enforcement: Actions Needed to Better Handle, Identify, and Track Cases Involving Veterans*, [GAO-19-416](#) (Washington D.C., June 2019).

<sup>8</sup>The five military services included in this review are the Navy, Air Force, Army, Marine Corps, and Coast Guard.

---

2010 through 2021.<sup>9</sup> We also analyzed these data to determine the adjudication results for applications filed during these fiscal years and the most frequent countries of nationality for applicants. The adjudication results represent the status of naturalization applications as of March 2022 when USCIS retrieved these data.<sup>10</sup> Further, we analyzed CLAIMS 3 data on the numbers of applications filed on behalf of deceased servicemembers from fiscal years 2010 through 2021.<sup>11</sup> In addition, we reviewed fiscal years 2020 and 2021 USCIS data from ELIS to determine the number of naturalization applications filed by veterans and servicemembers' spouses and the number of these applications that USCIS approved or denied.<sup>12</sup> We assessed the reliability of all of these data by reviewing existing information about each system, crosschecking data across systems to ensure consistency, and interviewing data users and managers responsible for these data. We found the data to be sufficiently reliable for reporting trends in military naturalization applications and USCIS adjudications of those cases.

To address our second objective, we reviewed DOD and service policies and interviewed DOD and service officials to determine their procedures for certifying USCIS Form N-426: *Request for Certification of Military or Naval Service* within time frames established in response to a directive in

---

<sup>9</sup>We selected this time period because we last reported on military naturalizations in 2010 and fiscal year 2021 is the most recent full year of military naturalizations available at the time of our review. See GAO, *Military Naturalizations: USCIS Generally Met Mandated Processing Deadlines, but Processing Applicants Deployed Overseas Is a Challenge*, [GAO-10-865](#) (Washington, D.C., July 2010). CLAIMS 4 was USCIS's system for electronic case management, application tracking, and processing applications for naturalization until USCIS decommissioned the system in fiscal year 2020 and transferred cases to ELIS.

<sup>10</sup>Applications for naturalization may have one of six statuses: (1) approved, (2) approved not oathed, (3) denied, (4) administratively closed, (5) withdrawn, and (6) pending. Some of these data reflect a complete adjudication and final decision of approved or denied. Other applications were in an interim status such as approved not oathed or pending.

<sup>11</sup>CLAIMS 3 is USCIS's system to track and adjudicate certain immigration applications, including filings and approvals for Form N-644: Applications for Posthumous Citizenship. USCIS does not use CLAIMS 3 to process naturalization applications filed with Form N-400.

<sup>12</sup>USCIS officials identified reliability concerns with data on the number of naturalization applications filed by veterans and servicemembers' spouses before fiscal year 2020. As a result, we report the numbers of naturalization applications filed by veterans and servicemembers' spouses beginning in fiscal year 2020.



---

the 2020 National Defense Authorization Act.<sup>13</sup> For example, we reviewed DOD and Army memoranda, the Navy’s Military Personnel Manual, Marine Corps Administrative Orders, and an Air Force Personnel Guide. We compared DOD and service policies and procedures to *Standards for Internal Control in the Federal Government* and determined that the control activities and monitoring components of internal control, along with the underlying principles that management should implement control activities through policies, establish activities to monitor the internal control system, and perform ongoing monitoring were significant to this objective.<sup>14</sup>

Further, we reviewed USCIS policies and procedures related to the military naturalization application and adjudication processes including *the USCIS Policy Manual* and the Consolidated Handbook of Adjudication Procedures. We also interviewed USCIS officials to discuss recent policy developments related to the military naturalization application and adjudication process. Moreover, we analyzed USCIS processing time data to determine how the processing times for military naturalization applications for servicemembers compare to all naturalization application adjudications completed from fiscal years 2010 through 2021. We also used USCIS data from ELIS to calculate the number of days between the receipt of all background checks and final adjudication dates during fiscal years 2020 and 2021 for noncitizen servicemembers serving overseas. Prior to fiscal year 2020, USCIS tracked overseas military naturalization application background check data in CLAIMS 4. According to USCIS officials, background check data from CLAIMS 4 are not reliable and as a result, we used data from ELIS—which covers fiscal years 2020 and 2021—for this analysis. We assessed the reliability of the data from ELIS by reviewing existing information about the system and interviewing data users and managers responsible for these data. We found the data to be sufficiently reliable for determining the number of days between the receipt of all background checks and final adjudication dates. We compared USCIS’s efforts to process overseas military naturalization applications with time frames specified in the Kendell Frederick Act<sup>15</sup> and federal internal control standards in which we determined that the control

---

<sup>13</sup>National Defense Authorization Act for Fiscal Year 2020, Pub. L. No. 116-92, div. A, title V, subtitle C, § 526, 133 Stat. 1198, 1356 (2019).

<sup>14</sup>GAO, *Standards for Internal Control in the Federal Government*, [GAO-14-704G](#) (Washington D.C. September 2014).

<sup>15</sup>Pub. L. No. 110-251, 122 Stat. 2319 (2008).

---

activities and monitoring components of internal control, along with the underlying principles that management should implement control activities through policies, establish activities to monitor the internal control system, and perform ongoing monitoring were significant to this objective.<sup>16</sup>

To address our third objective, we reviewed the services' policies and procedures, reviewed USCIS procedures, and interviewed officials from these departments and agencies, in addition to DOD and the VA, to determine the extent that they assist noncitizen servicemembers, veterans, and their family members with the military naturalization process. Specifically, we reviewed the services' policies on providing legal assistance on immigration-related issues and procedures to assist noncitizen servicemembers with the naturalization process. We reviewed the USCIS National Benefits Center's *Standard Operating Procedure for N-400 Military Naturalization* for its Military Help Line. We also interviewed DOD and military service officials to identify and discuss their policies and procedures for providing military naturalization assistance. Further, we interviewed officials from USCIS on agency efforts to provide a remote naturalization program at domestic services' military installations and operations of the Military Help Line. We also interviewed VA officials to discuss the department's expanding military naturalization assistance efforts.

We assessed DOD and service policies and procedures in light of provisions of the National Defense Authorization Acts for fiscal years 2018, 2020, and 2022. We also compared DOD and service policies and procedures to federal internal control standards and determined that the control activities and monitoring components of internal control were significant to assessing their efforts, along with the underlying principles that management should implement control activities through policies and perform ongoing monitoring.<sup>17</sup> We also reviewed documentation from DOD's Transition Assistance Program, which is designed to help servicemembers who are transitioning out of the military successfully prepare for civilian life. Specifically, we reviewed the latest version of form DD 2648 (*Pre-Separation/Transition Counseling* form) to determine whether it included information on naturalization as required by the 2020 and 2022 National Defense Authorization Acts.

---

<sup>16</sup>[GAO-14-704G](#).

<sup>17</sup>[GAO-14-704G](#).

---

In addition, we interviewed officials from DOD, VA, and USCIS to determine the extent to which they have assessed their military naturalization efforts. We used key practices on interagency collaboration and leading practices for evaluation based on the American Evaluation Association's *An Evaluation Roadmap for a More Effective Government* to determine the need for these agencies to assess their efforts.<sup>18</sup> We also determined the information and communication and monitoring components of federal internal control standards were significant to our assessment.<sup>19</sup>

We conducted this performance audit from March 2021 to September 2022 in accordance with generally accepted government auditing standards. Those standards require that we plan and perform the audit to obtain sufficient, appropriate evidence to provide a reasonable basis for our findings and conclusions based on our audit objectives. We believe that the evidence obtained provides a reasonable basis for our findings and conclusions based on our audit objectives.

---

<sup>18</sup>GAO, *Results-Oriented Government: Practices That Can Help Enhance and Sustain Collaboration among Federal Agencies*, [GAO-06-15](#) (Washington, D.C.: Oct. 21, 2005); *Managing for Results: Key Considerations for Implementing Interagency Collaborative Mechanisms*, [GAO-12-1022](#) (Washington, D.C.: Sept. 27, 2012); and *Foreign Assistance: Selected Agencies' Monitoring and Evaluation Policies Generally Address Leading Practices*, [GAO-16-861R](#) (Washington, D.C.: September 2016). Also, see American Evaluation Association, *An Evaluation Roadmap for a More Effective Government*. The American Evaluation Association published the roadmap to guide the development and implementation of federal agency evaluation programs and policies. The framework offers a set of general principles intended to facilitate the integration of evaluation activities with program management.

<sup>19</sup>[GAO-14-704G](#).

---

## Background

### Noncitizens Entering the Military

In most cases, a noncitizen must be a lawful permanent resident to enlist in the U.S. military.<sup>20</sup> Noncitizens entering the military include both noncitizen servicemembers who are U.S. nationals—referred to as “noncitizen nationals”—as well as noncitizen servicemembers who are foreign nationals.<sup>21</sup> A U.S. noncitizen national is a person who, though not a citizen of the U.S., owes permanent allegiance to the U.S. by virtue of their U.S. nationality (for example, persons born to noncitizen parents in American Samoa or Swains Island).

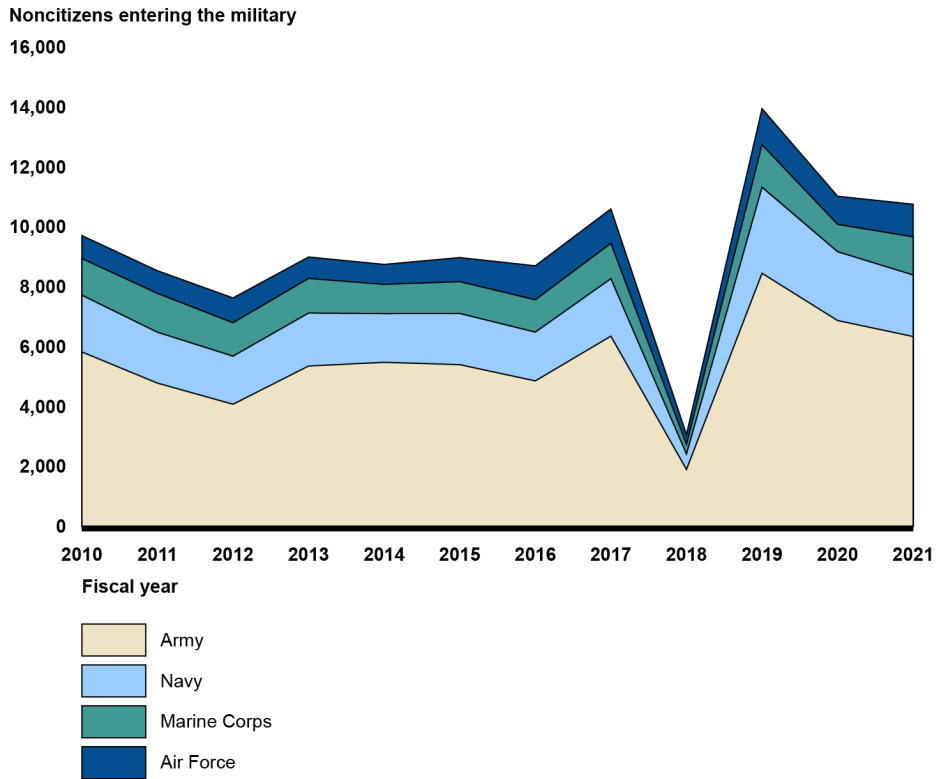
The number of noncitizens entering the military remained relatively stable from fiscal years 2010 through 2017, then declined sharply in fiscal year 2018 and increased in fiscal year 2019 to surpass fiscal year 2017 levels (see fig. 1).

---

<sup>20</sup>See 10 U.S.C. § 504. Lawful permanent residents, also known as “green card” holders, are noncitizens who are lawfully authorized to live and work permanently within the U.S. Lawful permanent residents may generally accept an offer of employment without special restrictions, own property, receive financial assistance at public colleges and universities, and join the Armed Forces. Certain nationals of three countries in free association with the U.S.—the Marshall Islands, the Federated States of Micronesia, and Palau—are also eligible for military service.

<sup>21</sup>DOD refers to servicemembers entering the military as “accessions.” DOD’s citizenship accession data reflect servicemembers’ citizenship status on their first day of military service.

**Figure 1: Noncitizens Entering U.S. Military from Fiscal Years 2010 through 2021, by Service**



Source: GAO analysis of Department of Defense (DOD) data. | GAO-22-105021

Notes: Noncitizens entering the military include both noncitizen servicemembers who are U.S. nationals—referred to as “noncitizen nationals”—as well as noncitizen servicemembers who are foreign nationals. A U.S. noncitizen national is a person who, though not a citizen of the U.S., owes permanent allegiance to the U.S. by virtue of their U.S. nationality (for example, persons born to noncitizen parents in American Samoa or Swains Island). Service data includes active duty and reserve noncitizens entering the military. Some individuals in DOD data have a citizenship status of “unknown” and are not included in totals in the figure. Our analysis of the data indicate approximately 1 percent (26,980) of the total noncitizens entering the military (3,184,337) from fiscal years 2010 through 2021 have an unknown citizenship status. From fiscal years 2010 through 2021 there were 236 noncitizens who entered the U.S. Coast Guard. Those data are not shown on the graph due to their small number relative to the other military services.

---

## Military Naturalization Process

USCIS is responsible for adjudicating naturalization applications filed by servicemembers, veterans, and their families.<sup>22</sup> DOD is responsible for establishing policies governing noncitizens' eligibility to join the military, certifies honorable service for immigration benefits, and provides legal assistance to noncitizen servicemembers who wish to naturalize. Servicemembers applying for naturalization are required to submit a certified copy of USCIS Form N-426: *Request for Certification of Military or Naval Service* along with the Form N-400: *Application for Naturalization* to USCIS.<sup>23</sup> To request certification of honorable military service, servicemembers submit the N-426 to an officer, or certifying official, within the military services.<sup>24</sup> Currently, servicemembers are immediately eligible to submit the N-426 for certification after one day of military

---

<sup>22</sup>Spouses of servicemembers and veterans may apply for naturalization through the general naturalization provision or on the basis of their marriage to a U.S. citizen, see INA §§ 316(a) (8 U.S.C. § 1427(a)), 319(a) (8 U.S.C. § 1430(a)). Any person (1) whose U.S. citizen spouse employed by the U.S. government or listed American private or public entities and regularly stationed abroad, (2) who is in the U.S. at the time of naturalization, and (3) who declares good faith intent to reside in the U.S. immediately upon termination of their citizen spouse's employment, may be naturalized without any prior U.S. residence or physical presence. INA 319(b) (8 U.S.C. § 1430(b)). Any surviving spouse, child, or parent of a U.S. citizen (including a person granted posthumous citizenship) who dies during a period of honorable active duty military service, and for a surviving spouse, was living in marital union with the citizen spouse when they died, may be naturalized without prior U.S. residence or physical presence. INA 319(d) (8 U.S.C. § 1430(d)). A lawful permanent resident spouse of a service member who is accompanying and residing with the military spouse who is abroad on official orders, is deemed to be residing and physically present in the U.S. for purposes of meeting residence and physical presence criteria under INA §§ 316(a), 319(a); and such spouse is eligible for naturalization proceedings overseas under 8 U.S.C. § 1443a. See INA § 319(e) (8 U.S.C. § 1430(e)).

