

## **Fee increase triggers immigration applications deluge; may delay naturalizations**

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(AP) - WASHINGTON-Millions of people who applied for naturalization and other immigration benefits to beat a midyear fee increase are caught in a paperwork pileup that threatens the chances for some to become U.S. citizens in time to vote in next year's presidential election.

The application backlog is so large that 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, an early step in the process. "Were we caught off guard by the volume? Let's just say it was anticipated it would increase. It was not anticipated it would increase by that much," said Emilio Gonzalez, director of Citizenship and Immigration Services.

The immigration agency would not say how many applications it has received. The American Immigration Lawyers Association, a private legal advocacy group, said it was told by agency officials that 3.5 million applications had come in over a two-month period. The agency had projected a workload of 3.2 million applications for the period Oct. 1, 2007-Sept. 30, 2009, the budget years 2008 and 2009.

Gonzalez ordered his staff to give priority to naturalizations, but some applicants will miss voting in presidential primaries, which begin in January, preliminary voting for next year's November elections.

"I really want to target the elections," Gonzalez said. "I really want to get as many people out there to vote as possible."

The onslaught of applications 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 Service Center is working on applications dating from July 26, according to the agency's latest Web posting.

Boston janitor Betsy Camacho, 44, applied for U.S. citizenship on July 27. On Nov. 9, she got a receipt acknowledging the check she wrote for her fees had been deposited and her information was logged in the agency's computer.

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

"I would like to vote, to participate, to travel with a passport, have freedom of expression," Camacho said. A native of El Salvador, she has lived in the United States for almost 25 years.

Some groups that have been waging national campaign to help 1 million legal residents become citizens and vote in 2008 fear the pileup will hurt their efforts.

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

The application crush was worsened by another flood of about 300,000 applications from skilled workers wanting to become legal residents. The agency initially said it would not accept the visa applications but changed its mind 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 this year when confronted with a passport application backlog because of a change in law requiring Americans to show passports 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 receipts.

Still, the situation is hardly under control.

Ashish Bansal applied for a green card on July 2. His application was returned to him twice, citing problems that others of his attorney's clients had not experienced. The bureaucratic 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 on a skilled worker visa in a Washington suburb.

Immigration application fees were raised in part so the agency could increase its work force. But the additional workers will not be on board in time to deal with the pileup.

Congress appropriated \$460 million (â, -311.1 million) in recent years to Citizenship and Immigration Services to cut previous application backlogs to six months. That funding ended last budget year.

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

Without the fee increase, the agency estimated it would receive about \$1.25 billion (â, -850 million) in annual revenue in fiscal years 2008 and 2009. It projected a funding gap of about \$1 billion (â, -680 million), but that includes about \$524.3 (â, -354.6) million in planned improvements. Those include spending \$124.3 million (â, -84.1 million) on improved information technology; \$14 million (â, -9.5 million) to pay for humanitarian programs such as resettling Haitians and Cubans; and \$41.2 million (â, -27.9 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 avalanche 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. Membership of the Service Employees International Union, like that of other organizations with many immigrant members, is heavily Democratic.