

Citizenship brings respect, immigrants say

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NEW BEDFORD — Rosa Romero speaks little English and works as a janitor and cook 65 hours a week to feed her family.

This Dominican native might receive a suspicious glance once in a while, but that's OK.

She is an American now.

"As immigrants, we are often discriminated against in many ways," said Mrs. Romero, who became a citizen in 2000. "Becoming a citizen has changed my life. There are new doors open for me, and I can confidently go anywhere. Now, when I say that I am a citizen, I get treated better, with respect."

Twenty local organizations are holding a citizenship drive Saturday at the Southern New England School of Law in Dartmouth under a year-long national effort known as "Ya Es Hora iCidadania!," which translates as "Now it's time of citizenship!"

Organizers said immigrants should take every opportunity to make their voices heard at a time immigration is a major topic of national debate.

"This is an election year," said Rocio Saenz, president of the Service Employees International Union Local 615. "I think that this time we are going to see many, many faces become part of this civic engagement."

Attaining citizenship has allowed Mrs. Romero to speak her mind, she said.

"The best thing about being a citizen is that now I can make my voice be heard; I can vote for a president who will understand the problems and the needs of this immigrant community," she said during a press conference on the steps of City Hall.

According to statistics provided by the campaign, there are 5.7 million immigrants just among the Latino community who qualify for citizenship. The number of immigrants seeking citizenship has steadily risen since 2003 from 463,204 to 702,589, as have application costs.

Ines Goncalves-Drolet of U.S. Rep. Barney Frank's New Bedford office described citizenship as "one of the most valuable rights and privileges" immigrants have.

"Your journey isn't complete until you apply for citizenship," said Mrs. Goncalves-Drolet, a Portuguese immigrant who became a naturalized American citizen in 1982.

"We want them to be able to participate in our political activities," said Mayor Scott W. Lang. "We want them to become full members of our society."

The SNESEL citizenship event runs from 9 a.m. to 2 p.m. at 333 Faunce Corner Road, Dartmouth. The cost of the citizenship application is \$10.

To schedule a time to fill out an application or for more information, call the clinic at (508) 998-9600, Ext. 106, or Crystal Desiree at Ext. 174. For more information, call (888) VE-Y-VOTA or visit www.yaeshora.info.

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