



Aspiring citizens will face new test

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After months of test-marketing, U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services officials believe they have come up with a new citizenship exam that standardizes the naturalization process and does a better job of gauging how well immigrants understand what it means to be American.

The revisions are designed to determine whether legal immigrants applying for citizenship, whose numbers have doubled in Arizona in the past year, have a basic understanding of democracy and U.S. government. The new exam was used earlier this year in communities around the country, including Tucson.

The old test was criticized for being based too much on memorization. Questions that asked aspirants to name the first president have been replaced with queries like "What does the Constitution do?"

"The point (now) is to know the concept so the exact answer is less important . . . so that when they study they will understand the concepts better, which we think will help them integrate into society," said Marie Sebrechts, regional spokeswoman for Citizen and Immigration Services.

Some immigrant advocates worry the new test will make it more difficult for immigrants to become citizens. That could have a major impact on states such as Arizona, which have large immigrant populations.

"Most people who are applying for naturalization have been here a long time. Why are we putting up roadblocks?" said Luis Ibarra, chief executive officer of Friendly House, a non-profit organization that helps immigrants prepare for the naturalization test. Ibarra said there was nothing wrong with the old test.

"If it was broken, I'd say fix it, but it wasn't," Ibarra said.

Test redesigned

Immigration officials began redesigning the naturalization test in 2000 after lawmakers in Congress raised numerous criticisms about the old test. Studies found that the test lacked a standardized scoring system, standardized test content and the ability to assess whether applicants have a meaningful understanding of U.S. history and government.

Officials consulted with immigrant advocates, testing experts, teachers and other stakeholders to come up with a new version with 143 possible questions broken down into five categories: American democracy, government, rights and responsibilities, history and geography.

In February, the agency tested the new exam with 6,000 volunteers in 10 cities: Tucson; Albany, N.Y.; Boston;

Charleston, S.C.; Denver; El Paso; Kansas City, Mo.; Miami; San Antonio, Texas; and Yakima, Wash.

From May to July, the agency expanded the testing to 64 other communities after receiving criticism that the first round did not include a large enough pool of immigrants. The second round was conducted in 13 states: Arizona, California, Colorado, Florida, Illinois, Kansas, Maryland, Massachusetts, Minnesota, Missouri, New York, Texas and Washington.

The pilot testing was to make sure the test was fair for all immigrants, regardless of their nationality, language or educational background, Sebrechts said.

The new version ended up having a passing rate of 92 percent, Sebrechts said, better than the current test, which has an 88 percent passing rate for first-time applicants.

Officials also used input from the test phase to whittle the exam down from 143 questions to 100 questions, she said.

Everyone who applies for citizenship after Oct. 1, 2008, will be required to take the new test. Applicants who apply before Oct. 1, but are given interview dates after Oct. 1, will have the option of taking the old or the new test.

To be eligible for naturalization, applicants must have been lawful, permanent residents for at least five years, or three years if they are married to a U.S. citizen.

The new test will be given as part of the interview process. Each applicant will be given 10 computer-generated questions to answer verbally.

To pass, applicants must answer six of the 10 questions correctly. There is no time limit on the test.

The new test comes at a time when the number of legal immigrants in Arizona applying for citizenship has doubled, in part due to community efforts to boost Latino voting power.

Nearly 22,000 legal immigrants in Arizona applied for citizenship from Oct. 1, 2006, through August this year, compared with about 11,000 during the same period the previous year, according to data from the Phoenix and Tucson offices of the CIS.

Not 'insurmountable'

The new exam is also introduced as the nation's foreign-born population has soared to more than 37 million, or about 12 percent of the total population. Arizona has the eighth-largest foreign-born population of any state.

In 2006, the census estimated that 929,083 of the state's residents were foreign-born, or about 15 percent of the total. Of those, 655,383, or 70 percent, were non-citizens.

Rosalind Gold, a policy director at the National Association of Latino Elected and Appointed Officials, doesn't think the new test itself is a problem.

"We don't think the test is going to be an insurmountable barrier to becoming a citizen," she said.

But she is concerned that groups that offer English and civics classes to help immigrants prepare for the test are unaware of the changes. That will require more outreach by the government.

That is already happening, Sebrechts said.

In September, the agency publicly released the 100 new questions that will be used for the new test to help immigrants study.

Early next year, the agency also will begin distributing books, flash cards and other study materials to community groups that offer civics and English classes to immigrants, Sebrechts said.

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