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80 seek help with citizenship papers

Volunteers at St. Victor assist with government paperwork

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CALUMET CITY | Maria Perez isn't a U.S. citizen yet, but she already is helping others fill out their applications.

Perez was one of about 50 trained volunteers at a citizenship workshop Sunday at St. Victor Parish. About 80 people sought free assistance in filling out an eight-page form that could lead to them becoming American citizens.

A Calumet City resident for 17 years, Perez completed the application at a June 10 workshop. She will be fingerprinted Tuesday and hopes to become a citizen in the fall.

On Sunday, Perez helped five people fill out the form -- three immigrants from Mexico and one each from Costa Rica and Guatemala.

"If I'm going to register myself, I might as well help other people register," said Perez, a native of Mexico.

To apply for citizenship, you have to be a legal permanent resident for at least five years. Perez, though, typified the people at the two workshops because many have been here far longer than that, said citizenship workshop coordinator Joe Del Real.

Perez has lived in the U.S. for 42 years, and her brothers, Gilbert and Jose, became citizens after fighting for America in the Vietnam War. But she did not try to become a citizen until recently because of "laziness" and a feeling her vote didn't count, she said.

Like many others at Sunday's workshop, Perez was inspired, in part, by the political battle over immigration. The controversy has made voting more important to her.

"If I want to raise my voice, I should take the first step (and register)," she said.

Del Real estimated that 95 percent of applicants at the workshops have been Latino. He said the application fee increasing from \$400 to \$675 on July 30 also is a factor in the surge of interest in citizenship.

"It's time to (apply)," said Sandra Angel, 36, a Merrillville resident who moved to the U.S. from Honduras 16 years ago. "I want to do everything I can to stay."

Angel, Filemon Gaytan, and three people Perez helped expressed fear the political climate could jeopardize their future here.

"We need to do this because we want to protect this country, too," said Gaytan, who moved to Chicago from Mexico in 1984.

St. Victor, Congressmen Luis Gutierrez and Jesse Jackson Jr., Pilsen Neighbors Community Council and Gamiliel of Chicago sponsored the workshop.

Print Page

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