



THIS STORY HAS BEEN FORMATTED FOR EASY PRINTING

## Long wait expected to become US citizen Delays spur concern over voting eligibility

*The Boston Globe*

By Maria Sacchetti, Globe Staff | November 21, 2007

Immigrants will face a significantly longer wait to become US citizens because applications surged more than expected before hefty fee increases took effect July 30, Boston's chief immigration official said yesterday.

The delay has raised concern among immigrant advocacy groups that thousands of immigrants might not be eligible to vote in the 2008 presidential elections because they must be US citizens to go to the polls. It has also stirred anxiety among immigrants who are still awaiting word from the government.

Nationally, 784,601 people applied for citizenship before the fees increased this year, compared with 458,964 during the same period the previous year, a 71 percent jump, according to US Citizenship and Immigration Services. Denis Riordan, Boston's district director for the agency, said "processing time will increase and increase, to be frank, significantly."

It is too soon to know how long the process will take, he said, partly because thousands of applications are still sitting in boxes. But he said it will certainly take longer than the current seven months, both in Boston and nationwide. In January, it took four to five months to become a citizen in Boston.

Riordan said national officials are scrambling to come up with a plan to minimize the delays, from offering overtime to hiring more employees.

In Boston, he was already planning to add at least eight officers to a 40-person staff handling these and other cases. Each officer can handle as many as 1,600 citizenship cases a year.

"We are not going to stand by and let that backlog increase significantly," Riordan said. "Whatever it takes to get the job done, we are prepared to do."

But the delays are already unleashing a wave of uncertainty across the region. Immigrants had rushed to beat the fee hikes, which rose from \$400 to \$675, and then heard nothing for months.

Now they are calling help lines, scouring their bank statements to see whether the government has cashed their checks, and shuffling through their mail for letters from the government. Some worry that their applications are lost.

"Some applicants are nervous because they would have expected to have received the notification for an interview at this point, and have not," said Thomas Keown, spokesman for the Irish Immigration Center in Boston. "It's a stressful process for people anyway, but with a delay of this size they get more nervous."

Immigrants are especially concerned about missing out on the 2008 elections, according to advocates. Immigration has become a pivotal issue in the upcoming election, with presidential candidates clashing over what to do about the estimated 12 million illegal immigrants in this country.

Immigrants must be legal residents to apply for citizenship. But many citizens and noncitizens alike rallied in recent years to seek change in immigration law, holding signs at local demonstrations such as "today we march, tomorrow we vote."

"The longer a person takes to become a citizen, the fewer voters you have on the rolls," said Ali Noorani, executive director of the Massachusetts Immigrant and Refugee Advocacy Coalition. "When we're faced with a national election that determines the next president, the last thing we should be doing is keeping people from

voting."

Patricia Montes is a coordinator of community organizers with Centro Presente, a Cambridge-based nonprofit that helps immigrants apply for citizenship. Montes applied to become a citizen just before the fee increase.

She said she only received her appointment to be fingerprinted a few weeks ago, and she is worried that she won't be eligible to vote.

"More than anything I want to vote," said Montes, a journalist with a college degree who arrived from Honduras four years ago. "I believe in democracy. I have few opportunities to participate in the civic life of this country without being a citizen."

Riordan said the agency would try to work quickly, "with or without a national election coming up."

To apply for citizenship, immigrants must fill out an application, pay the fee, be interviewed and tested, and undergo background checks. Applicants must be legal residents for five years, have a basic command of English, and adhere to the US Constitution. Finally, they must attend a swearing-in ceremony.

In raising the fees, the government was seeking to raise an additional \$1 billion to improve services and cover costs for the US Citizenship and Immigration Services, which processes 6 million to 8 million immigration-related applications a year, from work authorizations to asylum and legal permanent residency, called green cards.

But immigration officials said the agency is being buffeted by a "perfect storm," including an average 66 percent increase in agency fees and a federal decision to increase the number of people who could apply for green cards through work, which deluged their office with 800,000 unexpected applications.

The magnitude of the increase in applications caught immigration officials off guard, Riordan said. The fee increases were announced in February, though the final costs weren't released until May.

"We've had fee increases in the past," he said. "But this surge is unprecedented. Maybe people are more aware of the immigration debate and the importance of citizenship," Riordan said.

Maria Sacchetti can be reached at [msacchetti@globe.com](mailto:msacchetti@globe.com). ■