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Citizenship backlog may keep immigrants from polls

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Jaime Soto, of Sunrise, helped almost 500 legal residents file citizenship applications this summer. A looming fee hike was the stick; the opportunity to vote for the next U.S. president was the carrot.

But with a huge surge in citizenship applications to be processed, Soto now wonders whether all those people he helped will make it to the ballot box next November. He fears many will still be waiting for citizenship, forced to sit on the sidelines when elections roll around.

This concern has spread across the United States, especially among leaders of Latino groups that launched a campaign last week to attract new citizens to voter rolls. They warn that this summer's flood of citizenship applications is crashing into government delays and may prevent hundreds of thousands of would-be voters from registering in time.

"I feel frustrated," said Soto, president of the ProColombia Unida organization, which guides eligible immigrants through the citizenship process, among other services.

"We worked hard, with few resources," he said, referring to the scramble to help 487 immigrants apply for citizenship in the three weeks leading up to July's hefty fee increase. "If they don't vote, there won't be change."

U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services reported Wednesday evening that it had received 1.4 million applications for citizenship in the fiscal year that ended in September, double the previous year's total. Most of those came in before the fee increase, which boosted processing fees across the board and pushed citizenship fees to \$595 per application, compared with the previous \$330.

That in turn brought stacks of new paperwork to immigration officers' desks at a time when they had just reduced backlogs. U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services usually takes about six months to complete a successful citizenship request unless the application bogs down in security checks.

"There is a possibility that those who applied for naturalization after June 1 could look at a processing time of 16 to 18 months," said Bill Wright, spokesman for the immigration agency. "That's not a guarantee. We fully intend to beat that. But we want to be open and honest about it and let people know



that this time-frame is possible."

Wright said the agency plans to hire 1,500 more people, government and contract workers, to process the applications.

"We projected a surge. What we were surprised at was the magnitude and immediacy of the increase," he said.

Soto said he has already seen the system slowing. Usually, applicants get a receipt saying their paperwork has arrived within two weeks or a month. So far, most of the immigrants he helped over the summer are still waiting to see that slip of paper.

Cecilia Muñoz, executive vice president of the National Council of La Raza, called the phenomenon a front log — a swell of applications that have been submitted but have yet to be entered into the system.

Unless the front log is cleared soon, she projected hundreds of thousands of immigrants who planned to vote in next year's presidential primaries and elections could miss the chance.

Registration for Florida voters closes Dec. 31 for the presidential primary and Oct. 6 for the 2008 general election.

"It's an unhealthy thing for a democracy when you invite people to the door, but slam it in their face when it comes time to participate," Muñoz said.

Other Latino advocates pointed out that immigration services justified this year's rate increases as a measure needed to scale back processing times, while also upgrading facilities and centralizing data.

"First of all, the fee hikes trample on people who have the least resources to put into this process, and when asked to explain the increase, they told us it was to accommodate increased resources to move the bulk of existing naturalizations forward," said Jorge Mursuli, executive director of Democracia U.S.A, a Miami-based civic engagement group. "That was the bone they were throwing the immigrant community and it perpetuates a lack of credibility in government."

Undeterred by receipt delays, Latino groups and a trio of prominent Spanish-language networks launched the second phase of their "Ya Es Hora," or "It's Time," campaign last week. The drive first focused on eligible residents, encouraging them to apply for citizenship, and has now shifted to citizens as well, asking them to register to vote.

The campaign has featured well-known anchors taking audiences through citizenship requirements and even quizzing them on the naturalization civics test. As elections draw near, organizers also plan to send volunteers door to door with voter registration forms, especially in swing states like Florida.

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