<sup>23</sup>Noncitizen veterans submit the N-426 to USCIS when applying for naturalization; however, they are not required to obtain DOD certification of the form. Instead of the DOD certified N-426, veterans submit their discharge memoranda which may be the Form DD-214: *Certificate of Release or Discharge from Active Duty*, Form NGB-22: *National Guard Report of Separation and Record of Service*, or other official discharge document for all periods of service.

<sup>24</sup>In an October 2017 memorandum from DOD to the Secretaries of the Military Departments and Commandant of the Coast Guard, DOD established that the secretaries of the military departments were to make the determination regarding honorable military service for the N-426. This memorandum also provided the Secretaries with the authority to delegate this certification authority to a commissioned officer in the pay grade of O-6 or higher within their military department. An O-6 rank corresponds to a Colonel in the Marine Corps, Army, or Air Force and a Captain in the Navy or Coast Guard. The three DOD military departments are the Department of the Army, the Department of the Navy, and the Department of the Air Force. The U.S. Navy and the U.S. Marine Corps are both components of the Department of the Navy.

---

service.<sup>25</sup> Within the military services, the Judge Advocate offices are to provide legal advice to support military operations as well as legal services to servicemembers and their families.

A dedicated unit within the USCIS National Benefits Center is responsible for conducting preprocessing of naturalization applications filed by servicemembers, their spouses, and veterans to include checking the naturalization application for completeness and initiating background checks on the applicant. These background checks are to include a query of DOD investigation records as well as name-based and fingerprint-based Federal Bureau of Investigation background checks.

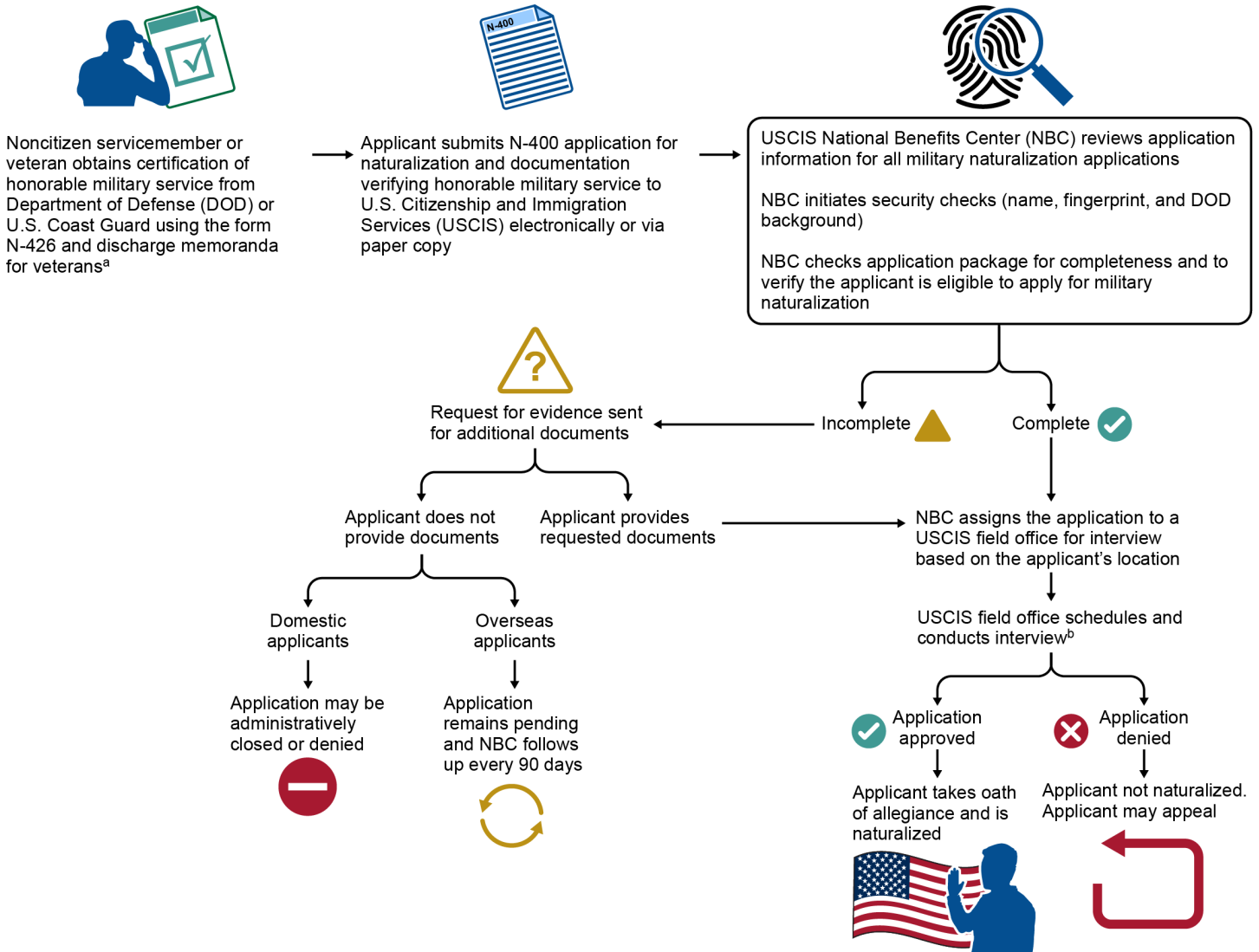
After preprocessing, the National Benefits Center is to transfer military naturalization applications to a USCIS field office for adjudication, applicant interview, and final background checks. During the naturalization interviews, USCIS officers are to test applicants' ability to understand English, including their ability to read, write, and speak words in ordinary usage in the English language; and administer a civics test to determine the applicants' understanding of U.S. history and government. If the applicant successfully passes these tests and is otherwise eligible to naturalize, USCIS is to approve the application and schedule the applicant for a naturalization ceremony. At the naturalization ceremony, the applicant is to take an oath of allegiance to the U.S. and becomes a U.S. citizen.<sup>26</sup> See figure 2 for a description of the naturalization process for noncitizen servicemembers and veterans.

---

<sup>25</sup>An August 2020 memo from the DOD Office of Personnel and Readiness to the military services stated that the 2017 DOD policy requiring noncitizen servicemembers to serve 180 days prior to obtaining an N-426 certification of honorable service was suspended until further notice enabling servicemembers to submit the N-426 after one day of service. In January 2022, DOD officials stated they were coordinating with the Department of Justice to develop a new policy on the N-426 certification process that will succeed their existing policy. DOD officials could not provide a time frame for the expected issuance of this policy.

<sup>26</sup>In March 2021, as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic, USCIS began conducting video naturalization interviews and ceremonies at DOD facilities for servicemembers and their family members who are located abroad, according to USCIS officials.

**Figure 2: Naturalization Application Process for Noncitizen Servicemembers and Veterans**



Source: GAO analysis of USCIS policies and procedures. | GAO-22-105021

<sup>a</sup>Noncitizen servicemembers applying for naturalization while in the military obtain DOD certification of honorable service using USICS Form N-426: Request for Certification of Military or Naval Service. Veterans submit the completed but uncertified N-426 along with their discharge memoranda which may be the Form DD-214: Certificate of Release or Discharge from Active Duty, Form NGB-22: National Guard Report of Separation and Record of Service, or other official discharge document for all periods of service. The Form N-400 is the Application for Naturalization.

<sup>b</sup>Noncitizen servicemembers applying for naturalization may complete the application process abroad at USCIS hubs at overseas military bases. During the COVID-19 pandemic, USCIS also began conducting some video military naturalization interviews and oath ceremonies for current servicemembers and their family members at overseas military bases.



---

## Servicemember Naturalization Applications and Approvals Fell from 2016 to 2018 and Rose in 2019

---

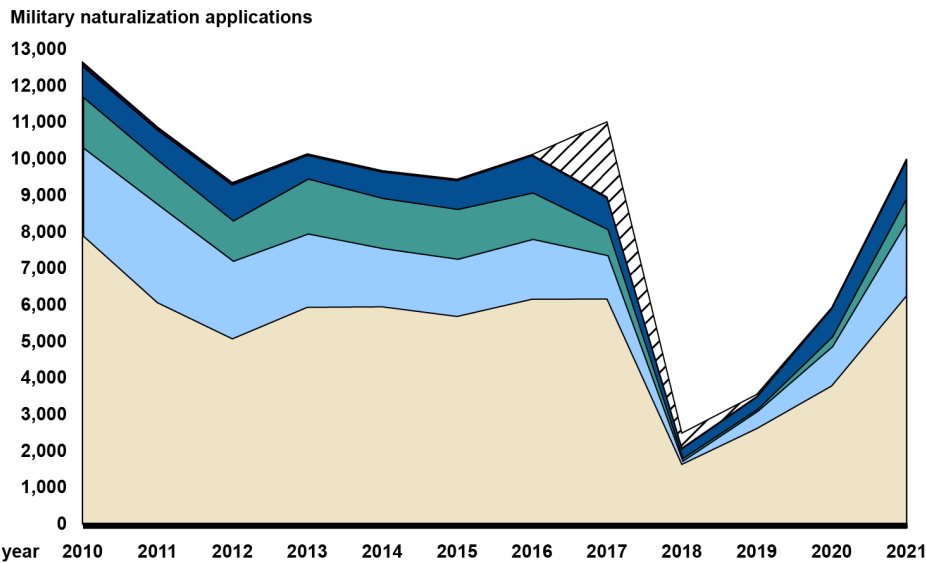
### Trends in Naturalization Applications Attributed in Part to DOD Policy Changes Over Time

From fiscal years 2010 through 2021, servicemembers filed 104,954 applications for naturalization using the USCIS Form N-400 (naturalization application).<sup>27</sup> The number of servicemember naturalization applications remained fairly constant from fiscal years 2010 through 2017, then declined by 78 percent between fiscal years 2017 and 2018 and began increasing in fiscal year 2019. By fiscal year 2021, the number of servicemember naturalization applications returned close to pre-fiscal year 2018 levels. See figure 3 for the trends in servicemember naturalization applications filed with USCIS from fiscal years 2010 through 2021.

---

<sup>27</sup>In addition to applications for naturalization using the USCIS Form N-400 (naturalization application) there were 22 applications for posthumous citizenship filed on behalf of servicemembers from 2010 through 2021 using the USCIS Form N-644: *Application for Posthumous Citizenship*. USCIS data show that each of these applications was approved. According to USCIS data, there were no naturalization applications for the surviving spouse, child, or parent of a deceased servicemember from fiscal years 2010 through 2021.

**Figure 3: Servicemember Naturalization Applications Filed with U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services by Military Service, Fiscal Years 2010 through 2021**



	2010	2011	2012	2013	2014	2015	2016	2017	2018	2019	2020	2021
Army	7,884	6,039	5,049	5,912	5,926	5,662	6,133	6,140	1,611	2,592	3,759	6,227
Navy	2,510	2,796	2,245	2,130	1,714	1,688	1,761	1,309	210	594	1,201	2,112
Marine Corps	1,395	1,226	1,116	1,517	1,386	1,377	1,284	726	87	68	282	659
Air Force	722	704	849	513	589	652	881	729	123	195	624	921
Coast Guard	89	71	60	36	26	30	29	31	25	21	7	19
Unknown service branch	27	12	8	6	14	12	6	2,057	412	58	30	39
<b>Total</b>	<b>12,627</b>	<b>10,848</b>	<b>9,327</b>	<b>10,114</b>	<b>9,655</b>	<b>9,421</b>	<b>10,094</b>	<b>10,992</b>	<b>2,468</b>	<b>3,528</b>	<b>5,903</b>	<b>9,977</b>

Source: GAO analysis of U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services data. | GAO-22-105021

Note: Coast Guard data are not visible on the chart due to the relatively small number of Coast Guard military naturalization applications filed with USCIS compared to other military services from fiscal years 2010 through 2021.

USCIS and DOD officials attributed the 2018 decline in the number of naturalization applications filed by servicemembers in part to DOD policy changes made in October 2017. Specifically, DOD expanded background check requirements for lawful permanent residents as well as for Military

---

Accessions Vital to the National Interest (MAVNI) program recruits.<sup>28</sup> It also increased the amount of time noncitizens must serve before DOD would certify their honorable service from as little as a few days to 180 days. DOD has since suspended the 180-day service requirement. As we reported in 2019, USCIS also made several policy changes in response to or in tandem with these DOD policy changes that affected the military naturalization process.<sup>29</sup>

In addition, USCIS officials stated that the numbers of military naturalization applications are dependent on the numbers of noncitizens who enter the military. For example, they said that if the number of noncitizens entering military service decreased in a particular fiscal year, USCIS would expect to see a corresponding decrease in military naturalization applications.<sup>30</sup> As previously noted, the number of noncitizens entering the military on an annual basis varied from fiscal years 2010 to 2021.

---

## USCIS Approvals of Servicemember Naturalization Applications Fell for Those Filed in Fiscal Years 2017 and 2018

USCIS generally approved a similar percentage of servicemember naturalization applications filed in fiscal years 2010 through 2016 as the general naturalization application population in those years. However, for applications filed in fiscal years 2017 and 2018, USCIS approved a lower percentage of servicemember naturalization applications than the general population. The percentage of approved naturalizations applications filed in fiscal year 2021 is lower than for applications filed in prior years. According to USCIS officials, this decline is due to the higher percentage of applications filed in fiscal year 2021 that remain in pending status

---

<sup>28</sup>Until 2017, MAVNI allowed certain noncitizens who were lawfully present in the U.S., but not lawful permanent residents, to join the U.S. military and apply immediately for U.S. citizenship using Form N-400: *Application for Naturalization*. The program was available to noncitizens holding critical skills—physicians, nurses, and experts in certain languages with associated cultural backgrounds.

