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Bids for citizenship on rise

Legal, illegal residents want voices heard

By **Fernando Quintero, Rocky Mountain News**
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What are the three branches of government?

Juan Gonzalez stared blankly at the instructor of the citizenship class held this week in the basement of Woodbury Library in north Denver.

"Legislative. Executive. Judicial," said instructor Maria de Cambra in English before switching to Spanish: "Think *legislativo, ejecutivo, judicial* - all Spanish words that sound similar to the English words."

Gonzalez scribbled the Spanish words in a notebook. An older man seated next to him did the same on the back of a grocery receipt.

They were among the 30 students who packed the classroom Thursday evening in preparation for an upcoming citizenship test. In Denver and elsewhere, there's been a surge in citizenship applications, in part because of anxiety fueled by the contentious debate over illegal immigration.

In Colorado, applicants rose sharply, from 6,364 in 2005 to 8,122 in 2006 to nearly 11,000 in the first half of this year alone. Many people sped up the process to avoid a sharp increase in application fees, to \$675 from \$400 starting July 30.

One result: From Fort Collins to Pueblo, citizenship classes are at capacity.

Cambra and others who run similar workshops say feelings of insecurity among all immigrants, illegal and legal, has driven the numbers.

"It's necessary to become a citizen," said Karina Hernandez, a 26-year-old native of Peru who has been a legal resident for the past five years. "There are no guarantees being a resident. Any DUIs, traffic tickets, any problems with the law and they'll deport me. I'm afraid."

Her sentiment was echoed by several others in the class.

"I practically feel like an illegal (immigrant)," said Maria Lourdes Lerma, 55, who has been a legal resident for 18 years. "As a resident, you no longer feel secure. People are saying such ugly things about immigrants. I want more peace in my life."

In addition to the security of citizenship, many legal immigrants are motivated by the right to vote.

"All these people who have been legal residents for so long are waking up and realizing that they have the ability to effect change. They have this enormous untapped power that they're ready to put to use," said Marta Moreno, executive director of El Comite de Longmont, a Hispanic advocacy organization.

Ismael Medina, a native of Mexico who has been a legal resident for 20 years, said he is tired of the anti-immigrant rhetoric and is putting on notice lawmakers who have been vocal critics of illegal immigration.

"The politicians think less of us. I want to become a citizen so I can vote for candidates that aren't against us," said Medina, 40, who works in construction. "I want to vote so we can change the laws so that they're more just."



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The Rocky

Karina Hernandez, 26, originally from Lima, Peru, is a legal resident. She has joined classes at the Woodbury Library because she said "it's necessary to become a citizen."

Maria Pasillas, also originally from Mexico, said she looked forward to casting her first vote in America.

"I want to vote to help immigrants. Many are losing their jobs because of the political climate. I don't like the way they're treated," said Pasillas, 32, who works at a local Italian bakery. "We've all been there. I'll never forget that. My children will never forget."

The Latina Initiative, a Denver-based group that helped organize the weekly citizenship classes at area libraries, is part of a national coalition working to get more legal residents to apply for naturalization and eventually registered to vote.

The coalition's campaign, *Ya Es Hora, Ciudadania!* (It's Time, Citizenship!), has also partnered with Moreno's group.

She said her organization, like the Latina Initiative, is working to get Hispanics involved in local government and schools. She said more than 65 people registered for the last citizenship workshop in July.

"The people we help register for citizenship today, we want them to run for the school board and city council positions tomorrow," she said. "We're going to see a whole lot of changes around here soon. Just wait and see."

Applications in Colorado

2005 6,364

2006 8,122

2007 (through July) 10,892

Requirements for U.S. citizenship

- **Must be at least** 18 years old
- **Must be legal** permanent residents for at least five years with no absences from the United States of more than one year.
- **Must show good** moral character and not have committed any serious crimes.
- **Must take a test** that demonstrates knowledge of American history and form of government.
- **Must be able** to read, write and speak English. Exceptions are made for those who have been residing lawfully in the United States for at least 15 years and are over 55, or have been residents for at least 20 years and are over 50.

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