

Agency Acts to Cut Delay in Gaining Citizenship

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Federal officials said Friday that they had agreed on an emergency plan to hire back about 700 retired government employees in an effort to pare an immense backlog in applications for citizenship by legal immigrants.

Under the plan, first proposed by Senator Charles E. Schumer, Democrat of New York, retired workers could return to the federal Citizenship and Immigration Services agency without sacrificing any part of their pensions. The agency will be authorized to hire former employees who have long since passed training programs and could be on the job quickly to help handle the more than one million citizenship applications filed in the first 10 months of last year, Mr. Schumer said.

The required waiver was approved in a letter on Thursday to immigration officials from Linda M. Springer, the director of the Office of Personnel Management.

The rehiring program is one step to help the immigration agency overcome an embarrassing backlog. Legal immigrants, saying they were spurred by a fee increase that took effect July 30 and by worries raised in the fierce political debate over immigration, applied in huge numbers last summer to become citizens. They were aided by a nationwide drive led by Hispanic groups and Univision, the Spanish-language television network.

According to its Web site, the immigration agency is projecting that it could take up to 18 months to process citizenship applications received after June 1. Hispanic groups have protested that hundreds of thousands of applicants would be unable to vote in the presidential election.

“It’s a problem of their own making,” William Ramos, director of the Washington office of the National Association of Latino Elected and Appointed Officials Educational Fund, said of the agency. “We kept telling them, there is going to be a surge.”

In recent days, the immigration agency confirmed that it received 1,026,951 citizenship applications from last January to October, nearly double the number in that period in 2006.

The agency also received a deluge of other immigration petitions.

Hispanic groups have demanded that the agency complete by July 4 the naturalizations of all immigrants who applied in the 2007 fiscal year, which ended Sept. 30, Mr. Ramos said.

Normally, when retired federal employers return to work, their salaries are reduced by the amount of their pension payments. Under the new waiver, retired workers who return to the immigration agency will receive full salary as well as their regular pension payments.

Christopher Bentley, a spokesman for Citizenship and Immigration Services, said the agency was also reorganizing its work force and imposing mandatory overtime on current workers.

The immigration agency plans to hire at least 1,500 new regular employees by the end of this year, Mr. Bentley said.