<sup>29</sup>USCIS made policy changes in response to or in tandem with DOD's policy changes. For example, in July 2017, USCIS determined that the completion of DOD background checks was relevant to MAVNI recruits' eligibility for naturalization. Further, as a result of DOD's October 2017 policy change where DOD increased the amount of time noncitizens must serve before DOD would certify their honorable service for naturalization purposes, USCIS closed naturalization offices at Fort Sill in Oklahoma, Fort Benning in Georgia, and Fort Jackson in South Carolina, and ended the Naturalization at Basic Training Initiative in January 2018. See [GAO-19-416](#).

<sup>30</sup>USCIS officials stated that there is an approximately 6 to 9 month lag in trends between noncitizens entering the military and USCIS servicemember naturalization application receipts.

---

compared to applications filed in earlier years. They said that this does not indicate that servicemember applications filed in fiscal year 2021 will result in a lower percentage of approvals than prior years.

Applications for naturalization may have one of six statuses: (1) approved, (2) approved not oathed, (3) denied, (4) administratively closed, (5) withdrawn, and (6) pending.<sup>31</sup> Table 1 shows the percentage, by application status of all naturalization applications filed from fiscal years 2010 through 2021 for servicemembers. It also shows the percentage of each application status for all naturalization applications filed, which include nonmilitary as well as military naturalizations.

---

<sup>31</sup>Specifically, application status categories used for fiscal years 2010 through 2021, include: (1) *Approved (Oath)* – applications that are approved, oathed (naturalization ceremonies), and closed out of the USCIS case management system; (2) *Approved not Oathed* – applications that are approved, but not oathed and remain active in the USCIS case management system and the case is pending oath at the time the data were pulled; (3) *Denied* – applications that were denied; (4) *Administratively closed* – application is closed for other reasons than final adjudication; (5) *Withdrawn* – applicant withdraws application; (6) *Pending* – active applications waiting an initial adjudicative decision, waiting oath ceremony closeouts, or reopened cases waiting a final decision.

**Table 1: Naturalization Applications by Status and Type, as of March 2022**

Naturalization application statuses <sup>a</sup>	Naturalization application type	Fiscal year that application was filed											
		2010	2011	2012	2013	2014	2015	2016	2017	2018	2019	2020	2021 <sup>b</sup>
Percentage approved	Servicemember	93	92	91	91	92	92	91	86	84	93	93	78
	All (military and nonmilitary)	93	93	91	92	91	91	90	90	90	90	82	54
Percentage approved not oathed	Servicemember	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	4
	All (military and nonmilitary)	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	1	5
Percentage denied	Servicemember	3	4	4	4	4	4	5	6	5	2	1	1
	All (military and nonmilitary)	6	6	7	7	7	8	9	8	8	8	6	4
Percentage Administratively closed	Servicemember	3	3	3	4	3	3	3	5	8	2	1	1
	All (military and nonmilitary)	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	0
Percentage withdrawn	Servicemember	2	2	2	1	1	1	1	2	2	1	2	2
	All (military and nonmilitary)	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	0
Percentage pending	Servicemember	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	1	3	15
	All (military and nonmilitary)	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	1	9	37

Source: GAO analysis of U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services (USCIS) data. | GAO-22-105021

Note: Percentages may not add to 100 percent due to rounding.

<sup>a</sup>Application status categories used for fiscal years 2010-2021, include: (1) Approved– applications that are approved, oathed (naturalization ceremonies), and closed out of the USCIS case management system; (2) Approved not Oathed – applications that are approved, but not oathed and remain active in the USCIS case management system and the case is pending oath at the time the data were retrieved; (3) Denied – applications that were denied; (4) Administratively closed – applications are closed for other reasons than final adjudication but may be reopened; (5) Withdrawn – applicants withdrew applications; and (6) Pending – active applications awaiting an initial adjudicative decision, awaiting oath ceremony closeouts, or reopened cases awaiting a final decision.

<sup>b</sup>Application status percentages are for applications filed in a given fiscal year. As of the date USCIS retrieved these data in March 2022, a greater percentage of applications filed in fiscal years 2020 and 2021 are in pending status and have not reached a final adjudication decision compared to earlier fiscal years. As a result of the increased number of pending cases, the percentages of other status categories is lower in fiscal years 2020 and 2021 compared to prior years.

As shown in Table 1, USCIS approved a lower percentage of servicemember naturalization applications in fiscal years 2017 and 2018 compared to prior years. Similar to the rationale for the decline in military naturalization applications during these years, USCIS officials told us that this decline was due to DOD’s 2017 policy change requiring enhanced background screening for servicemembers in the MAVNI program. USCIS

---

officials stated that the background screening changes resulted in higher percentages of servicemember naturalization applications administratively closed or withdrawn in those years.

In addition, across fiscal years 2010 through 2021, USCIS denied a lower percentage of naturalization applications filed by servicemembers and administratively closed a higher percentage of these applications compared to the general naturalization application population. According to USCIS officials, differences in the percentages of applications denied and administratively closed between servicemembers and the total naturalization application population are due to differences in eligibility and characteristics for those populations. In addition, according to USCIS officials, the percentage of servicemember naturalization applications denied is lower than the total naturalization application population because of differences in requirements to naturalize. Specifically, servicemembers filing naturalization applications under the Immigration and Nationality Act military naturalization provisions are not required to meet the same lawful permanent residence and physical presence requirements as the general population. The percentage of applications administratively closed is higher among servicemember naturalization applications due to the impermanent nature of military life, according to USCIS officials. They noted that administrative closure allows USCIS and the applicant to keep the case in stasis without the permanence of a denial while the servicemember is moving locations due to their career.

---

**USCIS Began Tracking Reliable Data on Veteran and Military Spouse Naturalization Applications in Fiscal Year 2020; Servicemembers Filing for Naturalization Are Nationals of Various Countries**

In addition to current servicemembers, veterans and servicemember spouses may also be eligible for expedited naturalization. USCIS began tracking reliable data on naturalization applications filed by veterans and

---

military spouses in fiscal year 2020.<sup>32</sup> USCIS approved about 900 out of about 1,060 applications (85 percent) filed by veterans across fiscal years 2020 and 2021. USCIS approved about 5,700 out of the about 6,300 applications (90 percent) filed by spouses of servicemembers across fiscal years 2020 and 2021. According to USCIS officials, data on the total number of applications filed by or on behalf of the children of servicemembers are not available because children of servicemembers may apply for naturalization or a certificate of citizenship through several separate processes.<sup>33</sup>

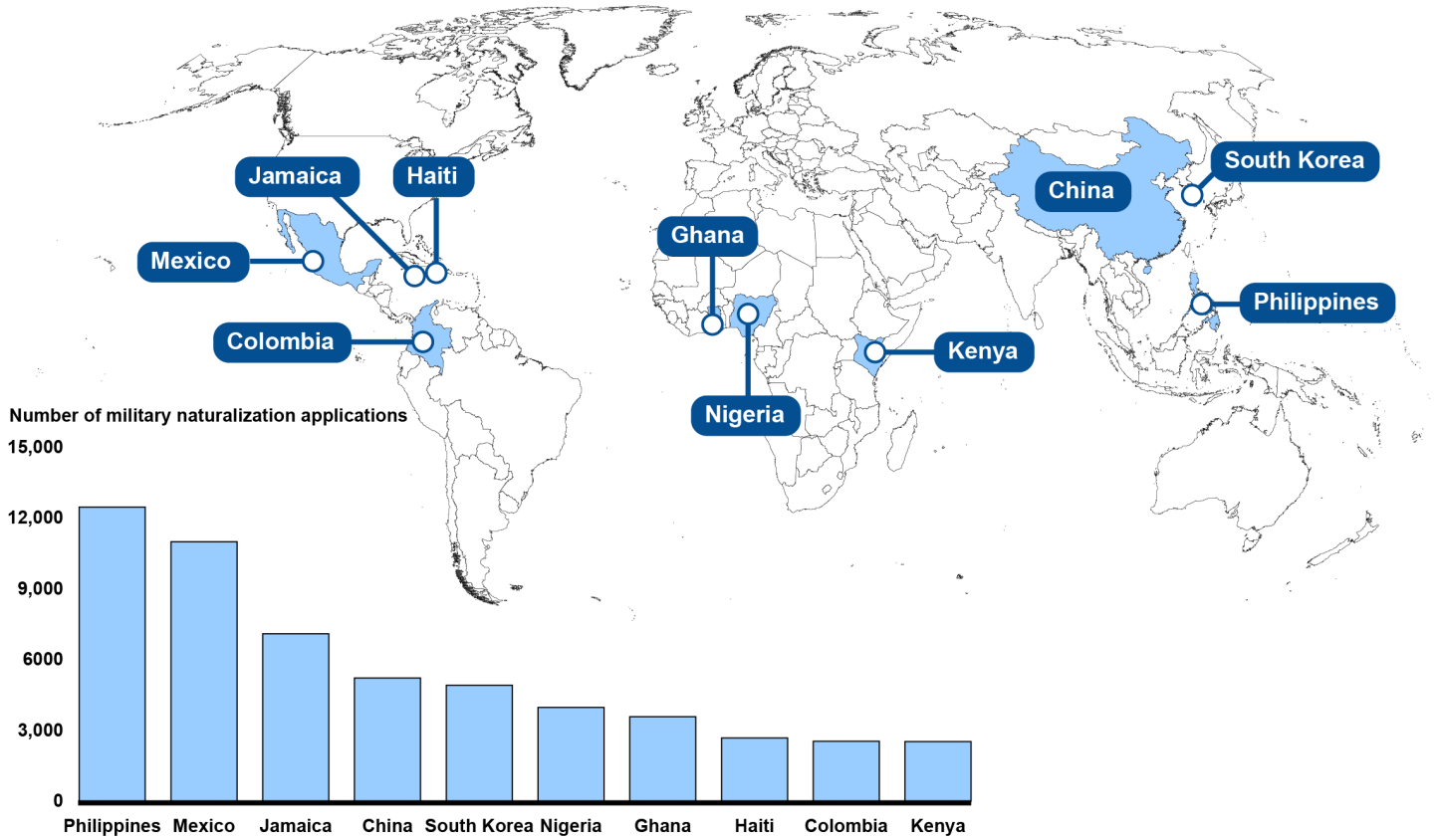
USCIS data also show that servicemembers filing for naturalization are nationals of countries from around the world. From fiscal years 2010 through 2021, the top three most common countries of nationality for noncitizen servicemembers filing for naturalization were the Philippines, Mexico, and Jamaica. See Figure 4 for additional information on servicemember naturalization applicants' countries of nationality.

---

<sup>32</sup>According to USCIS officials, CLAIMS 4—the USCIS electronic case management system that USCIS used to track and process applications for naturalization until fiscal year 2020—recorded data differently than ELIS—the current USCIS electronic case management system used to process the applications for naturalization. As a result, USCIS does not have accurate data on veteran and military servicemember spouse applications prior to fiscal year 2020.

<sup>33</sup>For example, a child may obtain citizenship after birth when a citizen parent applies for naturalization with USCIS Form N-600K: *Application for Citizenship and Issuance of a Certificate of Citizenship* on behalf of a child born outside the U.S. who has not acquired citizenship automatically. 8 U.S.C. § 1433. Children of servicemembers who have automatically acquired citizenship under INA §§ 301, 309, or 320 (8 U.S.C. §§ 1401, 1409, 1431) may file Form N-600: *Application for Certificate of Citizenship*. As a result, USCIS does not have consolidated data on all children of servicemembers applying for naturalization or a certificate of citizenship.

**Figure 4: Military Servicemember Naturalization Applications Filed with U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services by Ten Most Frequent Countries of Nationality, Fiscal Years 2010 through 2021**



Source: GAO analysis of U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services data. | GAO-22-105021



---

## DOD, Most Military Services, and USCIS Have Policies to Expedite Military Naturalizations, but Lack Procedures to Ensure Timely Completion

---

### Not All Services Ensure Implementation of Policy for Certifying Military Service

DOD and most of the military services have policies that document the process for military service certification. However, they do not know whether certifying officials are following the processes because they generally do not have procedures for certifying officials to track and report their timeliness in certifying military service. Before current servicemembers apply for naturalization with USCIS, they must obtain certification of honorable military service from DOD or the Coast Guard. Servicemembers use the USCIS Form N-426 to request this certification from their military service.

The National Defense Authorization Act for Fiscal Year 2020 required DOD to establish time requirements for returning a processed N-426 form to a servicemember.<sup>34</sup> In April 2020, DOD issued a memorandum directing the services to require certifying officials to process USCIS's N-426 forms with priority and return them to the servicemembers within 30 days of submission.<sup>35</sup> *Standards for Internal Control in the Federal Government* states that management should implement control activities through policies, establish activities to monitor the internal control system, and perform ongoing monitoring.<sup>36</sup>

In response to the DOD memo, the Navy, Air Force, Army and Marine Corps issued policies to document how they will implement DOD's

---

<sup>34</sup>National Defense Authorization Act for Fiscal Year 2020, Pub. L. No. 116-92, div. A, title V, subtitle C, § 526, 133 Stat. 1198, 1356 (2019).

<sup>35</sup>Department of Defense, Under Secretary for Personnel and Readiness, *Certification of Honorable Service for the Purposes of Naturalization*, Memorandum to the Secretaries of the Army, Navy, and Air Force (April 24, 2020).

<sup>36</sup>[GAO-14-704G](#).

---

requirement to process N-426 forms within 30 days. These policies reiterate DOD's requirement to review and return the N-426 forms within 30 days. Coast Guard officials told us the service had not issued a policy documenting the 30-day turnaround requirement because the N-426 is a USCIS form.

