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Citizenship applicants should expect long wait

For 20 people, last step comes just in time for voter sign-up

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Immigrants waiting to become U.S. citizens "shouldn't get their hopes up" that projected long delays in processing applications will be shortened, said Emilio Gonzalez, the director of U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services, who was in Sacramento on Tuesday.

"Becoming a citizen is so special, you can't fast-track it. What we won't do is sacrifice security," said Gonzalez, who responded to criticism of the delays during an interview at the Leland Stanford Mansion in Sacramento.

Gonzalez was at the mansion for a special ceremony to swear in 20 new citizens from Northern California. He was visiting immigration officials in Sacramento, where his federal agency has an office. Citizenship Services is part of the U.S. Department of Homeland Security.

Gonzalez's agency reviews citizenship applications. It is facing criticism that hundreds of thousands of people won't be allowed to vote in November because of delays that could have been avoided.

Tuesday was the last day to register to vote in California's Feb. 5 primary election. Some of the new Americans Gonzalez swore in said they were eager to mail in voter registration forms before the end of the day.

The agency predicts that citizenship applications filed after last July could take almost three times longer to process in some cities than last year. The average wait has grown from seven months to 16 to 18 months in some cities.

The reason, Gonzalez said, is a dramatic surge in applications, especially right before citizenship fees increased 69 percent – from \$400 to \$675 – on July 30. About 1.4 million applications were filed from October 2006 to September 2007, nearly double the amount filed the year before.

Labor unions with immigrant members and Latino voting rights advocates – who began a nationwide citizenship campaign a year ago – say Gonzalez's agency should have been prepared for the flood of new applications, which was widely predicted.

Now the agency has to manage the surge in applications from last year, on top of a backlog of hundreds of thousands of applications that already were piled up in offices before the fee increase. The agency requested the fee increases last year, arguing that it needed more money so it could whittle away at the backlog and offer financial aid to the FBI, which conducts background checks on applicants.

Gonzalez said his agency has hired several hundred new employees and is aiming to hire or retrain a total of 3,000 workers to tackle the applications. Spokespeople for the agency have suggested that it might be able to shorten delays, but Gonzalez was firm Tuesday that he doubts that will be possible in general.

"It's not a question of money now," he said, explaining that it takes time to train staff to examine applications and test applicants. "I would just tell folks they have to be patient."

Prolonged delays could still be avoided with better planning and reorganization inside the agency, according to Arturo Vargas, executive director of the Los Angeles-based National Association of Latino Elected Officials, who testified Thursday at a congressional immigration subcommittee hearing probing why Citizenship Services is anticipating such long delays.

FBI checks of applicants' names are a primary reason why some applications are delayed, Gonzalez said.

At the congressional hearing, Eliseo Medina, executive vice president of the Service Employees International Union, said that separate FBI name checks are simply duplicating what obligatory FBI fingerprint checks already do and could be eliminated without risk to national security.

But Gonzalez said Tuesday that a thorough review is needed to prevent the naturalization of people with histories that should disqualify them.

He said that in the 1990s demands to quickly process citizenship applications resulted in "unmitigated disaster," with failures to detect applicants who were not eligible.

Two new citizens sworn in Tuesday consider themselves lucky to have completed the citizenship process in seven months.

Walter Leal, a University of California, Davis, professor, and his wife, Beatriz, are natives of Brazil. They had envelopes ready to mail voter registration forms they had brought with them.

Leal said he plans to vote in the Democratic Party primary for Hillary Rodham Clinton. He came of age in Brazil when that country was ruled by a military dictatorship, and he lived abroad after that.

"I have never voted for a president in my entire life," he said.

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