



Betsy Camacho, of Lynn, Mass., an immigrant from El Salvador, appears on the street near a hotel, in Boston, Monday, Nov. 12, 2007. Camacho has been improving her English and learning American civics in hopes of neutralizing in time to vote in next year's presidential elections. (AP Photo/Steven Senne)

Agency Buried in Applications

By SUZANNE GAMBOA – 5 days ago

WASHINGTON (AP) — Millions of people who applied for naturalization and other immigration benefits to beat a midsummer fee increase are caught in a paperwork pileup that threatens the chance for some to become U.S. citizens in time to vote in next November's presidential election.

The application backlog is so large that Citizenship and Immigration Services, a division of the Homeland Security Department, is months behind schedule in returning receipts for checks written to cover fees — an early step in the process.

"Were we caught off guard by the volume? Let's just say it was anticipated it would increase. It was not anticipated it would increase by that much," said Emilio Gonzalez, director of Citizenship and Immigration Services.

The immigration agency would not say how many applications it has received. The American Immigration Lawyers Association, a private legal advocacy group, said it was told by agency officials that 3.5 million applications had come in over a two-month period. The agency projected a workload of 3.2 million applications for fiscal years 2008 and 2009.

Gonzalez ordered his staff to give priority to naturalizations, but some applicants will miss voting in primaries, which begin in January.

"I really want to target the elections," Gonzalez said. "I really want to get as many people out there to vote as possible."

The onslaught of applications has led to some files being sent back with errors or mistakenly rejected, while others seem lost in the system, applicants and attorneys say. Service centers in Nebraska and Texas have the longest delays. The Texas Service Center is working on applications dating from July 26, according to the agency's latest Web posting.

Boston janitor Betsy Camacho, 44, applied for U.S. citizenship on July 27. On Nov. 9, she got a receipt acknowledging the check she wrote for her fees had been deposited and her information was logged in the agency's computer.

Normally such receipts are returned to applicants within a week to 10 days, immigration attorneys said.

"I would like to vote, to participate, to travel with a passport, have freedom of expression," Camacho said. A native of El Salvador, she has lived in the United States for nearly 25 years.

Some groups that have been waging national campaign to help 1 million legal residents become citizens and vote in 2008 fear the pileup will hurt their efforts.

"Everybody keeps saying immigrants don't want to be part of this country, they don't want to assimilate and here people are coming in droves to show how much they want to be part of this country and here are these barriers. I think it's unconscionable," said Eliseo Medina, executive vice president of Service Employees International Union.

The application crush was worsened by another flood of about 300,000 applications from skilled workers wanting to become legal residents. The agency initially said it wouldn't accept the visa applications but changed its mind amid public outrage.

The agency also set up hot lines and is posting progress updates on its Web site. Files are being sent to Vermont and California for processing there. The agency has asked staff members to volunteer to help clear the delayed paperwork, just as the State Department did when confronted with a passport application backlog because of a change in law requiring Americans to show a passport when flying to and from Mexico, Canada and the Bahamas.

At least 110 immigration workers have volunteered to help process applications and are being sent to Texas and Nebraska, said agency spokesman Chris Bentley.

After businesses began to complain that their employees were being grounded, officials also changed regulations to allow immigrants who hold visas for skilled workers and visas for employees of international companies to travel without a receipt.

Still, the situation is hardly under control.

Ashish Bansal applied for a green card on July 2. His application was returned to him twice, citing issues that had not been a problem for other clients of his attorney. The bureaucratic snag forced Bansal to delay plans to travel with his family.

"My application seems to be in a black hole. I don't know when it's going to be accepted," said Bansal, originally from India and now living in Silver Spring, Md. on a skilled worker visa.

Immigration application fees were raised in part so the agency could increase its work force. But the additional workers won't be on board in time to deal with the pileup. They are intended to be on board to adjudicate the applications.

Congress appropriated \$460 million in recent years to Citizenship and Immigration Services to cut previous application backlogs to six months. But that funding ended last fiscal year.

Rendell Jones, the agency's chief financial officer, said the agency could not afford to delay the fee increase until after the presidential elections.

Without the fee increase, the agency estimated it would receive about \$1.25 billion in annual revenue in fiscal years 2008 and 2009. It projected a funding gap of about \$1 billion, but that includes about \$524.3 million in planned improvements. Those include spending \$124.3 million on improved information technology; \$14 million to pay for humanitarian programs such as one resettling Haitians and Cubans and \$41.2 million to provide professional development and training for employees.

To cover the costs, the agency increased fees charged applicants, which can include citizens, rather than ask Congress for more money.

The failure to anticipate the swamp of applications has left some skeptical of the agency and uncertain whether the pileup is political.

"I hope there is no politics involved, but it makes me wonder when it's a Republican administration and those pushing anti-immigrant legislation are Republicans and the ones managing this process are Republicans," Medina said.

On the Net:

- Citizenship and Immigration Services: <http://www.uscis.gov>
- Ya es Hora. !Ciudadania! campaign: <http://www.yaeshora.info/>