However, the services do not know whether certifying officials are meeting the requirement to process N-426 forms within 30 days. Specifically:

- The Navy has developed a procedure to track the duration of time each N-426 certification takes. However, it does not yet have complete information on N-426 certification timeliness. The Navy Judge Advocates issued its N-426 timeliness tracking procedure in June 2021. This procedure established a regional reporting structure to, among other things, maintain metrics on the number of submitted, approved, and denied N-426 forms as well as the number of days in which each N-426 was processed. However, the first reporting cycle did not produce complete information on whether certifying officials are meeting the requirement. Navy officials stated that, as a result, the Navy Judge Advocates are in the process of training and appointing additional personnel to break the regions into smaller reporting units. According to Navy officials, their procedure to track N-426 turnaround time frames will help ensure that the Navy is fulfilling the 30-day requirement.
- The Air Force, Army, Marine Corps, and Coast Guard do not have information to ensure that certifying officials process the N-426 forms within the required 30 days because they have not developed procedures for ensuring that certifying officials track and report this information. According to officials from these military services, the services have not developed such procedures for various reasons. Specifically, Air Force officials stated that they do not track N-426 time frames because it may be difficult to determine when the servicemembers submit the form to the O-6 officer for review. Further, these officials stated they trust the certifying officers to fulfill this responsibility. Army officials stated they do not track data on how long the N-426 certification process takes because of the decentralized structure of the Army. They added that they rely on applicants to raise the issue if they experience delays. The Marine Corps requires the certifying officer to document the reasons for delay when the N-426 certification takes longer than 30 days. However, according to Marine Corps officials, certifying officers have discretion regarding how and where they document the reasons for delay. Officials from Marine

---

Corps headquarters stated that certifying officers would then share the reasons for N-426 delays upon request from Marine Corps headquarters; however, there is no procedure to share this information.

Without procedures to collect information on the timeliness with which certifying officials review and return N-426 forms to servicemembers applying for naturalization, the Air Force, Army, Marine Corps, and Coast Guard are not positioned to ensure that they are meeting DOD's requirement to process the N-426 forms within 30 days. Further, documenting the N-426 certification process in policy, as the other military services have, would help better ensure Coast Guard certifying officials are following the N-426 certification process. Developing procedures to collect information on the timeliness of certifying officials' return of the N-426 forms across the services can help ensure servicemembers do not face unnecessary delays in their pursuit of becoming naturalized U.S. citizens.

---

## USCIS Has Policies to Facilitate Expedited Military Naturalizations, but Does Not Track Adjudication Time Frames for Overseas Military Applications

### USCIS Established Policies and Procedures for Adjudicating Military Naturalization Applications

USCIS has policies and procedures for how it adjudicates military naturalization applications, including for expediting those adjudications. For example, the *USCIS Policy Manual* documents military naturalization eligibility and provides an overview of the application process for servicemembers, veterans, and their families. Additionally, the USCIS National Benefits Center uses its *Military Naturalization Standard Operating Procedure* for staff to preprocess applications filed by servicemembers, their spouses, and veterans.<sup>37</sup> The National Benefits

---

<sup>37</sup>The USCIS National Benefits Center uses the *Military Naturalization Standard Operating Procedure* to guide preprocessing for spouses of servicemembers when applying for naturalization on the basis of their marriage to a U.S. citizen servicemember. Children of servicemembers stationed abroad may file a Form N-600K: *Application for Certificate of Citizenship and Issuance of Certificate under Section 322*. The National Benefits Center conducts preprocessing for these applications which are covered by the National Benefits Center's *Adjudication Guide to Miscellaneous N-Forms* instead of the *Military Naturalization Standard Operating Procedure*.

---

Center then transfers the application to a USCIS field office for adjudication. The USCIS Consolidated Handbook of Adjudication Procedures is a companion resource to the Policy Manual that provides field office adjudicators with procedures for implementing policies for adjudication of military naturalization applications.

Further, according to USCIS officials, USCIS developed an interagency plan to improve the naturalization process in response to Executive Order 14012 and submitted this plan to the White House in April 2021. USCIS officials stated that the military-related elements of the plan include 1) conducting video military naturalization adjudications for servicemembers abroad, and 2) developing two USCIS policy updates regarding veteran naturalizations, which USCIS published in May 2021 and November 2021.<sup>38</sup>

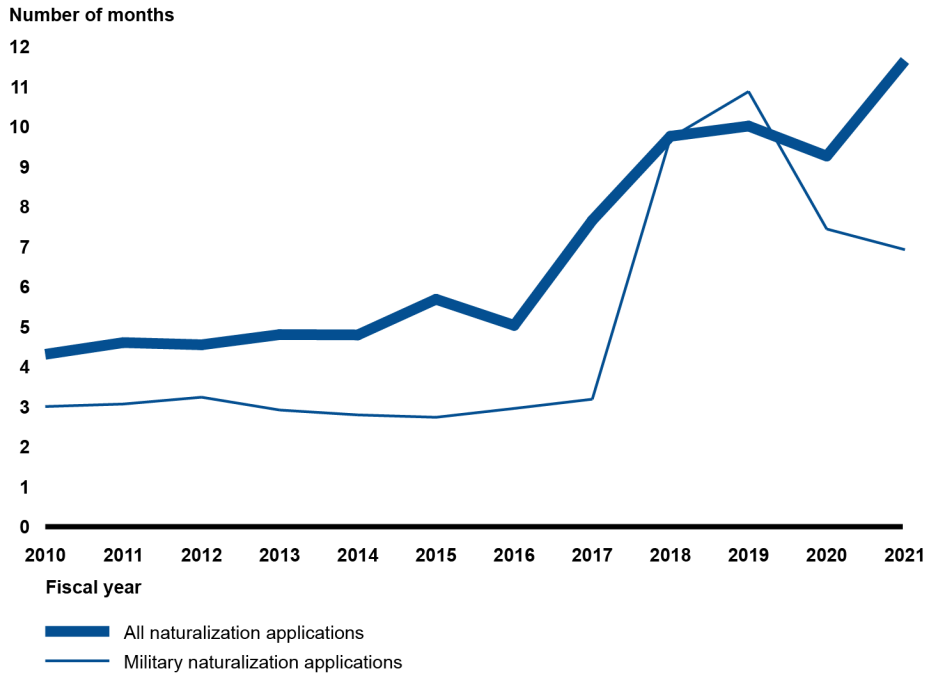
Moreover, in March 2022, USCIS implemented a 6-month cycle time goal for processing naturalization applications, including military naturalization applications. According to USCIS officials, prior to the implementation of this timeliness goal, USCIS aimed to expedite applications filed by servicemembers, veterans, and their family members and complete these adjudications within 6 months.

For applications adjudicated in fiscal years 2010 through 2021, USCIS generally processed naturalization applications filed by servicemembers more quickly than all naturalization applications, with fiscal year 2019 as the exception, according to USCIS data. From 2010 through 2017, the yearly average of monthly median processing times for military naturalization applications was within six months. From fiscal years 2018 through 2021, the yearly average of monthly median processing times exceeded USCIS's 6-month goal by a range of 1 to nearly 4 months, as shown in figure 5. According to USCIS officials, increased background screening requirements led to longer processing times for military naturalization applications in fiscal year 2018.

---

<sup>38</sup>U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services, *Veterans Residing Outside the United States and Naturalization*, PA-2021-09 (Camp Springs, Md: May 28, 2021); U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services, *Clarifying Guidance on Military Service Members and Naturalization*, PA-2021-24 (Camp Springs, Md: Nov. 12, 2021).

**Figure 5: Annual Average of Monthly Median U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services Processing Times for Naturalization Applications Completed in Fiscal Years 2010 through 2021**



Source: GAO analysis of U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services data. | GAO-22-105021

USCIS Does Not Track Data to Evaluate Key Measures of Adjudication Timeliness for Naturalization Applications Filed by Servicemembers Stationed Overseas

Statute requires USCIS to adjudicate military naturalization applications filed by active duty servicemembers stationed abroad within a certain number of days, but USCIS does not track its time frames for adjudications to help ensure it is meeting that requirement. In particular, the Kendell Frederick Act requires appropriate actions be taken to ensure that naturalization applications filed by active duty servicemembers

---

stationed abroad receive expedited processing and are adjudicated within 180 days of the receipt of responses to all background checks.<sup>39</sup>

We analyzed USCIS data to calculate the time between the date of the last background check USCIS received and the date the oath of allegiance or application denial occurred for servicemembers stationed abroad. Among the 374 naturalization applications that USCIS identified as filed by servicemembers on active duty abroad and reaching a final adjudication decision (oath of allegiance or application denial) during fiscal years 2020 and 2021, USCIS took longer than 180 days from the receipt of all background checks to final adjudication date for 194 (52 percent).<sup>40</sup> The average number of days from USCIS's receipt of all background checks to the final adjudication date was 281 days for these 194 records.

According to USCIS officials, the COVID-19 pandemic delayed processing times because USCIS officials were unable to travel abroad for naturalization interviews and oath ceremonies once the pandemic began in 2020. USCIS officials stated that the implementation of conducting video naturalization interviews and oath ceremonies in 2021 led to improved processing times and they anticipate making continued improvements in the future. When servicemember applicants are

---

<sup>39</sup>The Act states that “the Secretary of Homeland Security, the Director of the Federal Bureau of Investigation, and the Director of National Intelligence shall take appropriate actions to ensure that applications for naturalization filed by members of the United States Armed Forces on active duty serving abroad, and associated background checks, receive expedited processing and are adjudicated within 180 days of the receipt of responses to all background checks.” Pub. L. No. 110-251, § 2, 122 Stat. 2319, 2320 (2008) (classified at 8 U.S.C. § 1440f). As previously noted, USCIS coordinates with the Federal Bureau of Investigation on applicant background checks. The Director of National Intelligence is responsible as the Security Executive Agent and has responsibilities that cover personnel security processes within all agencies, government-wide. USCIS, within DHS, is the agency responsible for adjudicating immigration benefits and as a result is responsible for ensuring timely application adjudications.

<sup>40</sup>According to USCIS officials, USCIS tracked background check data for applications filed prior to fiscal year 2020, in part, in the CLAIMS 4 database. CLAIMS 4 was a case management system and not an adjudication system of record like ELIS and the background check data in CLAIMS 4 may be incomplete or unreliable, according to USCIS officials. As a result, we used applications filed in fiscal year 2020 or 2021 for our analysis. In addition, we removed cases that are pending an adjudication decision from our analysis because pending cases may not have all background check data complete. An analysis of the removed cases—those filed during fiscal years 2020 and 2021 and pending as of February 2022, the date USCIS provided these background check data—show that on average these cases have been in pending status for a similar amount of time as the completed cases included in our analysis scope. This indicates that removing pending cases does not lead to an underestimate of timeliness.

---

stationed at sea or at a location that cannot otherwise accommodate a video naturalization interview, this can cause processing delays, according to USCIS officials. However, officials stated that USCIS engages with overseas applicants on a daily basis to identify availability for conducting naturalization interviews.

USCIS does not track the duration of time between when it receives all background checks and the final adjudication for naturalization applications filed by servicemembers stationed on active duty abroad. USCIS officials stated they have never tracked the length of time between when they receive the final background check and the adjudication decision date because it would be very difficult, or impossible, to track these data. Officials stated various background checks are completed at different points in the application process, and USCIS systems are not capable of calculating the final background check date. However, we used USCIS data to determine the time between the date of the last background check and the date the oath of allegiance or application denial occurred. Similarly, USCIS could determine the number of days between when it receives all background checks and the final adjudication by using the length of time between the background check with the latest chronological date and the date of oath or denial, as we did for the purposes of our analysis.

*Standards for Internal Control in the Federal Government* states that management should implement control activities through policies, establish activities to monitor the internal control system, and perform ongoing monitoring.<sup>41</sup> Tracking the adjudication time frame from the receipt of last background check to the final adjudication date for naturalization applications filed by servicemembers stationed abroad would better position USCIS to track the extent to which the agency is meeting the Kendell Frederick Act's 180 day time frame. Using this information to improve efforts to adjudicate these cases within 180 days, could reduce the amount of time noncitizen servicemembers would need to wait to become U.S. citizens while they are stationed abroad.

---

<sup>41</sup>[GAO-14-704G](#).

---

## Federal Agencies Offer Assistance, but Do Not Assess Military Naturalization Efforts

---

### Military Services Offer Military Naturalization Assistance, But Noncitizen Servicemembers Are Not Consistently Notified of the Expedited Naturalization Process and Resources

#### Military Services Assist Noncitizen Servicemembers, Retired Veterans, and Their Families with Naturalization

The five military services provide assistance with the military naturalization process to noncitizen servicemembers, retired veterans—veterans who served for at least 20 years, and their families. Specifically, the Judge Advocates or the personnel service divisions of the services offer legal assistance to servicemembers on a variety of issues, including immigration-related issues and the naturalization process. Specifically:

- **Navy.** The Navy Judge Advocates Legal Assistance Policy Division has a naturalization assistance program. As part of that program, in June 2021 the Navy began requiring commanding officers to appoint Command Citizenship Representatives at each of the Navy commands. The Command Citizenship Representatives receive training on how to counsel noncitizen servicemembers on the naturalization process and are to review servicemember naturalization application packages, as well as assist servicemembers with obtaining certified N-426 forms.<sup>42</sup>
- **Air Force.** According to Air Force Policy Directive 51-5, *Military Legal Affairs*, the Air Force Judge Advocates provide legal assistance and counseling to servicemembers seeking help with immigration or the

---

<sup>42</sup>For requested assistance beyond the scope of the Command Citizenship Representatives, noncitizen servicemembers receive a referral to the regional legal service offices. At the regional legal service office level, the Navy requires commanding officers to designate program managers and coordinators to oversee the naturalization assistance program and Command Citizenship Representatives.



---

military naturalization process. Specifically, according to Air Force officials, the legal services offices may assist servicemembers as they complete the forms required to apply for naturalization.

- **Coast Guard.** The Coast Guard Legal Assistance Office has a form to identify various legal issues for which servicemembers may need assistance, including naturalization. Additionally, the Business Operations Division of the Coast Guard Personnel Service Center is the Coast Guard's central office that provides assistance with the military naturalization application process.
- **Army.** In accordance with Army policy, the legal assistance program is required to offer legal assistance to servicemembers on immigration issues and the naturalization process.
- **Marine Corps.** The Marine Corps Judge Advocates Legal Assistance Branch provides legal assistance to servicemembers, which may include assistance with immigration issues or the naturalization process.

