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Union citizenship drive downtown draws 200 immigrants The Boston Globe Organizers seek to speed process

By Brian R. Ballou, Globe Staff | July 22, 2007

As Jorge Santurce-Vaide placed his application for citizenship and identification cards on top of a table yesterday, his permanent resident card caught the eye of the volunteer checking to make sure applications were complete. The man in the card's photograph had a thick beard and a full head of jet-black hair, with taut skin and chubby cheeks.

"What happened here?" asked the volunteer, chuckling as he shifted his eyes from the card to Santurce-Vaide, a slim 55-year-old with receding gray hair and fine wrinkle lines. Santurce-Vaide, 55, who emigrated from Cuba in 1980, replied, "That's me, but more than 20 years ago."

Santurce-Vaide was one of about 200 immigrants from mostly Spanish-speaking countries who attended a citizenship drive yesterday in downtown Boston, at the Service Employees International Union Local 615 headquarters. The drive is part of the "Ya Es Hora: Ciudadania" national campaign seeking to help 1 million legal permanent residents become citizens and register to vote.

Organizers are working to help the immigrants get their citizenship applications in the mail before July 30, when fees rise from \$400 to \$675. More than a half-million legal residents across the country have applied since January.

Many of the people who showed up yesterday, such as Santurce-Vaide, said they have been procrastinating but the fee hike convinced them to not put it off any longer, while others said they have not applied because they have not been able to afford it. Many of those immigrants said they have borrowed money from friends or relatives or have gone without some basic necessities to raise money before the deadline.

"Across the country, one of the biggest obstacles to becoming a citizen is money," said Rocio Saenz, president of the Local 615, which organized the event. There was also a drive in Providence that drew 225 people, and one in New Hampshire that drew 18.

Saenz said the failed Senate immigration bill and resulting anti-immigration rhetoric has served as a rallying call for more civic involvement on behalf of the immigrant community. "This is simply about being recognized as a part of this country, of having the right to vote," Saenz said.

Massachusetts has approximately 300,000 immigrants with permanent legal-residency status, and of those, about 200,000 are eligible to become US citizens, Saenz said. An unmarried legal resident is required to have lived in this country for five years, while a person married to a US citizen is required to have lived in the United States for three years to be eligible.

The union represents 1.9 million janitors, security guards, public service workers, and healthcare workers nationwide.

Yesterday, the headquarters of Local 615, on West Street, was transformed into an intake center with dozens of tables and rows of seats were set up. The event was scheduled to start at 10 a.m., but applicants started showing up at 8:45 a.m., and the doors were opened early. The first stop of the day was a prescreening room, where a union volunteer reminded applicants they needed to have their permanent resident cards, passports, and other information.

The applicants then walked to the main floor, where they sat down at tables with volunteers trained to help them fill out the applications. At the end of the process, which took about an hour, passport photos were taken, copies of documents made, and the participants were given yellow envelopes and certified mail stickers to

send off their applications.

"It wasn't bad at all," said Domingo Alvarado , 83, as he sat next to his wife, Eva, 80. The couple emigrated from Ecuador 13 years ago and now live in Roxbury. "Before we couldn't find this kind of help." ■

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