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From the Los Angeles Times

Citizenship applications climb despite fee hike

Growing anti-immigration sentiment is pushing many people to take action so they can vote, experts say.

By Teresa Watanabe
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The number of citizenship applications received in the Los Angeles area tripled in September compared with the same period last year, despite a major application fee increase that immigration experts feared could drastically set back demand.

Nationwide, citizenship applications also increased in August and September compared with last year, according to new figures from the U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services.

The applications are on track to surpass the 1-million mark, a milestone reached only twice in the last century -- both times in the mid-1990s. That's when many illegal immigrants who received amnesty in the 1980s became eligible for citizenship, and a political backlash against them motivated many to apply.

This year, similar dynamics are in place, immigration experts said.

"The anti-immigrant sentiment is bordering on the xenophobic, and people are taking notice of that," said Evan Bacalao of the National Assn. of Latino Elected and Appointed Officials Educational Fund in Los Angeles. "So even though the fees have increased, people still want to make sure their voices are heard."

To help boost the number of new citizens even more, an alliance of hundreds of organizations last week launched a "100 Days" national campaign to urge immigrants to apply for citizenship in time for the 2008 election.

Citizenship workshops will be held in more than 20 cities nationwide, including one held in Bell Gardens on Saturday in collaboration with Assemblyman Hector De La Torre (D-South Gate). Workshop information is available at www.yaeshora.info.

Major Spanish-language media, including Univision Communications Inc. and ImpreMedia, which publishes La Opinion, will air and publish public service announcements urging legal permanent residents to apply for citizenship. It usually takes from nine months to a year to become a citizen, including submitting the initial application, passing English and civics tests and taking the oath of allegiance, Bacalao said.

In addition, the national Latino group this week launched a revolving loan fund initiative to provide zero-interest loans to help immigrants pay the citizenship application fee, which was increased from \$400 to \$675 on July 30. The \$100,000 fund, provided in a grant from Advance America, a cash advance provider, will offer loans up to \$400.

One of the fund's recipients is Julia A. Moreno, 62, a Los Angeles resident and Guatemala native who applied for citizenship in September. Moreno said she would not have been able to pay the application fee without a loan from the fund. She has been able to find only part-time work as a nurse's assistant, makes \$1,080 a month and pays more than half of that in rent, she said.

Moreno said she wanted to become a citizen to vote, get a better job and possibly sponsor her siblings in Guatemala to come to the United States. Although she has been eligible to apply for citizenship for more than a dozen years, she said the fee increases and tougher climate for immigrants pushed her to make the move this year.

"I decided I have to do it now," she said. "I have no choice. They may get rid of green cards next, or increase the fee even more."

Immigrant advocates had sharply protested the fee increase, saying it would bar many eligible but indigent immigrants from seeking citizenship. But immigration officials said the hike was needed because they receive no regular congressional appropriations for their work and must depend on user fees.

It was still unclear what effect the increase has had on new citizenship applications. Because so many applicants rushed to beat the July 30 fee hike, immigration officials said, the normal processing time to issue receipts has grown from two weeks to as long as 15. As a result, some of the applications received in September might have been filed in June or earlier, before the fee increase took effect.

Immigrant advocates in some cities said the increase had driven down the number of new applicants.

"In Chicago, participants in citizenship workshops plummeted in August and September, and we can only attribute that to the fee increase," said Fred Tsao, policy director for the Illinois Coalition for Immigrant and Refugee Rights.

But in Los Angeles, Bacalao said immigrants seeking citizenship continued to pour into his organization's office. "We're still seeing incredible numbers of people coming in," he said.

Citizenship applications in the Los Angeles area hit 24,377 in September, compared with 8,216 during the same month last year. The total number of applications received between January and September this year reached 213,139, compared with 102,150 for all of last year.

Nationally, citizenship applications noticeably declined after the fee increase took effect, dropping from 135,326 in June to 75,121 in August.

But the numbers this year were still higher than in similar months last year -- 80,365 in September, for instance, compared with 59,869 in the same month last year. The number of applications between January and September was 940,087, compared with 781,684 for all of last year.

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