The services may also provide legal assistance related to personal civil legal affairs to retirees of the Armed Forces.<sup>43</sup> Each service's legal counseling and services are also available for servicemembers' noncitizen spouses and children. According to Coast Guard, Marine Corps, and Navy officials, legal assistance attorneys may refer servicemembers' noncitizen spouses and children to nongovernmental legal experts for assistance with cases that involve more complex immigration issues.<sup>44</sup>

---

<sup>43</sup>The services may not provide legal assistance to veterans who are not retirees. 10 U.S.C. § 1044. Subject to the availability of legal staff resources, the Armed Forces may provide legal assistance, including to servicemembers or former servicemembers entitled to retired or retainer pay or equivalent pay.

<sup>44</sup>Specifically, Coast Guard officials stated that Coast Guard Legal Assistance may refer an individual to the American Bar Association or the American Immigration Lawyers Association for cases that involve complex issues, such as entry without inspection, criminal convictions, and asylum. Marine Corps officials similarly stated they refer complex cases to the American Immigration Lawyers Association. The Navy's Judge Advocates legal assistance website includes a description and contact information for the American Immigration Lawyers Association's Military Assistance Program. According to the American Immigration Lawyers Association, between 2019 and 2021, they received 1,769 requests for a variety of immigration assistance (e.g., fiancé visas, consular processing, green card applications) from servicemembers and veterans for themselves or their family members. Among these requests, 153 were specifically for the naturalization of servicemembers and 250 were for the naturalization of servicemembers' family members.

DOD Does Not Require the Services to Notify Noncitizen Servicemembers of Military Naturalization Process and Resources Available

Although all services offer assistance to noncitizen servicemembers with the military naturalization process, the services do not consistently inform noncitizen servicemembers of their ability to naturalize. Further, DOD does not require the services to establish processes to inform noncitizen servicemembers of their ability to naturalize and that assistance is available to them.

The Navy, Air Force, and Coast Guard have processes to inform noncitizen servicemembers of naturalization eligibility and assistance, and the Army has also taken some steps to inform noncitizen servicemembers of naturalization eligibility and assistance. However, the Marine Corps does not have a process to inform noncitizen servicemembers of eligibility and assistance (see Figure 6).

**Figure 6: Processes Military Services Use to Inform Noncitizen Servicemembers about Military Naturalization and Available Resources, as of April 2022**



Source: GAO analysis of related documents and interviews with officials from the military services. | GAO-22-105021

<sup>a</sup>Marine Corps does not have a process to inform noncitizen servicemembers about military naturalization and available resources. Their public-facing website does not include information on Marine Corps legal assistance with military naturalization.

The Navy, Air Force, and Coast Guard use several processes to inform noncitizen servicemembers of the military naturalization process, including through policies or guidance for recruiters, emails to servicemembers, and information on publicly available websites.

- **Navy.** A 2016 memorandum of understanding between the Navy Judge Advocates Legal Assistance Policy Division and DOD’s Defense Manpower Data Center established a process for the center to share a list of noncitizen servicemembers with Navy Judge

---

Advocates on a monthly basis.<sup>45</sup> The Navy uses this list to inform noncitizen servicemembers via email of their ability to apply for naturalization, offer legal assistance with completing and expediting their application, and provide general resources about the military naturalization process from USCIS. In addition, Navy guidance provides information for recruiters, who are required to brief interested enlistees about the availability of expedited citizenship through honorable military service. Further, Navy Judge Advocates' legal assistance public website includes links to USCIS's website and guides on military naturalization, as well as availability of Navy legal assistance with military naturalization.

- **Air Force.** In May 2021, the Air Force began informing noncitizen servicemembers via email about their ability to apply for naturalization and providing related resources. Air Force officials stated that they plan to continue to send these emails to noncitizen servicemembers twice a year. In addition, recruiters may use the *Air Force's Total Force Personnel Services Delivery Guide on U.S. Citizenship and Naturalization* to inform interested enlistees about the military naturalization process. This guide, among other things, instructs servicemembers and their certifying officials on the military naturalization application process, and includes a flowchart of the application process and links to required documents. The guide also includes information about the naturalization interview and the availability of Air Force legal assistance with applying for naturalization. The Air Force maintains an internal website that provides guidance for recruits in basic training and all servicemembers on the military naturalization process, among other issues. The website includes information about eligibility requirements, the process of applying, expedited naturalization for family members, as well as related USCIS and Air Force resources, including an Air Force fact sheet and the *Total Force Personnel Services Delivery Guide on U.S. Citizenship and Naturalization*.
- **Coast Guard.** The Coast Guard's Legal Assistance Office emails all new Coast Guard members on the availability of legal services, including immigration-related issues, and includes a link to the Coast Guard Personnel Service Center's webpage on military naturalization—see figure 7 for an example. This webpage provides a general overview of the military naturalization process, links to the N-

---

<sup>45</sup>The Defense Manpower Data Center serves under the Office of the Secretary of Defense to aggregate personnel of military and their family, workforce, training, financial, and other data for DOD. The center uses personnel data for purposes of healthcare, retirement funding, and other administrative needs.

---

400 and N-426 forms, and the availability of Coast Guard legal assistance with applying for naturalization. Further, while the Coast Guard's recruiting manual mentions citizenship requirements for recruits, it does not detail a naturalization process for eligible recruits.

**Figure 7: Example Email the Coast Guard Legal Assistance Office Sends to All New Servicemembers that Includes Resources on the Military Naturalization Process**

Good Afternoon,

Congratulations on your recent graduation from Cape May! Since recruit training can be challenging, there may have been some topics discussed that you wish to review now. Your access to legal service may be very important to you, and I would like to take a moment to summarize your benefits.

You and your dependents are entitled to legal advice at no cost during your active duty service. A military legal assistance attorney can provide help with virtually any personal legal issue that may arise, including consumer law, family law, immigration law and military rights. Typical concerns include disputes with landlords, car dealerships, or bill collectors. Timely legal advice can often keep a minor issue from becoming a major problem. Attorneys also draft wills and powers of attorney to ensure you and your family are cared for pursuant to your wishes.

Legal assistance attorneys can help assert your rights under the Servicemembers Civil Relief Act (SCRA) and other laws. The SCRA allows military personnel to terminate many (but NOT all) vehicle and residential leases early, and even get the interest rate on some (but NOT all) pre-service loans reduced to 6%. This law, like many others, has twists and turns to it which are best navigated with the help of a legal assistance attorney.

If you are not a United States citizen and would like to become one, an explanation and the required forms may be found at: [http://www.dcms.uscg.mil/Our-Organization/Assistant-Commandant-for-Human-Resources-C-G-1/Personnel-Service-Center-PSC/BOPS/PSC-BOPS-C/PSC-BOPS-C-MR/PSC-BOPS-C-MR\\_Citizenship/](http://www.dcms.uscg.mil/Our-Organization/Assistant-Commandant-for-Human-Resources-C-G-1/Personnel-Service-Center-PSC/BOPS/PSC-BOPS-C/PSC-BOPS-C-MR/PSC-BOPS-C-MR_Citizenship/). There generally is no filing fee for military members. If you have questions, a legal assistance attorney can help with the process. The decision to become a citizen is a personal one, and you are not required to be a citizen in order to serve in the Coast Guard. However, your ability to re-enlist or obtain security clearance may be affected by your citizenship status.

The following link leads to our Readiness Checklist: [https://www.uscg.mil/Resources/Legal/LMA/Legal\\_Assistance/Find-A-Legal-Assistance-Lawyer.aspx](https://www.uscg.mil/Resources/Legal/LMA/Legal_Assistance/Find-A-Legal-Assistance-Lawyer.aspx). This document provides an opportunity to quickly review your potential legal needs and access areas in which you may want help. Should you want to speak with an attorney, you may use the following link to find the legal assistance office closest to you: <http://legalassistance.law.af.mil/content/locator.php>. Any military legal assistance office will provide free advice, but you may be more comfortable finding the most convenient Coast Guard facility.

Members of the US Coast Guard are required to file federal, and in some cases state, income tax returns each year. CG SUPRT, utilizing the H&R Block tax service, now provides free tax assistance and preparation. This tax preparation program is currently accessible through the CGSUPRT website [www.CGSUPRT.com](http://www.CGSUPRT.com). All Coast Guard active duty and their dependent family members are eligible to use the program. It is a self-preparation program that allows for the free e-filing of one federal and up to three state tax returns. Free technical assistance is available, along with free and confidential tax consultants, by both H&R Bock and CGSUPRT.

Thank you for the chance to provide an overview of our program. Best of luck with your career in the Coast Guard!

Source: U.S. Coast Guard. | GAO-22-105021

---

The Army has taken some steps to inform noncitizen servicemembers of naturalization eligibility and assistance; however, the Marine Corps has not informed noncitizen servicemembers of this benefit.

- **Army.** According to Army officials, the Army has not issued any policy requiring Army units or commands to inform noncitizen servicemembers of the opportunity for expedited naturalization. Army officials stated that while attorneys are available to provide advice when an individual seeks their counsel, they do not proactively identify and inform noncitizen servicemembers of their eligibility to naturalize. In addition, they stated recruiters are not required to provide information or answer questions about the military naturalization process. Further, the Army's public website does not have information that addresses naturalization through military service. However, according to Army officials, in March 2022 the Army sent an email for the first time, with assistance from USCIS, to all noncitizen servicemembers with USCIS website links and updated information on applying for expedited naturalization. Army officials stated that DOD's Office of Secretary of Defense and USCIS asked the Army to distribute the email to noncitizen servicemembers identified through an Army database. As previously discussed, the greatest proportion of military naturalization applications are filed by noncitizen servicemembers in the Army.
- **Marine Corps.** According to Marine Corps officials, they do not have a process to inform noncitizen servicemembers about the military naturalization process and naturalization assistance available to them. According to Marine Corps officials, they are waiting for new guidance from DOD on informing noncitizen servicemembers of the opportunity to naturalize. Additionally, Marine Corps officials stated the Marine Corps recruiting manual does not mention recruits' ability to naturalize through military service or the military naturalization process. According to Marine Corps officials, if an applicant asks about military naturalization, the recruiters will inform the individual to seek assistance from their local legal assistance office.

As of March 2022, officials from the Marine Corps Judge Advocates stated they plan to meet with the Marine Corps recruiting division to identify ways to inform noncitizen recruits and servicemembers transitioning out of the military of the opportunity to naturalize. In addition, DOD officials stated that they are working with the Marine Corps to distribute an email similar to the one sent by the Army to all noncitizen servicemembers. However, as of May 2022, the Marine Corps has not sent an email or made other plans to begin informing active noncitizen servicemembers about the military naturalization

---

process. Further, while the Marine Corps' legal assistance website includes a link to USCIS's website on military naturalization, it does not have additional information on the availability of Marine Corps legal assistance. The website also does not have information on steps noncitizen servicemembers need to take within the service. Additionally, the Marine Corps' public recruiting website does not have information on expedited naturalization through military service, according to Marine Corps officials.

In addition to the services' notification efforts, DOD has run USCIS public service announcements related to military naturalization on Armed Forces radio and television, according to DOD officials. DOD also maintains a public website, Military OneSource, which has a page on the military naturalization process and links to USCIS resources. However, as of May 2022, this website does not provide information on or link to the naturalization assistance resources that each of the military services provides. Further, DOD does not have a policy directing the services to inform noncitizen servicemembers of their ability to apply for naturalization or assistance available to them. As a result, the services have not consistently made efforts to inform noncitizen servicemembers about military naturalization.

Moreover, while DOD officials stated they consider the Navy and Air Force's process for personally informing noncitizen servicemembers of naturalization resources via email to be a best practice, DOD does not monitor services' efforts to ensure they inform noncitizen servicemembers of the opportunity to naturalize. DOD officials stated that it was their understanding that all military recruiting websites have resource information that points to citizenship as a benefit of military service and recruiters routinely share this information. However, DOD does not have a formal mechanism in place to ensure this is happening, according to DOD officials. Further, not all services share information with recruits and not all services' public websites include information or resources on military naturalization eligibility.

DOD officials stated that they are in the process of developing guidance in response to Section 523 of the 2022 National Defense Authorization Act requiring proper notice of naturalization options for noncitizen recruits and servicemembers transitioning out of service. However, as of April 2022, DOD has not issued this guidance and did not identify a specific

---

time frame for completing it.<sup>46</sup> DOD officials also stated that the forthcoming guidance would direct the services to send emails to noncitizen recruits and servicemembers semi-annually.

The National Defense Authorization Acts for fiscal years 2018, 2020, and 2022 include provisions for the Secretaries of Defense and Homeland Security and of the military service branches to inform, and make resources available to, noncitizen recruits and servicemembers regarding the military naturalization process.<sup>47</sup> In addition, *Standards for Internal Control in the Federal Government* state that management should implement control activities through policies that document the internal control responsibilities of the organization, and should perform ongoing monitoring.<sup>48</sup> Establishing a policy to ensure that the services develop and maintain a process to inform noncitizen servicemembers about the military naturalization process and available assistance would help DOD clarify the services' responsibilities with regard to informing noncitizen servicemembers about naturalization. Further, given that DOD has not ensured that the services consistently inform noncitizen servicemembers about naturalization and related resources following the National Defense

---

<sup>46</sup>National Defense Authorization Act for Fiscal Year 2022, Pub. L. No. 117-81, div. A, title V, subtitle C, § 523, 135 Stat. 1541, 1687 (codified at 10 U.S.C. §§ 503 note, 1142 note).

