

Citizenship bids deluge agency

Daniel González

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Immigrant advocates said Thursday that they have helped more than 5,000 legal immigrants in the Valley apply for citizenship in hopes of boosting the number of Latino voters this November.

Advocates are worried, however, that many of those who applied may not get to vote because the immigration service is not processing the requests fast enough because of backlogs created by a rush of new applications for citizenship.

"These applicants have played by the rules," said Joel Foster, a labor organizer and member of *Ya es hora, Ciudadania* ("Citizenship, it's time"), a coalition of labor unions and grass-roots organizations that help legal immigrants navigate the naturalization process. "They deserve to have their voices heard on Election Day. They should not have to wait. We are committed to making that happen."

An immigration official acknowledged a spike in naturalization applications has fueled backlogs, but the agency is trying to process applications faster by working overtime and hiring more employees.

The labor coalition held 13 citizenship fairs over the past year in Maricopa County that helped more than 5,000 legal immigrants of voting age fill out the paperwork for applying for citizenship, doubling its goal, said Guillermo Nicacio, president of the grass-roots organization My Family Votes.

The fairs were part of a national push to get more Latinos to the polls in hopes of countering anti-immigrant measures and pressuring Congress to pass immigration reform after bills failed in 2006 and 2007, Nicacio said.

Although the Latino population is surging, its political clout has lagged. That's because

much of the population growth is being driven by illegal immigration, and illegal immigrants are not eligible to apply for citizenship and therefore can't vote. What's more, native-born Hispanics tend to have lower voter turnouts than other groups.

Latinos make up 30 percent of Maricopa County's 3.7 million population, according to the Census Bureau. Only about 12 percent of registered voters in Maricopa County have Latino surnames. And Latinos accounted for only 8 percent of the votes cast in the 2006 general election, according to data released in September by the county's Election Office.

Advocates believe they may have better success in boosting Latino voting power by focusing on immigrants, since they may be more motivated to vote.

"I think the immigration issue is really going to push a lot of these new voters to go out and vote because all these anti-immigration measures are really starting to affect the Hispanic community, so people are going to try and vote for candidates that are friendly toward them or will at least listen to them," Nicacio said.

Legal immigrants, such as delivery-truck driver Enrique Gutierrez, 37, of Phoenix, have flooded U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services with naturalization applications as the presidential elections draw near.

"I really want to be become a citizen so I can

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exercise my right to vote," Gutierrez said.

In fiscal 2007, which ended Sept. 30, about 1.4 million people applied for citizenship nationwide,



nearly twice as many as the year before, said Marie Sebrechts, a spokeswoman for the local office of U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services.

Through August, 17,684 people applied for naturalization in Phoenix, nearly double the 8,911

who applied through the previous August, she said.

Sebrechts credited grass-roots efforts for some of the spike. But other factors also have fueled a rise in naturalization applications, including thousands of people spurred to apply before a 70 percent fee hike. The fee increase took effect on July 30. A campaign by the agency to encourage legal immigrants to apply for citizenship also played a role, she said.

The flood of naturalization applications has created backlogs in Phoenix and elsewhere in the U.S., Sebrechts said.

In Phoenix, applicants are waiting up to eight months for their paperwork to be processed, two months longer than the usual six-month wait.

The agency projects the waiting time could reach 16 to 18 months in other parts of the country, Sebrechts said.

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