

Goal Set for Reducing Backlog on Citizenship Applications

THE NEW YORK TIMES

March 15, 2008

By JULIA PRESTON

Immigration officials said on Friday that they expected to complete about 930,000 citizenship applications in the fiscal year ending Sept. 30, reducing a huge backlog in a time frame that would allow many new citizens to register to vote in the November elections.

The projection from the federal Citizenship and Immigration Services agency came as its director, Emilio T. Gonzalez, praised his staff in a statement, saying it had reduced overall waiting times for immigrants seeking to become American citizens to a maximum of 16 months, from an 18-month projection Mr. Gonzalez made in January.

But the agency's internal figures on the applications that remain in the pipeline indicate that to meet its goal it will have to work much faster than it has in recent months. Of 1,051,186 naturalization applications the agency is processing, 75 percent are still in the early phases of being logged in and placed in line for scheduling of several required steps, the figures show.

Only 262,780 applications are in the time-consuming later phases, when applicants must submit fingerprints and pass required background checks, and English and civics tests, according to the figures, which were provided by Congressional staff members.

Lawmakers from both parties and Latino immigrant groups have criticized Mr. Gonzalez's agency for underestimating a surge of citizenship applications in the last year, which was driven not only by anticipation of fee increases but also by rising interest in the presidential race. The delays threatened to leave more than one million immigrants who applied last summer to become citizens without a chance to vote in November.

Chris Rhatigan, a spokeswoman for the agency, said officials there expected to complete by Sept. 30 all the naturalization applications received last June and more than half from July, the peak months of the surge.

She said the agency was not timing naturalizations to the November elections. "We don't do anything based on the election cycle," she said, adding that the applications would be evaluated "without compromising national security or the quality or integrity of the immigration system."

Lawmakers noted that even if the agency met its projection, hundreds of thousands of immigrants who had applied since June would not be naturalized in time to vote in November.

“Certainly we welcome any progress that U.S.C.I.S. makes in clearing up the backlog,” said Senator Edward M. Kennedy, Democrat of Massachusetts, who is chairman of the Senate Judiciary subcommittee on immigration. “But even their best projection leaves half a million people out in the cold, unable to vote.”