<sup>47</sup>The fiscal year 2018 National Defense Authorization Act states that DOD is to ensure that lawful permanent resident servicemembers of the Army, Navy, Air Force, and Marine Corps, are informed of the availability of, and the process to pursue, military naturalization, and that resources are available to assist qualified service members to navigate the application and naturalization process. Pub. L. No. 115-91, div. A, title V, subtitle C, pt. II, § 530, 131 Stat. 1283, 1383 (2017) (codified at 10 U.S.C. § 1781 note). The fiscal year 2022 National Defense Authorization Act requires the Secretary of each military department to prescribe regulations ensuring that noncitizen military recruits receive proper notice of naturalization options such that they are informed of existing programs or services that may aid in the naturalization process. Upon separation from military service, USCIS, coordinating with DOD, is to provide noncitizen service members the same notice, which informs them of existing programs and services that may aid in naturalization. National Defense Authorization Act for Fiscal Year 2022, Pub. L. No. 117-81, div. A, title V, subtitle C, § 523, 135 Stat. 1541, 1687 (codified at 10 U.S.C. §§ 503 note, 1142 note). Similarly, the fiscal year 2020 National Defense Authorization Act states that DOD is to modify the pre-separation counseling checklist (i.e. *Pre-Separation/Transition Counseling form*) to allow a service member to indicate that they would like to receive information regarding their immigration status and expedited naturalization. Additionally, the Secretaries of the Army, Navy, Air Force, and Homeland Security are to provide noncitizen servicemembers counseling on how to apply for naturalization. National Defense Authorization Act for Fiscal Year 2020, Pub. L. No. 116-92, div. A, title V, subtitle G, §§ 570C, 570D, 133 Stat. 1198, 1399.

<sup>48</sup>[GAO-14-704G](#).

---

Servicemembers Transitioning to Civilian Life Are Notified of Option to Receive Information on the Naturalization Process

Authorization Acts of 2018, 2020, and 2022, establishing a mechanism to monitor how the services inform noncitizen servicemembers of naturalization processes would help DOD have better insight into the services' efforts. Establishing this monitoring mechanism would also help ensure noncitizen recruits and servicemembers across the services are informed of the military naturalization process and available assistance.

DOD's Transition Assistance Program is designed to help servicemembers who are transitioning out of the military successfully prepare for civilian life. According to DOD and military service officials, the transition program offers information about citizenship and naturalization to all servicemembers participating in the program. Servicemembers use the *Pre-Separation/Transition Counseling* form to guide their individual counseling.<sup>49</sup> A transition counselor from within one of the military services is responsible for monitoring servicemembers' completion of the checklist and their progress throughout the program.

In response to a requirement in the fiscal year 2020 National Defense Authorization Act, DOD's Military to Civilian Transition Office added a line-item question to the electronic version of the *Pre-Separation/Transition Counseling* form located on the Transition Assistance Program's internal website that asks servicemembers if they would like to receive additional information regarding their immigration

---

<sup>49</sup>For the purposes of this report, we use *Pre-Separation/Transition Counseling* to refer to the Service member "Pre-Separation/Transition Counseling and Career Readiness Standards e-Form for Service Members Separating, Retiring, Released from Active Duty", DD form 2648. This form is also used to record requested services and benefits and identify counseling areas of interest, and to track their progress in completing required components of the transition program.



---

status and expedited citizenship application.<sup>50</sup> Military to Civilian Transition Office officials stated that the immigration status and expedited naturalization question on the electronic version of the *Pre-Separation/Transition Counseling* form is a required entry field that servicemembers must complete for a transition counselor to finalize and sign the form. If a servicemember elects to receive immigration or expedited naturalization-related information on the electronic form, a transition counselor will discuss it as part of the servicemember's individual transition counseling. Further, transition counselors refer servicemembers interested in the military naturalization process to related USCIS resources and the services' local legal office and document their election on the *Pre-Separation/Transition Counseling* form, according to military service officials.<sup>51</sup>

In addition, officials from all five military services stated that transition counselors mention immigration and expedited naturalization during the required group Pre-Separation Counseling Brief, which is provided to all servicemembers who are transitioning out of the military. According to officials from the Military to Civilian Transition Office and all five services,

---

<sup>50</sup>The 2020 National Defense Authorization Act directed DOD to designate a specific block on the *Pre-Separation/Transition Counseling* form for noncitizen servicemembers to indicate if they would like to receive information regarding their immigration status and expedited naturalization. The Military to Civilian Transition Office uses the electronic version of the *Pre-Separation/Transition Counseling* form to monitor servicemembers' progress throughout the Transition Assistance Program. DOD data show that there were over 230,000 total *Pre-Separation/Transition Counseling* forms submitted between January 1, 2021 and February 8, 2022. The Military to Civilian Transition Office also maintains a PDF version of the *Pre-Separation/Transition Counseling* form that servicemembers may use as part of their pre-separation counseling. The PDF version of the form is intended for use when the electronic version is not available, which can include, but is not limited to servicemembers who are incarcerated, hospitalized, or lack internet capability, according to officials from the Military to Civilian Transition Office. For example, according to officials, a high proportion of members of the Navy stationed at sea use the PDF version. If a servicemember completes a PDF form, the transition counselor is required to create an electronic record for that servicemember and enter information on naturalization.

<sup>51</sup>According to Military to Civilian Transition Office officials, to fulfill the 2022 National Defense Authorization Act requirement to provide noncitizen servicemembers notice of existing programs and services that may aid in naturalization, the transition program provides counseling connecting servicemembers to naturalization resources. Specifically, Air Force, Coast Guard, Marine Corps, and Navy officials stated transition counselors refer noncitizen servicemembers interested in naturalization to the local legal office or USCIS for assistance. Army officials stated that transition counselors refer noncitizen servicemembers to USCIS and Military OneSource's websites on military naturalization and may customize their referral recommendations based on the resources available at the installation, which can vary.

---

the Transition Assistance Program and its counselors share information about USCIS and service legal assistance resources that are available to transitioning servicemembers who may wish to apply for naturalization. Military to Civilian Transition Office officials note that while transition counselors share this information, they do not assist transitioning servicemembers with completing naturalization applications.

---

## VA Is Expanding Veteran Naturalization Assistance Efforts

The VA has been involved in various efforts to promote naturalization of noncitizen veterans as part of the Naturalization Working Group, a group established by Executive Order 14012 to develop a national strategy to promote naturalization. The VA serves in a supporting role primarily by amplifying messages from DHS and DOD about the military naturalization process to noncitizen veterans, according to VA officials.<sup>52</sup> For example, in November 2021, VA hospital waiting rooms nationwide featured a USCIS video on naturalization. USCIS and VA also coordinated communication efforts for social media and media messaging on naturalization for Veterans Day 2021. Further, VA officials stated that DHS sought weekly input from the VA on the resources and related federal website links available on DHS’s online resource portal for noncitizen veterans, launched in February 2022. The VA is also involved in DOD’s Transition Assistance Program by administering the “VA Veterans Benefits and Services” course to servicemembers and their families during the program, during which the VA provides an overview of USCIS military naturalization resources to course participants.

In addition to these efforts, VA officials told us that the department is expanding its efforts by coordinating with veteran serving organizations to assist with naturalization for noncitizen veterans who were subject to administrative immigration enforcement and removed from the U.S.<sup>53</sup> VA officials also stated that the department has partnerships with other organizations that provide pro bono legal services to veterans, including on naturalization.

---

<sup>52</sup>The Naturalization Working Group’s proposed strategy seeks to promote naturalization through citizenship education and awareness, as well as building capacity and expanding partnerships, by, among other goals, providing immigrants with opportunities and tools to become citizens, and eliminating barriers that prevent individuals from accessing available naturalization services.

<sup>53</sup>According to the VA, veteran serving organizations are nonprofit organizations that serve veterans and their families in some capacity.

---

VA officials told us that the department intends to conduct targeted outreach to noncitizen veterans on military naturalization. One step toward this outreach effort involves obtaining data from DOD's Defense Manpower Data Center. Currently, the VA utilizes the Veterans Affairs/Department of Defense Identity Repository, in conjunction with other VA applications, to provide a consolidated view of eligibility and benefits data from across VA and DOD.<sup>54</sup> According to VA officials, obtaining access to data identifying noncitizen veterans from the center and adding these data to the Veterans Affairs/Department of Defense Identity Repository will allow VA to have a list of noncitizen veterans and contact information to pursue more targeted outreach on military naturalization. Specifically, VA officials stated that the department intends to contact newly released noncitizen veterans by phone, email, and text during their first year released from active duty as part of the VA Solid Start Program.<sup>55</sup> According to VA officials, the department plans to conduct this outreach once it receives the center's data on noncitizen veterans. As of August 2022, the VA is receiving data on noncitizen servicemembers to facilitate this outreach, according to VA officials.

---

<sup>54</sup>The Veterans Affairs/Department of Defense Identity Repository is an electronic repository of military personnel's military history, payroll information and their dependents' data provided to VA by DOD's Defense Manpower Data Center. VA applications use the Veterans Affairs/Department of Defense Identity Repository to retrieve profile data, as well as address, military history, and information on compensation and benefits, disabilities, and dependents.

<sup>55</sup>VA implemented VA Solid Start in December 2019 as a way to provide consistent, supportive contact with newly separated veterans during their first year of separation. According to a VA blog post, representatives at the VA Solid Start program call newly separated veterans three times around 90-, 180- and 365-days post-separation and tailor the calls to the veteran's needs, directing them toward appropriate resources, services and benefits, including health care and insurance programs, mental health resources, housing loans, education assistance, and career counseling assistance. After each call, veterans receive a follow up email with the information and resources specific to their needs. Department of Veterans Affairs, *VA Solid Start program helps Veterans transition to civilian life* (Washington D.C., Oct. 12, 2020), accessed March 22, 2022, <https://blogs.va.gov/VAntage/79668/va-solid-start-program-helps-veterans-transition-civilian-life/>.

---

## USCIS Is Taking Steps to Reinstate a Naturalization Program at Military Bases and Offers Assistance through the Military Help Line

### Naturalization Program at Military Bases

USCIS is working to provide naturalization assistance to noncitizen servicemembers at domestic military bases. In addition, USCIS offers naturalization assistance for noncitizen servicemembers, veterans, and their families through the Military Help Line.

From 2009 through January 2018, USCIS ran a Naturalization at Basic Training Initiative to streamline the naturalization process for noncitizen servicemembers at Army, Navy, Marine Corps, and Air Force basic training locations.<sup>56</sup> USCIS ended the Naturalization at Basic Training Initiative in 2018 because of DOD's policy change requiring noncitizen servicemembers to serve 180 days before they were eligible for a characterization of service determination as certified on Form N-426. As a result of this policy, which was in effect from October 2017 through August 2020, noncitizen servicemembers at basic training were not eligible to obtain a certified N-426, which meant they could not apply for naturalization at that time.

According to USCIS and military service officials, USCIS has been coordinating with DOD and the services to provide a remote naturalization program at domestic service military installations that would offer video naturalization interviews and oaths. USCIS officials stated that this program would also be available to servicemembers who have completed basic training and are stationed at domestic military installations, expanding servicemembers' access to naturalization because many domestic military bases are far from USCIS field offices. The status of this effort varies across the services.

For example, according to USCIS and Navy officials, they conducted a remote military naturalization interview pilot at Naval Station Great Lakes from July through November 2021. As part of this pilot, USCIS coordinated with DOD to conduct remote naturalization interviews and

---

<sup>56</sup>USCIS launched the Naturalization at Basic Training Initiative in August 2009 to streamline the naturalization process for noncitizen servicemembers by collecting biometrics from participants, conducting naturalization interviews, and administering participants' Oath of Allegiance at DOD military bases during basic training. According to USCIS and Coast Guard officials, USCIS and the Coast Guard did not provide Naturalization at Basic Training Initiative at Coast Guard bases. As previously discussed, there are a relatively small number of noncitizens in the Coast Guard compared to the other services.

---

oaths. According to Navy and USCIS officials, due to the pilot's success, USCIS's Field Operations Division, the USCIS Chicago Field Office, and Navy Recruit Training Command agreed to continue the remote naturalization program as normal business practice. They noted that, with the success of the Navy's pilot, USCIS and DOD have expanded remote naturalization interviews and oaths to 19 domestic bases across the military, as of April 2022.

### Military Help Line

USCIS created the Military Help Line in 2007 to answer applicant questions regarding military naturalization. USCIS immigration officers within the National Benefits Center's Military Call Center respond to calls and emails that come through the help line and receive a range of inquiries, often about the status of an individual's application or providing a new address, according to National Benefits Center officials. If an inquiry is unrelated to military naturalization (i.e., other immigration benefits for military applicants separate from naturalization), the inquiry is rerouted to the USCIS Contact Center. National Benefits Center officials stated the majority of calls the Military Help Line receives are addressed by self-service prompts, which includes information on bringing a spouse or child to the U.S. From October 2020 to September 2021, immigration officers with the Military Help Line provided live assistance to 47,000 callers, according to National Benefits Center officials. The Military Call Center began manually collecting information in 2021 for determining staffing needs and understanding changes in call metrics (i.e., length of call time, number of dropped calls), according to National Benefits Center officials.

The National Benefits Center's *Form N-400 Military Application for Naturalization Standard Operating Procedures* has general guidance on Military Help Line procedures. This includes illustrative scenarios if a question is not related to an N-400 military application, information immigration officers are expected to collect from applicants (e.g., identification information, verification N-400 form is filed based on military service), and additional guidance for exceptions to the general scenarios, such as when the customer is abroad.

---

### DOD, VA, and USCIS Have Not Assessed Military Naturalization Efforts

DOD, VA, and USCIS have undertaken efforts to assist noncitizen servicemembers, veterans, and their families with the military naturalization process both separately and in coordination with each other. DOD, VA, and USCIS are also anticipating taking additional collaborative steps to provide assistance on the military naturalization process, such as expanding the domestic military naturalization program to offer remote naturalization interviews at domestic military bases. VA

---

and DOD are also coordinating to share data. Further, DOD, VA, and USCIS have taken additional coordinated actions to implement the July 2021 *Interagency Strategy on Naturalization*.

In addition to their individual assistance efforts, DOD, VA, and USCIS have also coordinated on assistance efforts. For example, DOD and USCIS have long-standing coordination mechanisms, including monthly meetings between DOD, each service, and USCIS, according to DOD and USCIS officials. DOD and USCIS officials stated that they have implemented naturalization-related changes over the years resulting from these meetings. For instance, in response to COVID-19 travel restrictions that impacted USCIS's ability to conduct in-person naturalization interviews and ceremonies abroad, DOD and USCIS established processes to conduct naturalization interviews and oath ceremonies virtually, according to DOD and USCIS officials. As of April 2022, USCIS officials stated they have administered almost 1,000 video naturalization oaths for servicemembers abroad.

