

Surge Brings New Immigration Backlog

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Immigration authorities are swamped in new bureaucratic backlogs resulting from an unanticipated flood last summer of applications for citizenship and for residence visas, officials said.

In July and August alone, the federal Citizenship and Immigration Services agency received 2.5 million applications, including petitions for naturalization as well as for the entire range of immigrant visas. That was more than double the total applications it received in the same two months in 2006, said a spokesman, Bill Wright.

In the 2007 fiscal year, which ended Sept. 30, the agency received 1.4 million petitions from legal immigrants to become United States citizens, about double the number of naturalization petitions in the 2006 fiscal year, Mr. Wright said.

The surge began after Jan. 31 when the immigration agency announced fee increases averaging 66 percent for most applications, official figures show. The increases went into effect July 30. The contentious tenor of the immigration debate also prompted legal immigrants to apply for citizenship. "We did our absolute best to foresee the surge we would have," Mr. Wright said. "We certainly were surprised by such an immediate increase with such a volume."

The deluge has been so great that the agency is struggling to send out notices acknowledging it has received the applications. According to a special Web page the agency set up for applicants, as of Nov. 16 the agency's processing center in Texas is sending out receipts for naturalization petitions that arrived by July 26. The processing center in Vermont is just now acknowledging naturalization petitions that came in by July 30.

Also contributing to the surge are about 300,000 applications in July and August for legal permanent resident visas, commonly known as green cards, from highly skilled immigrants. The jump in applications for the employment-based green cards resulted from the resolution of a mix-up in June between Immigration and Citizenship Services and the State Department, which is responsible for making visas available. The agencies had first invited the applications, then said they would not be accepted. They then reversed course, agreeing to accept them.

Immigration officials said it could take more than a year to decide many of the recent applications.

The processing backlogs are different from the visa backlogs that have burdened the United States immigration system for years. Because of annual limits on all green cards, immigrants from some countries like Mexico and the Philippines often have to wait decades for visas to become available. Now the agency has fallen behind on the bureaucratic work of logging in applications and deciding whether to grant visas or allow immigrants to become United States citizens.

In addition to the fee increase, the rush of naturalization requests was also prompted by anti-immigrant language in the debate over immigration policy this year, lawyers and advocates for immigrants said. Also, the immigration authorities had announced they were preparing a new, more difficult test for aspiring citizens, which they unveiled in September.

“People are scared,” said Ignacio Donoso, an immigration lawyer at the Monty Partners firm in Houston. “And they want to avoid the fees, and they do not want to face a more demanding test. So you are going to have people running like mad to apply, yet the government doesn’t hire any more staff to handle it.”

Citizenship and Immigration Services is required by Congress to draw most of its operating budget from fees. When the agency head, Emilio T. Gonzalez, announced the fee increases in January, he pledged that the agency would become more efficient and reduce wait times for deciding applications. Fees for naturalization, for example, increased 66 percent, to \$675 from \$405.

The agency plans to use the higher revenues to hire 1,500 employees, an increase of about 10 percent over its current staff of 15,000, Mr. Wright said. For the time being, agency employees have volunteered to work overtime to help clear the backlog.

Much of the rush for naturalization came from legal Latino immigrants. Hispanic organizations, including the National Association of Latino Elected and Appointed Officials Educational Fund, and Univision, the Spanish-language television network, led a nationwide naturalization campaign this year in which hundreds of thousands of longtime legal immigrants signed up to become citizens.

Immigration officials said they would work to complete naturalization petitions in time for new citizens to vote in the elections next November. They strongly denied that the delays had any partisan political motivation.

“We know what this issue is,” Mr. Wright said, but he cautioned there were limits to how much the agency could expedite its procedures.

“We are not going to sacrifice quality or security to speed up just to get the numbers,” he said.