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## **Immigrants rush for U.S. citizenship applications ahead of fee hike**

Many immigrants across the United States rushed to finalize their paperwork for U.S. citizenship applications on Friday in an attempt to preempt a 69 percent fee increase, which will be effective next week.

Across Southern California, one of the most favorite destinations for immigrants to the country, volunteers have been helping prospective citizens fill out paperwork at community centers, and they said tens of thousands people have filed their applications this month.

One activist said his group was on target to help 25,000 people apply in July, compared with the normal 1,000 applications per month.

Juan Jose Gutierrez, national coordinator of the Latino Movement USA, said dozens of other groups were helping thousands of other applicants, adding that the citizenship drive will likely result in tens of thousands of new voters ahead of the 2008 presidential elections.

A fee hike by the federal immigration authorities will increase costs from the current 400 U.S. dollars to 675 dollars on Monday.

Dozens of volunteers Friday gathered at the National Association of Latino Elected and Appointed Officials (NALEO) Educational Fund headquarters in Los Angeles to help legal permanent residents apply for citizenship. Applicants must postmark their applications before Monday to avoid paying the new 675-dollar fee.

Since the citizenship drive started in January, NALEO organizers said filings for citizenship applications increased more than 65 percent nationwide for the first part of the year compared to the same period last year. Los Angeles alone has seen an increase of 110 percent.

From July 30, legal residents -- who now pay 330 dollars to file a citizenship application and an additional 70 dollars for fingerprinting -- could have to shell out upwards of 675 dollars for the services. This does not include fees charged by service providers, which could bump up application costs to around a 1,000 dollars.

According to the U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services, the fees are needed to speed up the application process and balance the agency's budget.

Source: Xinhua

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