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Immigration Agency Dons a Friendlier Face

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The record numbers of immigrants applying to become American citizens will now have a cushy place to check on the progress of the large citizenship backlog: the newly renovated New York offices of the U.S. Bureau of Citizenship and Immigration Services.

At the grand opening of the new customer service center in the Federal Building in Manhattan yesterday, immigration officials cut the ribbon in a sleek waiting room that now looks less like the Department of Motor Vehicles and more like an executive airport lounge.

The renovation is part of a new push by the immigration agency to put on a friendlier face after it shed its immigration enforcement duties during the 2003 dissolution of its predecessor, the Immigration and Naturalization Service.

"The environment was hectic, noisy. Comfort was out of the question, and privacy was nonexistent," the USCIS New York City district director, Andrea Quarantillo, said of the old office, praising the new office for its "atmosphere that reduces anxiety."

Despite the pleasant new surroundings, the agency and its customers are anything but relaxed as USCIS struggles to process the surge in citizenship applications. The number of applications last year reached 1 million, the most in 10 years and double the number filed in 2006, according to USCIS numbers analyzed this week by the National Association of Latino Elected and Appointed Officials. The increased number of applicants come as immigrants have been encouraged by nationwide campaigns to sign up in time to vote in the 2008 election.

The director of NALEO, Arturo Vargas, who ran the "Citizenship, It's Time!" campaign, called the group's efforts a success, although he noted: "The question is how many people who applied in '07 will be able to make it through in '08 — I don't think anyone really knows."

The surge was also driven by the increase in the application fee in July, to \$675 from \$400. The fee increase was denounced by some immigrant advocates, but USCIS argued the money would help reduce the backlog, improve the agency's technological capabilities, and help with renovations such as the one in its Manhattan office.

The "July surge," as Ms. Quarantillo referred to it, has added to the backlog, however, as immigrants have raced to sign up before the fee increase and have set the agency scrambling to hire and train new workers and expand its facilities.

Ms. Quarantillo was upbeat about the New York office's ability to keep up with the record number of applicants, noting that waits here are averaging seven months. She also said New York already has begun adding 100 new federal employees and 75 contract staff. An advocate who works on civic participation for the Service Employees International Union, Benjamin Monterroso, who worked on the voting campaign, praised the renovation.

"Anything that is going to improve services to applicants is always welcome," he said. Mr. Vargas also praised the agency's efforts, and noted that his group would not be disheartened if some of the 1 million applicants miss the chance to vote this year.

"It's not about a single election," he said. "If it's all about November 4, it really is a lost cause."

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