

## **As changes loom, more immigrants seek U.S. citizenship**

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Tens of thousands of immigrants -- record numbers for this decade -- are scrambling to file applications, pay their fees and take the English and civics classes that prepare them to become U.S. citizens.

The surge in petitions for citizenship and permanent residency comes as Congress considers overhauling immigration laws and federal officials finalize plans to raise application fees, in some cases more than doubling the cost.

At least 118,600 immigrants across the United States took the first step to request citizenship in March, as compared with about 74,200 a year before, figures from U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services show.

In Florida, citizenship applications rose 62 percent in the first quarter of 2007 compared with the same period last year -- up to about 31,000 filings. Legalization requests, also known as adjustment of status petitions for those seeking green cards, rose 22 percent in the same period to more than 16,000 from the state.

The agency does not keep track of application receipts from metropolitan areas, but community groups in Orlando say they have seen twice or even triple the number of immigrants seeking citizenship.

Roy Miller, instructor at the Office for Farmworker Ministry in Apopka, was giving a practice quiz on a recent Saturday to five immigrants.

He turned to Jose Perez, a Mexican construction worker. "Jose," he asked, "what are some of the basic beliefs of the Declaration of Independence?"

"That all men are created equal," he answered, "and the pursuit of happiness."

Perez is almost ready for the real test: the exam he must pass before an immigration officer to become a naturalized U.S. citizen.

Advocacy groups fear that expected hikes in petition fees by summer's end and proposals to toughen exams would put the legal status and citizenship many immigrants seek beyond their reach.

Many immigrants are also concerned about the tone of the debate in Congress. They hope to petition relatives before laws change, especially since the latest proposal would limit visas issued to relatives of U.S. residents and citizens.

"With everything that is going on with immigration, it's as if people wanted to take away

any rights from immigrants," said Perez, 39, a homeowner in Apopka who is married to a U.S. citizen and has a son born in the U.S.

Activists also have been pushing for immigrants to become empowered to vote.

"The great majority of these applicants will become citizens by choice, and a lot of them want to have their voices heard in the upcoming presidential election," said Marcelo Gaete, senior director of programs with the National Association of Latino Elected and Appointed Officials in Los Angeles.

Of the roughly 8 million legal immigrants who could qualify for citizenship nationwide, said Gaete, about 5 million are Latinos -- and many have been fired up enough to join numerous street rallies for immigration reform during the last year.

"It is a mobilization," Gaete said, "that has mushroomed across the country."

The trend on citizenship requests filed with the immigration agency shows two recent spikes in applications. One occurred during a period of activism and massive marches in May 2006. The latest surge came after January, when the agency announced that it soon would cost more to become an American.

Under the proposed changes, citizenship applications would increase from \$330 to \$595, an 80 percent hike per person. Applications for legal residency would go from \$325 to \$905, an increase of 178 percent. The yearly renewal of work permits would increase 89 percent, from \$180 to \$340.

The agency expects to publish a revised fee plan as soon as next week, which may include changes that would make it easier for families to apply in some cases, said spokesman Shawn Saucier. The fees are expected to go into effect two months later, which would be by August.

Ana Santiago, a spokeswoman in Miami for U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services, said agency officials only know that petitions have risen, but it is not clear why. The agency, which is funded by user fees, has been operating on a deficit because of the high volume of requests it gets.

"This is one of the reasons why this fee increase that is coming up is so important, because this will be able to free us in ways that we haven't been able to do our work," Santiago said. "We'll be able to have the right resources to deal with the flow of workload."

Santiago said, despite the increased demand, the agency was still managing to respond to Florida applications within the six-months target it set after reducing its backlogs.

In the Orlando area, immigrants say they've heard the buzz about why the moment is now. "It's going to get harder, and there is no sense in waiting," said Rosalba Medina, 23,

a dental assistant in Apopka.

The Saturday citizenship classes in Apopka have broken into four groups that meet in the morning. English classes follow in the afternoon -- all taught by volunteers.

"It's what our country is based on. We are all immigrants," said Miller, a Winter Garden resident who helps out. "As far as I know, the Statue of Liberty is still up there, in New York."

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