

DAILY NEWS

One million more wait to answer the call

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It's official. More than one million eligible immigrants applied for U.S. citizenship in 2007. This is almost double the number that applied in 2006.

Once they become citizens - and voters - their numbers will be large enough to put some of the most violently anti-immigration demagogues out of business. And that's good news.

They also will be enough to help elect a President in November who will respect immigrants' humanity and hard work. And that's even better news.

Today, New York immigrant groups will launch the 2008 Democracy in Action campaign to register naturalized immigrants and get them out to the polls. Two thousand completed voter registration forms will be presented to the Board of Elections.

The event also will be a reminder that tomorrow is the deadline to register to vote in the New York primaries on Feb. 5.

But, in fact, there are many more immigrants eager to become full members of U.S. society. According to the United States Citizenship and Immigration Services (USCIS), 1,029,951 green card holders applied for citizenship from January to October, 2007.

"Just as immigrants of all stripes are increasingly under attack, this community is reasserting its patriotism and its commitment to help strengthen the U.S. democracy," said Eliseo Medina, executive vice president of the Service Employees International Union.

The record number of applicants is a testament to the work of the Ya es Hora: ¡Ciudadanía! (Citizenship, It's Time!) campaign, whose goal was to mobilize 1 million immigrants to apply for citizenship in 2007.

Launched last July with a press conference at the steps of City Hall, the campaign was said to be an all-out effort "to inform, educate and motivate" eligible legal residents to apply for citizenship.

In New York City, there are 800,000 eligible legal residents, but the campaign's scope goes beyond the tristate area. It is a national effort that brought together community groups, service providers and media organizations in 22 states.

Much of the Ya es Hora: ¡Ciudadanía! campaign's success is due to the unprecedented wave of hostility toward immigrants that is sweeping the country.

Not surprisingly, immigrants have responded by taking the necessary steps to claim their rightful place in American society.

This year, the Ya es Hora: ¡Ciudadanía! campaign is being followed by voter registration and get-out-the-vote efforts targeting new citizens.

The campaign just announced Ya es Hora: Ve y Vota (It's Time, Go Vote), a new initiative seeking to get millions of new citizens to the polls in November.

Yet the huge backlog at the USCIS could frustrate the effort and deprive hundreds of thousands of new citizens of their right to vote.

"This is not only a bureaucratic problem. This is excluding a whole segment of voters that will not be able to exercise

their rights," said Chung-Wha Hong, executive director of the New York Immigration Coalition.

Although the USCIS says it needs 16 to 18 months to process all the citizenship applications filed after June 1, the campaign is working with them and members of Congress to reduce the backlog. It is a matter of fairness.

"These applicants have played by all the rules - waited patiently in line, paid their taxes and contributed to their communities," said National Council of La Raza Vice President Cecilia Muñoz. "They deserve the opportunity to have their voices heard on Election Day."

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