

U.S. agency looks at eliminating old green cards

About 750,000 IDs issued without expiration dates would be void. Immigration advocates say it's a ploy to round up legal permanent residents who have committed crimes.

By Anna Gorman
Los Angeles Times
December 10, 2007

U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services is considering a proposal to eliminate hundreds of thousands of green cards issued years ago without expiration dates, a move that would help the agency track down individuals who have committed crimes and might be eligible for deportation.

By requiring immigrants to reapply for new cards, the federal agency would be able to update their personal information, conduct background checks and electronically store their fingerprints and photographs.

Authorities estimate there are 750,000 such green cards in circulation -- some of which are now nearly 30 years old. They were issued between 1979 and 1989.

Newer cards, which expire after 10 years, are equipped with technology that makes them less susceptible to fraud, immigration services spokeswoman Sharon Rummery said. For example, the new cards feature miniature images of all the U.S. presidents, she said. "There is, of course, a security aspect to it," she said. "It's harder to counterfeit the newer green cards."

Groups that favor more controls on immigration said the change is necessary for national security. The new cards provide "at least a speed bump along the road" for counterfeiters, said Rick Oltman, spokesman for Californians for Population Stabilization. "With freedom comes responsibility," Oltman said. "It doesn't seem to be too onerous a thing to require them to get new green cards that provide greater security and give us all greater peace of mind."

But some immigration attorneys and advocates said the proposal is just another way to round up legal permanent residents with criminal records. Under the law, green card holders who have committed certain crimes are eligible for deportation.

"They don't have the manpower to find these people," said Los Angeles immigration attorney Carl Shusterman. "This makes it kind of easy. The people will have to come to them. . . . A lot of people will be put into deportation proceedings."

Shusterman said that since the proposal was made public, his office has received several calls from permanent residents who said they have committed crimes and worry about being deported.

Shusterman and other attorneys said they don't know what to advise the callers. If they apply for a new green card, they could face deportation. If they don't, they might be unable to travel, change jobs or apply for citizenship.

"It creates a very awkward situation," said Mark Yoshida, staff attorney at the Asian Pacific American Legal Center in Los Angeles. "I really can't say that there is one better alternative than another. . . . The government has used this as another way to tighten the screws on immigrants."

Anti-illegal immigration activist Barbara Coe said requiring the cardholders to reapply would hold them accountable.

"There are plenty of violent criminals out there among these people," she said. "I think it would track these people."

Some attorneys are urging those without criminal records to apply now, even before it is required, to prevent getting stuck in a backlog.

Japanese immigrant Yuichi Iwaki heard about the proposal and decided to apply for a new green card about a month ago to replace the one he has had since 1986. Iwaki, 58, is a professor at USC's Keck School of Medicine and frequently travels to Asia and Europe to lecture, so he didn't want to encounter any problems down the line.

Iwaki said the process was "a pain" but that he was lucky he could afford the fees and an attorney to help.

"Whether we like it or not, we have to go through it," he said. "We have to follow the rules."

Some attorneys are critical of the high fees, which increased this summer and are insurmountable for many immigrant families. A new green card costs \$290, along with \$80 in fingerprinting and photo fees.

Immigration attorney Noemi Ramirez said she understands the need to eliminate the old green cards and update them, but said the fees should be waived for these cardholders.

"They were given a green card with no expiration date," Ramirez said.

The proposal was announced in the summer, but immigration services has not made a final decision on when it might adopt the new rule. Should it go forward, legal permanent residents would have 120 days to apply for new cards. Attorneys said that might not be enough time to get the word out and for people to save money and apply.

Immigration attorney Yeu Hong said he has concerns about the cost and the timeline, but he agrees that the old cards are outdated and aren't the best form of identification. Some of the photos on the old cards are three decades old and don't look anything like the cardholder now.

"In this day and age, I don't think it's necessarily a bad thing to update the system and use new technology," he said.