

Citizenship test, called 'too simple,' will be rewritten U.S. plans to begin using exam emphasizing civics in early 2008

By EDWARD HEGSTROM Copyright 2005 Houston Chronicle

The test to become a U.S. citizen will be revamped to emphasize civics instead of trivia.

Alfonso Aguilar, the head of the Office of Citizenship at U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services, says he hopes to have the test redesigned by January 2007 and in place a year later.

Currently, 97 percent of those who take the citizenship test pass, Aguilar said Tuesday. He said he wants to revamp it so that those who take the test are required to show some "attachment" to the United States and its Constitution.

"We're not going to give away citizenship," Aguilar said.

He said he was particularly concerned that so many of the questions on the current test require memorization instead of understanding.

"The current test has seven questions on the color of the flag," Aguilar said. He said he would prefer more questions testing knowledge about the function of Congress or the meaning of the Declaration of Independence.

But Aguilar added that some immigrants come here with low education levels, and he does not believe they should be excluded from becoming citizens.

The government began studying changes to the test in 1997. The effort is expected to cost more than \$6 million.

More than 400,000 immigrants take the citizenship test each year, including more than 13,000 in Houston.

Reaction to the ongoing process of reformulating the test has been mixed.

"The citizenship test is too simple," said Pablo Bexler, an Argentinian who teaches a citizenship test preparation class at the Central American Refugee Center in Gulfton.

"There are many people who don't understand the difference between the legislative and judicial branches of government."

But Bexler said some uneducated immigrants find it particularly difficult to pass the literacy test.

That has also been the experience in the Vietnamese community, said Ha Hoa Dang, with Boat People SOS, a group that aids Vietnamese refugees.