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Citizenship process backed up

Fee increase caused application deluge before the deadline

Associated Press

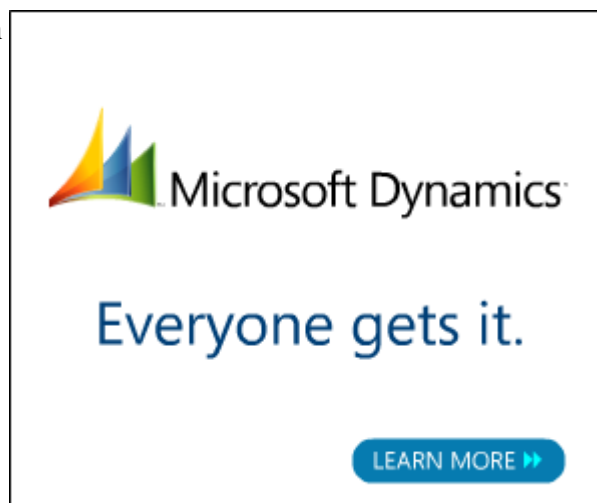
November 25, 2007

WASHINGTON

Betsy Camacho has been working to improve her English and learning civics and history so she can become a U.S. citizen in time to vote in the 2008 presidential election.

But she might not be processed in time - even though the election is a year away.

Camacho and millions of others who applied for naturalization and other immigration benefits just before a midsummer fee increase are caught in an application pileup. Citizenship and Immigration Services, a division of the Department of Homeland Security, is months behind schedule in returning receipts for checks written to cover fees.



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

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

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 application deluge 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 center is working on applications dating from July 26, according to the agency's latest Web posting.

"I would like to vote, to participate, to travel with a passport, have freedom of expression," said Camacho, 44, a Boston janitor who has lived in the United States for nearly 25 years.

Camacho applied for naturalization July 27. On Nov. 9, she received notice that the check she wrote for her fees had been deposited, and her information was entered into the immigration agency's computer system to start the process.

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

"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," said Eliseo Medina, executive vice president of Service Employees International Union. "I think it's unconscionable."

The beat-the-deadline rush was worsened by another flood of about 300,000 applications from skilled workers wanting to become legal residents. The immigration agency initially said it wouldn't accept the visa applications, then reversed that decision 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 July 2. His application was returned twice, noting issues that had not been a problem for other clients of his attorney. The 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 on a skilled-worker visa.

Immigration application fees were raised in part so the agency could increase its workforce. But the additional workers were meant to be in place in time to adjudicate applications and are not yet on board to deal with the current pile of applications.

Congress appropriated \$460 million in recent years to cut previous immigration application backlogs to six months. That funding ended with the last fiscal year.

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

Without the 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 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.

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