DOD, VA, and USCIS's efforts are positive steps that have assisted noncitizen servicemembers, veterans, and their families with the military naturalization process. However, DOD, VA, and USCIS have not assessed their military naturalization assistance efforts to determine (1) the extent noncitizen servicemembers, veterans, and their families receive information on expedited naturalization through military service and (2) receive information and resources to assist them with the application process.

For example, while the USCIS National Benefits Center collects Military Help Line data on call volume and patterns, such as number of call completions, it does not collect information on the content of the calls, such as the type of questions or issues raised by military naturalization applicants. National Benefits Center officials stated they do not have the ability to record calls or specific content from calls or emails, and they do not have information detailing who is contacting the Military Help Line (e.g., family members or veterans). Additionally, USCIS officials stated that the Naturalization Working Group is working with USCIS's Office of Performance and Quality to determine how to measure success of the 2021 *Interagency Strategy for Promoting Naturalization*, but has not assessed the military naturalization process specifically.

DOD and USCIS officials stated that they use informal metrics as sources of information for how the military naturalization process is working. For example, DOD officials stated they compare the number of noncitizen

---

accessions to the number of military naturalization applications filed with USCIS. Additionally, USCIS officials stated that they monitor public comments on the naturalization process and trends in the numbers of military naturalization applications that result in approval or denial, as well as processing times for military naturalization applications. However, neither DOD nor USCIS have used the information they collect to assess their military naturalization efforts. Since the implementation of Executive Order 14012 and the 2021 Interagency Strategy for Promoting Naturalization, the VA is expanding its role in promoting naturalization, but has not taken steps to assess its efforts.

While DOD, VA, and USCIS have taken various steps to assist noncitizen servicemembers, veterans, and their families with the military naturalization process, a more robust assessment of these efforts, particularly as they work to implement additional joint or collaborative efforts, could help enhance their efforts. For example, collecting basic information on the nature of calls USCIS receives each year regarding military naturalization applications would provide information on trends in the types of questions or issues military naturalization applicants face. USCIS could use these data to revise the type of information provided to noncitizen servicemembers or make adjustments to the military naturalization process or agency guidance for applicants. Further, in addition to using data from DOD's Defense Manpower Data Center to conduct targeted outreach to noncitizen veterans, VA officials stated that they could use these data to assess their efforts of promoting naturalization to determine how the VA can improve these services in the future.

We have previously reported on key practices to enhance and sustain interagency collaboration.<sup>57</sup> In particular, we previously reported that federal agencies engaged in collaborative efforts need to create the means to monitor and evaluate their efforts to enable them to identify areas for improvement. Reporting on these activities can help key decision makers within the agencies, as well as clients and stakeholders, to obtain feedback for improving both policy and operational effectiveness.<sup>58</sup> Further, *Standards for Internal Control in the Federal Government* states that management should use quality information to achieve the entity's objectives, and should establish monitoring activities

---

<sup>57</sup>[GAO-06-15](#) and [GAO-12-1022](#).

<sup>58</sup>[GAO-06-15](#).

---

and evaluate the results.<sup>59</sup> In addition, we developed a list of leading practices for evaluation based on the American Evaluation Association's *An Evaluation Roadmap for a More Effective Government*. The first leading practice involves the development of an evaluation plan or agenda.<sup>60</sup>

Regularly assessing each of their efforts would provide DOD, VA, and USCIS with insights into the extent to which noncitizen servicemembers, veterans, and their families are receiving appropriate information and assistance about applying for naturalization and into the extent to which program changes may be needed in the future. Further, coordinating with each other to develop and implement assessment plans would provide the opportunity for DOD, VA, and USCIS to jointly assess their coordinated military naturalization assistance efforts.

---

## Conclusions

Each year thousands of noncitizens join the U.S. Armed Forces in service to the country and, along with noncitizen veterans, may be eligible for expedited naturalization. Naturalization provides various benefits including the constitutional right to vote in U.S. elections if they are at least 18 years old, an expedited path for family members to naturalize under U.S. immigration law, and the right as a citizen to remain in the U.S. with protection from immigration enforcement and removal. Taking additional actions would help better position DOD and USCIS to facilitate the expeditious naturalization of servicemembers.

Specifically, the Air Force, Army, Marine Corps, and Coast Guard do not have complete information to ensure that certifying officials process and return servicemembers' certifications of honorable service in a timely manner because they have not developed procedures for certifying officials to track and report this information. The Coast Guard also does not have a policy documenting the 30-day requirement. Policies documenting the Coast Guard's certification process and developing procedures across the services to collect information on the timeliness of returning the forms can help the services ensure that servicemembers do

---

<sup>59</sup>[GAO-14-704G](#).

<sup>60</sup>GAO, *Foreign Assistance: Selected Agencies' Monitoring and Evaluation Policies Generally Address Leading Practices*, [GAO-16-861R](#) (Washington, D.C.: September 2016), and American Evaluation Association, *An Evaluation Roadmap for a More Effective Government*. The American Evaluation Association published the roadmap to guide the development and implementation of federal agency evaluation programs and policies. The framework offers a set of general principles intended to facilitate the integration of evaluation activities with program management.



---

not face unnecessary delays in their pursuit of becoming naturalized U.S. citizens. In addition, USCIS does not track data to evaluate key measures of adjudication timeliness for naturalization applications filed by servicemembers stationed on active duty abroad. Tracking the time frames from when USCIS receives the last background check to the final adjudication date and using these data to improve efforts to adjudicate these cases within 180 days, would better position it to reduce the amount of time servicemembers must wait to become U.S. citizens while stationed on active duty abroad.

Military naturalizations involve efforts from multiple federal departments and agencies. USCIS and DOD have each established policies that relate to and can affect the military naturalization process. The services offer assistance to noncitizen servicemembers with the USCIS military naturalization application process, but not all services have processes to inform servicemembers of their ability to naturalize and what assistance is available to them. Establishing a policy to ensure that the services develop and maintain processes to inform noncitizen servicemembers about the military naturalization process and available assistance would help DOD clarify the services' responsibilities with regard to informing noncitizen servicemembers about naturalization. Further, establishing a mechanism to monitor the services' implementation of their processes would help DOD ensure noncitizen recruits and servicemembers across the services are informed of the military naturalization process and resources.

In addition to the assistance the military services provide, DOD, VA, and USCIS have each taken steps to assist noncitizen servicemembers, veterans, and their families with the military naturalization process. However, DOD, VA, and USCIS have not developed plans to regularly assess their military naturalization assistance efforts. Coordinating to assess these efforts would provide DOD, VA, and USCIS insight into the extent to which noncitizen servicemembers, veterans, and their families receive appropriate information and assistance about applying for naturalization and the extent to which program changes may be needed in the future.

---

## Recommendations for Executive Action

We are making a total of 11 recommendations, including two to the U.S. Coast Guard, one to the Department of the Air Force, one to the Department of the Army, one to the Department of the Navy, two to USCIS, three to the DOD, and one to VA. Specifically:

---

The Commandant of the Coast Guard should develop a policy documenting the N-426 certification process. (Recommendation 1)

The Secretary of the Air Force should develop a procedure to collect information on the timeliness of certifying officials' return of N-426 forms to servicemembers applying for naturalization. (Recommendation 2)

The Secretary of the Army should develop a procedure to collect information on the timeliness of certifying officials' return of N-426 forms to servicemembers applying for naturalization. (Recommendation 3)

The Secretary of the Navy should ensure that the Commandant of the Marine Corps develops a procedure to collect information on the timeliness of certifying officials' return of N-426 forms to servicemembers applying for naturalization. (Recommendation 4)

The Commandant of the Coast Guard should develop a procedure to collect information on the timeliness of certifying officials' return of N-426 forms to servicemembers applying for naturalization. (Recommendation 5)

The Director of USCIS should track time frames from their receipt of the last background check to the final adjudication date for applications filed by servicemembers stationed on active duty abroad and use this information to help improve efforts to adjudicate these cases within 180 days. (Recommendation 6)

The Secretary of Defense should establish a policy to ensure that the military services develop and maintain a process to inform noncitizen servicemembers about the military naturalization process and available assistance and resources. (Recommendation 7)

The Secretary of Defense should establish a mechanism to monitor the military services' implementation of their processes to inform noncitizen servicemembers of the military naturalization process and available assistance. (Recommendation 8)

The Secretary of Defense, in coordination with the VA and USCIS, should develop and implement a plan to regularly assess its military naturalization assistance efforts. (Recommendation 9)

---

The Secretary of Veterans Affairs, in coordination with DOD and USCIS, should develop and implement a plan to regularly assess its military naturalization assistance efforts. (Recommendation 10)

The Director of USCIS, in coordination with DOD and VA, should develop and implement a plan to regularly assess its military naturalization assistance efforts. (Recommendation 11)

---

## Agency Comments and Our Evaluation

We provided a draft of this report to DHS, DOD, and VA for review and comment. We received written comments from each of these departments, which are reproduced in appendices I through III and summarized below. DHS also provided technical comments, which we incorporated into this report, as appropriate. In particular, we removed the term “applicable” for clarity in several instances where we refer to noncitizen servicemember populations in the report, including in two recommendations to DOD. The three departments concurred with all 11 recommendations

In concurring with our two recommendations directed to the U.S. Coast Guard, DHS stated that the Coast Guard is updating its Commandant Instruction to include a policy documenting the N-426 process. According to DHS, this update will also address the procedures for collecting information on the timeliness of certifying officials’ return of N-426 forms to servicemembers applying for naturalization. These actions, if implemented effectively, should address the intent of our recommendations.

With regard to our recommendation that USCIS track naturalization application adjudication timeframes for servicemembers stationed on active duty abroad, DHS stated that USCIS is planning to upgrade its data system to enable USCIS to track background checks for servicemembers applying for naturalization while stationed on active duty abroad. Once USCIS completes these system updates, it will review adjudication timeframes and determine where USCIS can make enhancements to complete cases for servicemembers stationed on active duty abroad within 180 days of the receipt of background checks. These actions, if implemented effectively, should address the intent of our recommendation.

In response to our recommendation that USCIS, in coordination with DOD and VA, develop a plan to regularly assess their military naturalization assistance efforts, DHS stated that USCIS regularly works with DOD and VA to provide outreach to military members. DHS also stated that USCIS

---

will continue to work with DOD and VA through the Interagency Naturalization Working Group to identify ways to enhance outreach to military servicemembers. In addition, DHS stated that USCIS and DOD began work on a Memorandum of Agreement in July 2022 that will formalize their partnership and outline opportunities for noncitizen military members to access the naturalization process early in their military career. While these are important collaborative steps, to fully implement this recommendation, DHS should work with both DOD and VA to develop and implement a plan to regularly assess their coordinated military naturalization assistance efforts.

In concurring with the one recommendation directed to VA to develop a plan, in coordination with DOD and USCIS, to regularly assess its military naturalization assistance efforts, VA stated that it has begun receiving data on noncitizen servicemembers from DOD to facilitate outreach regarding naturalization through the VA Solid Start program. It also stated that it has contacted USCIS to verify the status of veterans identified as noncitizens in the data. While these are positive steps, to fully implement this recommendation, VA should coordinate with both USCIS and DOD to develop and implement a plan to regularly assess this and any other military naturalization assistance efforts.

In concurring with the six recommendations directed either to the department or one of the military services, DOD described some planned actions. For example, DOD stated that the Office of the Secretary of Defense plans to establish a policy to ensure the military services develop and maintain a process to inform noncitizen service members about the military naturalization process and available assistance and resources. DOD also noted that the Office of the Secretary of Defense plans to establish a system to monitor the military services' implementation of such processes. With regard to our recommendation that the Army develop a procedure to collect information on the timeliness of certifying officials' return of N-426 forms to servicemembers applying for naturalization, DOD detailed the process the Army plans to implement to establish such a process. These actions, if implemented effectively, should address the intent of our recommendations.

---

We are sending copies of this report to the appropriate congressional committees and the Secretaries of Homeland Security, Defense, and Veterans Affairs. In addition, this report is available at no charge on the GAO website at <https://www.gao.gov>.

If you or your staff have any questions about this report, please contact me at (202) 512-8777 or [gablerr@gao.gov](mailto:gablerr@gao.gov). Contact points for our Offices of Congressional Relations and Public Affairs may be found on the last page of this report. GAO staff who made key contributions to this report are listed in appendix IV.

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Rebecca Gambler". The signature is written in a cursive, flowing style.

Rebecca Gambler  
Director, Homeland Security and Justice

# Appendix I: Comments from the Department of Homeland Security

U.S. Department of Homeland Security  
Washington, DC 20528



**Homeland  
Security**

August 19, 2022

Rebecca Gambler  
Director, Homeland Security and Justice  
U.S. Government Accountability Office  
441 G Street, NW  
Washington, DC 20548

Re: Management Response to Draft Report GAO-22-105021, "MILITARY NATURALIZATIONS: Federal Agencies Assist with Naturalizations, but Additional Monitoring and Assessment Are Needed"

Dear Ms. Gambler:

Thank you for the opportunity to comment on this draft report. The U.S. Department of Homeland Security (DHS or the Department) appreciates the U.S. Government Accountability Office's (GAO) work in planning and conducting its review and issuing this report.

DHS leadership is pleased to note GAO's recognition that in July 2021, the Department's U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services (USCIS), in coordination with 10 other Federal departments, including the U.S. Department of Defense (DOD) and the U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs (VA), issued the "Interagency Strategy for Promoting Naturalization," to eliminate barriers that prevent individuals from accessing available naturalization resources. GAO also noted that in March 2021, USCIS began conducting video naturalization interviews and ceremonies for servicemembers and their family members who are located at DOD facilities and abroad in response to the COVID-19 pandemic. DHS and USCIS remain committed to providing non-citizen military members access to naturalization as early in their military career as possible, and to working with their partners in DOD, various military components, and the VA to ensure non-citizen military members and their families have access to the benefits for which they are eligible.

The draft report contained 11 recommendations, including 4 for DHS, with which the Department concurs. Enclosed find our detailed response to each recommendation. DHS previously submitted technical comments addressing several accuracy, contextual, and other issues under a separate cover for GAO's consideration.

---

**Appendix I: Comments from the Department of  
Homeland Security**

---

Again, thank you for the opportunity to review and comment on this draft report. Please feel free to contact me if you have any questions. We look forward to working with you again in the future.

