

Record-Breaking Number of Immigrants Seek Integration, U.S. Citizenship

September 17th is Citizenship Day—a day to recognize and celebrate all of the immigrants who have chosen to integrate fully and become U.S. citizens. While some fear that demographic shifts threaten American identity, research and experience have shown that today’s immigrants integrate into American society just like generations of immigrants before them. **Citizenship Day is a time to celebrate the many immigrants who have taken a step toward full integration and participation in U.S. civic life.**

Immigrants want to be U.S. citizens. Naturalization is a powerful symbol of integration into U.S. society. People on all sides of the immigration debate want immigrants to assimilate—naturalization and civic participation are key to full integration. It is important that those immigrants who are eligible to naturalize have the opportunity to do so, and that the USCIS have the resources needed to process naturalization applications in a timely matter.

Immigrants must pass stringent eligibility requirements in order to naturalize. Naturalization is not an easy process. In order to become a U.S. citizen, an immigrant must:

- First reside in the United States continuously for five years as a Legal Permanent Resident (three years in the case of the spouse of a U.S. citizen).
- Be of “good moral character,” as determined by a criminal background check with the FBI.
- Be proficient in spoken and written English.
- Demonstrate a basic understanding of U.S. government and history.
- Take an Oath of Allegiance to the United States, its Constitution and laws, and renounce allegiance to any other nation.

Record numbers of immigrants are applying for citizenship. In fiscal year 2007, nearly 1.4 million naturalization applications were filed—almost double the number received the year before. In July 2007 alone, USCIS received more than 460,000 applications, a sevenfold increase over the same period in 2006. Applications increased for several reasons:

- **High fees.** Beginning July 30, 2007, the application fee increased 80 percent to \$675, and many people applied in June and July to qualify under the previous fees.
- **Outreach efforts.** National and local organizations led large citizenship campaigns aimed at naturalizing eligible immigrants.
- **Desire for change.** The immigration debate in Congress and across the country influenced immigrants to become citizens both to protect themselves from deportation and to have a voice in elections and policy decisions.

U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Service is not handling the situation well. Unfortunately, those immigrants who apply for naturalization are forced to wait for long periods of time before their applications are processed and they are sworn in as U.S. citizens.

- **More applications in the backlog.** Applications pending a decision increased from 470,000 at the end of 2006 to 1,130,000 by the end of 2007. USCIS is now saying that they will complete naturalization applications within 10 to 12 months of filing the application. This is at least double the five month processing times USCIS has promised.
- **High fees, bad service, endless backlogs.** The processing of naturalization applications has been funded almost entirely through fees paid by the applicants themselves. The fees

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have increased significantly (610% since 1998), but the service and the backlogs have not gotten any better.

- **Processing times vary significantly.** USCIS has announced the projected processing time for each local office as of the end of September 2008. The longest processing time is 14.9 months in Charlotte, NC. (Note that a 14.9 month processing time means that applications from July 2007 would still not be completed by the end of September 2008.) **New Orleans is 14.5 months, Dallas is 11 months, Miami 12 months, and Los Angeles 12.5 months.** The shortest projected processing time is five months, and that was projected for 17 offices around the country. However, it remains to be seen whether the local offices will actually meet those projections, or if they will remain even more backlogged.

Naturalization must be a priority for both candidates. There are tens of thousands of immigrants who tried to take another step toward achieving the American dream and applied for naturalization a year before the election, hoping to cast their votes in November and have their voices heard—but they will not be able to do so. Both political parties must commit to promoting naturalization so that more eligible immigrants can take that step toward full civic participation in the U.S. Furthermore, both parties must commit to providing USCIS the resources they need and making the structural changes necessary to eliminate the unacceptably long backlogs.

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