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A chance at citizenshipMore than 150 people turn out for forum, legal advice

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At least 150 people on Saturday got a step closer to becoming U.

S. citizens.

They participated in a forum called "Ya es Hora Ciudadanía," which translates to "Now is the Time for Citizenship." The event, held at Casa de Amigos, was part of a national day and year-long campaign to naturalize 1 million citizens this year. Those who took part are permanent legal residents, people with "green cards."

Through the Midland Hispanic Chamber of Commerce, people set appointments to see immigration attorneys. The lawyers charged \$50, but the proceeds will go to Casa de Amigos.

"I think it's gone pretty smoothly. They're excited. We've had some people waiting as walk-ins for five or six hours. They say they'll keep waiting," Midland Hispanic Chamber President and CEO Rachel Stone said.

"I got here at 8:30 and there were people already here," said Hispanic Chamber Membership Development Director Annabell Ramirez.

People drove in from across the Permian Basin and some attorneys were seeing walk-ins between their set appointments, Stone said.

Immigration fees are currently \$400, but effective July 30, the cost goes up to \$675. This includes fingerprinting, taking the civics test and the swearing-in ceremony. Those who can help fill out the forms are certified non-profit agencies and attorneys.

Many of those taking part were unwilling to talk to the Reporter-Telegram.

But as he waited for his appointment, Alecio Tovar said he has lived in the United States all his life but wants to get citizenship to get more rights. He has wanted to do this for a long time, "I guess I just needed a little push. It's a good opportunity right now," he said.

Maria Esparza and her husband, Esteban, drove from Andrews to Midland for the forum. Both are originally from Chihuahua. Maria Esparza said the best way of doing things is to get information and that's what they came to find Saturday.

The couple also wants to make life better for their four children.

Casa de Amigos Education Program Director Paul Brooks said it took 18-20 people about three weeks to plan the forum and each agency brought volunteers to help them.

"We all pitched in and we made the building available -- a place people trust."

"It's been an unbelievable project -- tiring, but in a good way," he said. "We've also had Catholic Charities here. He'll be back Monday and Tuesday from 10 a.m. to 5 p.m. and one other lawyer that will be here on Thursday," Brooks said.

Stone said Catholic Charities of Lubbock charges \$150 and you have to go to Lubbock for the service.

Brooks stressed that people at the forum are permanent legal residents.

"These are people that are doing this the right way. ... They're willing to do what needs to be done to become citizens," he said. Casa de Amigos motto is "Helping people help themselves" and this event is part of that credo.

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A blue rectangular graphic with the text "power the future?" in white, lowercase, sans-serif font. The text is positioned in the upper right portion of the graphic, with a thin white horizontal line below it.

Mike Borland also planned to give any proceeds he received to Casa de Amigos and said much of his business is immigration related. He said each client was taking 45 minutes to an hour.

"I think Casa de Amigos is just a great organization. It's a great cause. A lot of people want to become citizens. These are all lawful residents of the United States. We want to help them take the next step. They're already paying taxes, but they can't vote. It makes them in a truer sense permanent residents," Borland said.

"This is the community we service as attorneys. We feel an obligation to do some pro bono work," he added.

On the Net:

Ya es hora Ciudadanía:

www.yaeshora.info



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