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 From the Los Angeles Times

## Thousands get serious about citizenship

With application fees about to soar, Southland procrastinators join a nationwide rush. Some predict an effect on the 2008 election.

By Jennifer Delson  
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Thousands of Southern California immigrants, many of whom had procrastinated for years about becoming U.S. citizens, rushed this week to get help to complete applications before fees jump 69% on Monday.

Mirroring a nationwide rush, immigrants here have tied up hotlines and packed into centers designed to help them process the paperwork. Applications must be postmarked before Monday to avoid the jump in fees from \$400 to \$675.

Many of those filling out forms Thursday qualified for citizenship many years ago but put off taking the test because they feared they couldn't master the civics lessons and English needed. Others had not seen much benefit in becoming a citizen.

Nationally, the total number of pending citizenship applications reached 811,810 in June, up 67% compared with the same month last year, according to government figures. Applications in Southern California numbered 24,320 just in May, more than twice what was received in May 2006.

In Santa Ana, where more than half the population is foreign born, immigrants filed into the office of Catholic Charities, a nonprofit group that provides immigration assistance. Attendance at its weekly citizenship classes has doubled in recent months, to about 80, and requests for assistance with citizenship applications have tripled in the last two weeks, to about 75 a day.

On Thursday, "by 9:30 a.m., we had a full house already. We've had to turn people away," said Thu Tran, Catholic Charities program director. "The new fees are a lot for our clients. Most of them are low-income families."

About 70 immigrants crowded around counselors at long tables, trying to record their past on the 10-page application, which, if accepted, will lead to a citizenship test within eight months.

The scene, repeated throughout the nation, is one that Latino leaders hope will have an effect on local, state and national elections.

Saturday, numerous workshops across the United States helped immigrants apply for citizenship. Nearly 250 immigrants attended one at L.A. City College. Since then, about 80 people daily have shown up for help at the college's Workforce and Citizenship Center.

"It's been quite crazy, but it's good crazy," said Nelines Colon-Paladini, citizenship program director.

A Saturday event sponsored by Assemblyman Jose Solorio (D-Santa Ana) drew 2,000 to Santa Ana College.

Crowds also lined up in Boston, Las Vegas and Dallas, among other cities, said Eliseo Medina, executive vice president of the Service Employees International Union, which has helped organize citizenship assistance events.

In Las Vegas, more than 200 people showed up at a community center. Organizers had to turn some away and quickly organized another event for Thursday, Medina said.

The federal government is reallocating staff to handle the surge in applications, said Sharon Rummery, spokeswoman for U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services.

"There are many social issues that would encourage a person to naturalize," she said. "And we always see an increase when fees are going up."

### Hotlines burning

At workshops, it is mostly volunteers working for nonprofits who help immigrants with questions such as how often they've traveled abroad or received a parking ticket and whether they have registered with the Selective Service System.

Some choose to complete the application at home and call hotlines for help. Javier Angulo, director of civic education for the National Assn. of Latino Elected and Appointed Officials, said that beginning last week, his organization began answering 700 calls a day. Twelve operators are working 11 hours a day to answer questions at (888) 839-8682.

Angulo said he expected hundreds of people to attend a last-minute workshop today at 1122 W. Washington Blvd., Los Angeles.

Angulo said many new applicants were people who had long contemplated citizenship "but they hadn't sensed an urgency until now."

The failure of Congress to enact immigration reform and growing anti-immigrant sentiment since 9/11 are influencing immigrants to apply, he said.

Medina said he believed immigrants' reaction could influence next year's presidential election.

"People are saying 'We want to be heard,' " he said. "I think we will see an unprecedented number of applications, and I think we will see the effect in November 2008."

An intense media campaign to promote citizenship by Southern California television and radio outlets made many immigrants realize they could have a voice, Angulo added.

Angel Ivan Alvarez, 25, a Whittier real estate agent, sought help in recent weeks even though he's been eligible for citizenship for more than a decade.

Alvarez said he was miffed by Congress' inability to create paths to citizenship for illegal immigrants.

"I think I want to have a voice, to be able to choose those who are governing us," he said.

#### **'It's time'**

Many of those applying at Catholic Charities in Santa Ana on Thursday said they were influenced by reports on the local Spanish-language Univision station, KMEX-TV, which has promoted a citizenship campaign called Ya Es Hora ("It's Time"), sponsored by several community organizations.

Maria Sanchez, 60, said she hadn't taken the citizenship test out of worry that her English wasn't good and that she would never be able to answer questions about the U.S. government.

"I figured residency would be good enough for me, but now I'm not so sure," said Sanchez, a retired tile factory worker who completed sixth grade in Mexico. "Things have changed, and I love this country so much. I don't want to lose what I have."

In the days before filling out the citizenship application this week, Sanchez began studying the three branches of the federal government, hoping, after 35 years in the United States, to become a citizen.

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