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## **U.S. Raising Visa Fees 66% on Average, to Advocates' Dismay**

By JULIA PRESTON.

The federal agency that handles immigration visas confirmed yesterday that it would raise its fees by an average of 66 percent starting July 30. The step made final an increase first proposed in January, and drew a new outcry from immigration lawyers and advocacy groups.

The announcement by the agency, United States Citizenship and Immigration Services, followed its review of some 3,900 letters it received during a two-month period for public comment. Given those comments — posted online at [www.regulations.gov](http://www.regulations.gov) — the agency made minor adjustments to its proposal, unveiled on Jan. 31.

Among the many fees that will rise is the one for a legal immigrant to apply to become a United States citizen; it will increase 66 percent, to \$675 from \$405. An immigrant applying to become a legal permanent resident will pay \$1,010, a 155 percent increase over the current \$395 fee.

To limit the cost increases for immigrant families with children, the fee for each child 14 years and under who applies with at least one parent to become a legal permanent resident was set at \$600. That is a 25 percent reduction from the agency's proposal. But the \$1,010 fee for adults is a slight increase, of \$25, over the proposal.

The agency also said it would waive fees for victims of human trafficking, for refugees who are granted asylum in the United States, for some teenage immigrants and for immigrants fleeing domestic abuse who seek residency under the terms of the Violence Against Women Act.

Fees for a visa for a child adopted from a foreign country will increase to \$700 from \$545. But for parents facing long waits for children, the agency said, it will extend the adoption visa petitions once at no cost.

The agency said it would use the additional revenue to improve efficiency and upgrade its buildings and computer systems, and officials promised to reduce the average time for processing visa applications by 20 percent by the fall of 2009.

As a matter of policy, the agency pays its annual operating costs, which vary by year, from its fees. Its officials rejected calls from some immigrant groups that Congress be

asked to provide money to offset some fee increases, said Chris Bentley, a spokesman for the agency.

Leaders of immigration advocacy groups said the higher fees would discourage legal immigrants from becoming American citizens. One such critic was William Ramos, director of the Washington office of the National Association of Latino Elected and Appointed Officials Educational Fund, a group that has been leading a naturalization drive for legal immigrants in Los Angeles.

“This is a fundamentally flawed system of financing our immigration services,” Mr. Ramos said. “It places an unfair burden on folks who want to become citizens and participate in all the nation has to offer.”

Immigration lawyers predicted that the increases would in effect disenfranchise many legal immigrants who might otherwise vote in 2008.

“A large proportion of people eligible for citizenship are low-wage workers, and they will have to save their pennies to pay these fees,” said Crystal Williams, deputy director of the American Immigration Lawyers Association. “The practical effect will be that they are going to miss the 2008 election.”

The director of Citizenship and Immigration Services, Emilio T. Gonzalez, was ready to announce the increases last month, but held off until Senate and White House negotiators could reach agreement on a bipartisan bill to overhaul the immigration system, administration officials said.

If the Senate bill becomes law, the agency will face an immense new workload. Among other measures, the bill includes provisions to eliminate the current backlog of four million visa applications within eight years.

Mr. Gonzalez said yesterday that the fee increases were “both fair to our customers and vital to our nation as we continue to build a secure and efficient national immigration service.”