

Fair helps 140 beat immigration fee jump

By Darren Meritz / El Paso Times
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Trying to beat next month's increase in immigration fees, nearly 140 permanent residents in El Paso lined up to apply for naturalized citizenship Saturday at a fair sponsored by a grass-roots political organization, which wants to improve the political clout of immigrants.

The Association of Community Organizations for Reform Now, or ACORN, had the fair at the Plaza Del Sol shopping center at 5630 Gateway East.

Volunteers provided free counseling to permanent residents seeking naturalized citizenship.

In May, U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services officials announced a new fee schedule that, among other changes, will increase the fee for filing for citizenship from \$400 to \$675.

Under the new schedule, application and petition fees will increase an average of 66 percent. Permanent residents seeking citizenship have until July 30 to apply before the application fee increases.

Receiving naturalized citizenship provides immigrants with greater rights -- including the right to vote -- not afforded to "green card" holders or permanent residents.

Jesus Nassi Portillo is a scrap-metal salesman and has been a permanent resident in El Paso for about 20 years.

He said he's decided to seek citizenship now because he fears changes in immigration law that might make it easier for the government to deport him if he were accused of a crime.

"There are many political changes for residents," said Nassi Portillo, who has seven children, all of whom are U.S. citizens. "A resident doesn't have many guarantees."

El Paso ACORN coordinator Jose Manuel Escobedo, an organizer of the citizenship fair, estimated that as many as 140 people received help applying for citizenship on Saturday.

"The whole purpose of ACORN getting involved in this is to build a base of immigrant families that are ready to mobilize," he said. "That means being able to take that next step and have a right to vote."

A larger immigrant community vocally opposing the U.S. citizenship and immigration fee increases might have prevented the rate increases -- and may in the future prevent further government actions counter to immigrant interests -- Escobedo said.

Darren Meritz may be reached at dmeritz@elpasotimes.com; 546-6127.

**Immigration information
. U.S. Citizenship and Immigration
Services customer service: (800)
375-5283; www.uscis.gov.
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