Sincerely,

JIM H  
CRUMPACKER

Digitally signed by JIM H  
CRUMPACKER  
Date: 2022.08.19 08:53:53 -0400

JIM H. CRUMPACKER, CIA, CFE  
Director  
Departmental GAO-OIG Liaison Office

Enclosure

**Enclosure: Management Response to Recommendations  
Contained in GAO-22-105021**

GAO recommended that the Commandant of the Coast Guard:

**Recommendation 1:** Develop a policy documenting the N-426 [Request for Certification of Military or Naval Service] certification process.

**Response:** Concur. The Office of Military Personnel Policy (CG-133) is updating Instruction COMDTINST M1700.1, "Military Civil and Dependent Affairs,"<sup>1</sup> dated June 2017, to include a policy documenting the N-426 certification process. This policy will align with current USCIS naturalization processes and refer members who are seeking naturalization to the USCIS website for necessary forms and any specific information not addressed in the Instruction. Estimated Completion Date (ECD): November 30, 2022.

**Recommendation 5:** Develop a procedure to collect information on the timeliness of certifying officials' return of N-426 forms to servicemembers applying for naturalization.

**Response:** Concur. CG-133's updates to COMDTINST M1700.1 will address the procedures for collecting information on the timeliness of certifying officials' return of N-426 forms to servicemembers applying for naturalization. ECD: November 30, 2022.

GAO recommended that the Director of USCIS:

**Recommendation 6:** Track time frames from their receipt of the last background check to the final adjudication date for applications filed by servicemembers stationed on active duty abroad and use this information to help improve efforts to adjudicate these cases within 180 days.

**Response:** Concur. Currently, USCIS can obtain background check information using the Electronic Immigration System (ELIS) for Federal Bureau of Investigations name checks, fingerprint checks and Defense Clearance Investigative Index checks for military members stationed abroad. With this information, USCIS can currently track time from completion of most background checks to time of final adjudication for military applicants.

However, USCIS is not able to track national security or fraud related background checks within ELIS. National security and fraud background checks are conducted within the

<sup>1</sup> [https://media.defense.gov/2021/Apr/07/2002615986/-1/-1/0/CIM\\_1700\\_1.PDF](https://media.defense.gov/2021/Apr/07/2002615986/-1/-1/0/CIM_1700_1.PDF)



Fraud Detection and National Security Data System (FDNS-DS) and currently FDNS-DS does not interact with ELIS. USCIS is working to upgrade the FDNS-DS and to interface with ELIS, allowing for tracking of national security and fraud related background checks within ELIS for this population.

Once the system updates are completed and USCIS has a complete picture in ELIS of all background checks and their completion dates, the USCIS Field Operations Directorate will review the timeframes for military members abroad and see where enhancements may be put in place to complete their cases within 180 days of background checks being completed. ECD: September 29, 2023.

**Recommendation 11:** In coordination with DOD and VA, develop and implement a plan to regularly assess its military naturalization assistance efforts.

**Response:** Concur. Multiple Directorates within USCIS work regularly with DOD and the VA to provide outreach to military members—both active and former—as well as family members, to ensure they have access to information regarding naturalization and other immigration benefits. This includes:

- Outreach through the USCIS community relations officers (CROs) for engagements, in coordination with the Interagency Naturalization Working Group established under Executive Order 14012, “Restoring Faith in Our Legal Immigration Systems and Strengthening Integration and Inclusion Efforts for New Americans,” dated February 2, 2021,<sup>2</sup> and
- Conducting engagements with various outside entities on the services available to military members, and monthly meetings between USCIS and DOD to coordinate efforts to reach military members.

USCIS will also continue to work with the DOD and the VA through the Interagency Naturalization Working Group to identify ways to enhance outreach to ensure we provide the best service possible to military members. This will be done by continuing to routinely receive feedback from stakeholders and reviewing outreach efforts completed by CROs. In July 2022, USCIS and DOD began work on a Memorandum of Agreement that will formalize this partnership and outline clear and routine opportunities for non-citizen military members to access the naturalization process early in their military career. ECD: December 30, 2022.

<sup>2</sup> <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/>

# Appendix II: Comments from the Department of Defense



MANPOWER AND  
RESERVE AFFAIRS

OFFICE OF THE ASSISTANT SECRETARY OF DEFENSE  
1500 DEFENSE PENTAGON  
WASHINGTON, D.C. 20301-1500

Ms. Rebecca Gambler  
Director, Homeland Security and Justice  
U.S. Government Accountability Office  
441 G Street, NW  
Washington DC 20548

Dear Ms. Gambler,

This is the Department of Defense (DoD) response to the GAO Draft Report GAO-22-105021, "Military Naturalizations – Federal Agencies with Naturalizations, but Additional Monitoring and Assessment Are Needed," dated July 14, 2022 (GAO Code 105021).

Attached is DoD's response to the subject report. My point of contact is COL Serena D. Johnson who can be reached at [serena.d.johnson3.mil@mail.mil](mailto:serena.d.johnson3.mil@mail.mil) or 703-695-2949.

Sincerely,

CONSTABLE.THOMAS.A.1022745863  
AS.A.1022745863

Digitally signed by  
CONSTABLE.THOMAS.A.1022745863  
Date: 2022.08.30 17:31:23 -0400

Thomas A. Constable  
Performing the Duties of the Assistant Secretary  
of Defense for Manpower and Reserve  
Affairs

Attachment:  
As stated.

**GAO DRAFT REPORT DATED JULY 14, 2022  
GAO-22-105021 (GAO CODE 105021)**

**“MILITARY NATURALIZATION: FEDERAL AGENCIES ASSIST WITH  
NATURALIZATIONS BUT ADDITIONAL MONITORING AND ASSESSMENT ARE  
NEEDED”**

**DEPARTMENT OF DEFENSE COMMENTS  
TO THE GAO RECOMMENDATIONS**

**RECOMMENDATION 2:** The GAO recommends that the Secretary of the Air Force should develop a procedure to collect information on the timeliness of certifying officials' return of N-426 forms to servicemembers applying for naturalization.

**DoD RESPONSE:** Concur. This program is executed at the Commander's level (O-6/GS-15 or above). We are in the process of coordinating with the various stakeholders to develop an effective way to comply with this recommendation.

**RECOMMENDATION 3:** The GAO recommends that the Secretary of the Army should develop a procedure to collect information on the timeliness of certifying officials' return of N-426 forms to servicemembers applying for naturalization.

**DoD RESPONSE:** Concur. The Army made one comment: HQDA, ODCS G-1, DMPM-MPA acknowledges the recommendation for the Army to develop a procedure to collect information on the timeliness of certifying officials' return of N-426 forms to service members applying for naturalization. In order to mitigate this from happening at the frequency it currently is the Army's Accessions Directorate has implemented "contract language" that will enable enlistees to be notified of their potential eligibility to apply for expedited naturalization for US Citizenship, as a result of their serving in the Regular Army, US Army Reserve, or Army National Guard. While this serves as an initial step on the front end, the Director for Military Personnel Management/Accessions Directorate, has tasked the US Army Training and Doctrine Command (TRADOC) with ensuring that its commanders are adhering and following up with a Soldiers request by standing up a Centralized Certification Cell (CCC) within TRADOC HQ. This CCC will establish an enduring requirement located where the majority of Soldiers submit these requests within the TRADOC pipeline. An O-6 shall be designated as the certifying official for these actions via the USCIS form N-426. Where the tasked entity sees fit, implement a notification mechanism for Soldiers who may be interested in this opportunity. In addition to appointing a certifying official in writing, a quarterly report shall be submitted to HQDA G-1 Accessions Division (DAPE-MPA) utilizing the included template. These reports will then be routed, quarterly, to G-1 & ASAM&RA leadership for awareness. Lastly, the CCC will be accountable for providing amplifying information to HQDA for Congressional inquiries when they come regarding certifying these forms in a timely manner. For near term and purpose of this task, request a copy of memo designating the certifying official and initial data pull of those requesting certification of an N-426.

---

**Appendix II: Comments from the Department  
of Defense**

---

**RECOMMENDATION 4:** The GAO recommends that the Secretary of the Navy should ensure that the Commandant of the Marine Corps develops a procedure to collect information on the timeliness of certifying officials' return of N-426 forms to Service members applying for naturalization.

**DoD RESPONSE:** Concur with no comment.

**RECOMMENDATION 7:** The GAO recommends that the Secretary of Defense should establish a policy to ensure that the military services develop and maintain a process to inform applicable noncitizen servicemembers about the military naturalization process and available assistance and resources.

**DoD RESPONSE:** Concur. The Office of the Secretary of Defense will establish a policy to ensure the military services develop and maintain a process to inform applicable noncitizen service members about the military naturalization process and available assistance and resources.

**RECOMMENDATION 8:** The GAO recommends that the Secretary of Defense should establish a mechanism to monitor the military services' implementation of their processes to inform applicable noncitizen servicemembers of the military naturalization process and available assistance.

**DoD RESPONSE:** Concur. The Office of the Secretary of Defense will establish a system to monitor the military services' implementation of their processes to inform applicable noncitizen servicemembers of the military naturalization process and of the assistance that is available.

**RECOMMENDATION 9:** The GAO recommends that the Secretary of Defense, in coordination with the VA and USCIS, should develop and implement a plan to regularly assess its military naturalization assistance efforts.

**DoD RESPONSE:** Concur with no comments.

---

# Appendix III: Comments from the Department of Veterans Affairs

---



DEPARTMENT OF VETERANS AFFAIRS  
WASHINGTON

August 10, 2022

Ms. Rebecca Gambler  
Director  
Homeland Security and Justice  
U.S. Government Accountability Office  
441 G Street, NW  
Washington, DC 20548

Dear Ms. Gambler:

The Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) has reviewed the Government Accountability Office (GAO) draft report: ***MILITARY NATURALIZATIONS: Federal Agencies Assist with Naturalizations, but Additional Monitoring and Assessment Are Needed*** (GAO-22-105021).

The enclosure contains the action plan to implement the draft report recommendation. VA appreciates the opportunity to comment on your draft report.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Tanya J. Bradsher".

Tanya J. Bradsher  
Chief of Staff

Enclosure

Enclosure

Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) Response to the  
Government Accountability Office (GAO) Draft Report  
***MILITARY NATURALIZATIONS: Federal Agencies Assist with  
Naturalizations, but Additional Monitoring and  
Assessment Are Needed***  
(GAO-22-105021)

**Recommendation: The Secretary of Veterans Affairs, in coordination with DOD and USCIS, should develop and implement a plan to regularly assess its military naturalization assistance efforts:**

**VA Response:** Concur. The Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) has contacted the United States Citizenship and Immigration Services (USCIS) Verification Division to verify naturalization status of Veterans as targeted naturalization outreach is conducted under VA's Solid Start program. VA is now receiving non-citizen Service member data from the Department of Defense (DoD) monthly for our Solid Start Program to perform targeted outreach. VA received an initial batch of 123,983 records from DoD with data from September 2001 to April 2022. Thus, efforts to assess the impact of our military naturalization assistance efforts with DoD and USCIS are well underway. VA thanks GAO for this recommendation.

**Department of Veterans Affairs  
August 2022**

Page 1 of 1

---

# Appendix IV: GAO Contact and Staff Acknowledgments

---

## GAO Contact

Rebecca Gambler at (202) 512-8777 or [gablerr@gao.gov](mailto:gablerr@gao.gov)

---

## Staff Acknowledgments

In addition to the contact named above, Meg Ullengren (Assistant Director), Mara McMillen (Analyst-in-Charge), Vincent Balloon, Michele Fejfar, Eric Hauswirth, Jenna Lada, Brian Lipman, Sasan J. "Jon" Najmi, Jerome Sandau, Adam Vogt, and James Whitcomb made significant contributions to this report.

---

---

## GAO's Mission

The Government Accountability Office, the audit, evaluation, and investigative arm of Congress, exists to support Congress in meeting its constitutional responsibilities and to help improve the performance and accountability of the federal government for the American people. GAO examines the use of public funds; evaluates federal programs and policies; and provides analyses, recommendations, and other assistance to help Congress make informed oversight, policy, and funding decisions. GAO's commitment to good government is reflected in its core values of accountability, integrity, and reliability.

---

## Obtaining Copies of GAO Reports and Testimony

The fastest and easiest way to obtain copies of GAO documents at no cost is through our website. Each weekday afternoon, GAO posts on its [website](#) newly released reports, testimony, and correspondence. You can also [subscribe](#) to GAO's email updates to receive notification of newly posted products.

---

## Order by Phone

The price of each GAO publication reflects GAO's actual cost of production and distribution and depends on the number of pages in the publication and whether the publication is printed in color or black and white. Pricing and ordering information is posted on GAO's website, <https://www.gao.gov/ordering.htm>.

Place orders by calling (202) 512-6000, toll free (866) 801-7077, or TDD (202) 512-2537.

Orders may be paid for using American Express, Discover Card, MasterCard, Visa, check, or money order. Call for additional information.

---

## Connect with GAO

Connect with GAO on [Facebook](#), [Flickr](#), [Twitter](#), and [YouTube](#).  
Subscribe to our [RSS Feeds](#) or [Email Updates](#). Listen to our [Podcasts](#).  
Visit GAO on the web at <https://www.gao.gov>.

---

## To Report Fraud, Waste, and Abuse in Federal Programs

Contact FraudNet:

Website: <https://www.gao.gov/about/what-gao-does/fraudnet>

Automated answering system: (800) 424-5454 or (202) 512-7700

---

## Congressional Relations

A. Nicole Clowers, Managing Director, [ClowersA@gao.gov](mailto:ClowersA@gao.gov), (202) 512-4400, U.S. Government Accountability Office, 441 G Street NW, Room 7125, Washington, DC 20548

---

## Public Affairs

Chuck Young, Managing Director, [youngc1@gao.gov](mailto:youngc1@gao.gov), (202) 512-4800  
U.S. Government Accountability Office, 441 G Street NW, Room 7149  
Washington, DC 20548

---

## Strategic Planning and External Liaison

Stephen J. Sanford, Managing Director, [spel@gao.gov](mailto:spel@gao.gov), (202) 512-4707  
U.S. Government Accountability Office, 441 G Street NW, Room 7814,  
Washington, DC 20548

