

Naturalization paperwork jam hits Texas hard

Backlog may keep some from casting votes for president

Nov. 21, 2007

By SUZANNE GAMBOA
Associated Press

WASHINGTON — Millions of people who applied for naturalization and other immigration benefits to beat a midsummer fee increase are caught in a paperwork pileup that threatens the chance for some to become U.S. citizens in time to vote in next November's presidential election.

The application backlog is so large that Citizenship and Immigration Services, a division of the Homeland Security Department, is months behind schedule in returning receipts for checks written to cover fees — an early step in the process.

The onslaught of applications has led to some files being sent back with errors or mistakenly rejected, while others appear to be lost in the system, applicants and attorneys say. Service centers in Texas and Nebraska have the longest delays. The Texas Service Center is working on applications dating from July 26, according to the agency's latest Web posting.

"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 projected a workload of 3.2 million applications for fiscal years 2008 and 2009.

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 crush was worsened by another flood of about 300,000 applications from skilled workers wanting to become legal residents. The agency initially said it wouldn't 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 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 are being sent to Texas and Nebraska to help process applications, the agency said.