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May 9, 2016

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Hirono, Senate Democrats Announce Program To Reunite Filipino World War II Veterans With Their Families

WASHINGTON, D.C. – Senators Mazie K. Hirono, Harry Reid (D-NV), and Tim Kaine (D-VA) joined U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services (USCIS) Chief of Staff Juliet Choi, Filipino World War II veterans Rudy Panaglima and Celestino Almeda, and advocates today to announce the implementation of a long-awaited program to reunite aging Filipino World War II veterans with their children and families. Under the USCIS Filipino World War II Veterans Parole (FWVP) program, Filipino veterans whose service has been recognized by the U.S. Department of Defense, or their surviving spouses, may apply to bring children and certain other family members to the United States.

“Today is a victory for the thousands of Filipino World War II veterans and their families who will finally be able to be reunited in the United States,” **said Senator Hirono.** “This announcement is only possible because of the hard work of so many, and we are only beginning our work to reunite these families. I will continue to plan outreach events and coordinate with USCIS and advocates to ensure that as many veterans and families take advantage of this program as possible.”

“After facing decades of injustice and separation from their loved ones, Filipino veterans in Nevada and throughout the country finally have the opportunity to reunite with their families,” **said Senator Reid.** “The President’s executive action will help get some family members of Filipino veterans out of the family-based visa backlog, where many have waited for decades. There are more than 100,000 Filipino-Americans living in Nevada, and I know how much they contribute to our country. This program is a victory for them and Filipino-Americans throughout around the country.”

“For too many years, Filipino veterans who fought valiantly alongside the United States in World War II – including many who call Virginia home – have been waiting for the promise of reunification with their families to be fulfilled,” **said Senator Kaine.** “I’m so pleased that implementation of the Filipino World War II Veterans Parole Program has finally begun and that families like Rudy and Pura Panaglima of Arlington will soon be reunited with their sons who can provide them with much-needed care.”

Filipino World War II veteran Rudy Panaglima shared his family’s experience of waiting 20 years to be reunited with his sons, and his hope that they will finally be able to come to the United States under the FWVP program.

“My two sons in the Philippines, Rolando and Raoul, have had approved immigration petitions since 1995 – and have waited more than twenty years to join us,” **said Mr. Panaglima.** “We need Rolando and Raul to take care of us because of our age. We don’t have relatives in the area. I am a proud American who had served honorably. Hopefully in a few months, my two sons can be with me in America with this parole visa program. On behalf of the whole Panaglima family, I would like to convey our heartfelt gratitude to President Barack Obama and to Senators Mazie Hirono, Harry Reid, and Tim Kaine for their humanitarian leadership and for helping us elderly veterans.”

“Filipino World War II veterans fought with great bravery and courage for our country, and the least we can do after so many years is to reunite them with their families,” **said NCAPA National Director Christopher Kang.** “With the immigrant visa backlogs, it can take more than 20 years for immigration applications to be reviewed. We are heartened at this opportunity from USCIS and hope these families can be reunited quickly.”

“Before this long and over-due policy change, these war heroes had to wait, many of them for decades, to be reunited with their children,” **said Mee Moua, President and Executive Director of Asian Americans Advancing Justice (AAJC)**. “We are overjoyed to know that veterans can now live their remaining golden years with their loved ones at their side. AAJC thanks Senator Hirono, Senator Reid, and Senator Kaine for the leadership and support necessary to bring this momentous day to fruition.”

In her remarks, Senator Hirono shared the story of Mariano Guillermo – an 88-year-old Filipino World War II veteran from Kalihi who served in the guerrilla forces before joining the Philippine Scouts. Mr. Guillermo’s two children, who are 60 and 58, have been waiting to join their father in the United States for over 20 years.

Filipino veterans were granted citizenship in recognition of their service to the United States during World War II. Many of their children, however, were not. Due to backlogs in the U.S. immigration system, it can take more than 20 years for immigration applications to be reviewed. Under the FWVP program, families, some of whom have been waiting decades, can finally be together in the United States while their applications are processed.

Senator Hirono has been the leader in Congress of the effort to reunite Filipino World War II veterans with their families. After years of advocacy by Senator Hirono, the Obama Administration announced last July that it would create a parole program to reunite the families of Filipino World War II veterans. Senator Hirono then pushed the Administration to quickly implement the program and make children eligible for expedited consideration to come to the United States.

While the FWVP program is significant, it does not replace the need for a change in law that would not only make it easier for the children of Filipino WWII Veterans to reunite, but also to have their applications for full citizenship processed more quickly. Senator Hirono has worked to make this legislative change and introduced the Filipino Veterans Family Reunification Act as a member of the U.S. House in the 110th, 111th, and 112th Congresses. At the time, Senator Daniel K. Akaka led this effort in the Senate. In the Senate, Senator Hirono introduced the Filipino Veterans Family Reunification Act bill in the 113th Congress on a bipartisan basis, and then successfully included it in the Senate passed Comprehensive Immigration Reform bill. Last year, Senator Hirono again reintroduced the Filipino Veterans Family Reunification Act on a bipartisan basis.

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Left to right: Asian Americans Advancing Justice (AAJC) Director of Programs Marita Etcubanez; Filipino Veterans Recognition and Education Project Chair and Major General (Retired) Antonio Taguba; Filipino World War II veteran Celestino Almeda; Senator Tim Kaine; Filipino World War II veteran Rudy Panaglima; National Council of Asian Pacific Americans Executive Director Christopher Kang; Senator Mazie K. Hirono; USCIS Chief of Staff Juliet Choi

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