

Push for Immigrants to Become Citizens

By Michael Howard Saul

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The mayors of the nation's three largest cities—New York, Los Angeles and Chicago—plan to launch a new effort on Wednesday to increase citizenship among legal permanent residents, an effort officials hope will spread across the country.

The initiative, titled "Cities for Citizenship," will help the three cities expand naturalization programs and other ventures dedicated to helping immigrants secure their financial footing through counseling, legal assistance and microloans.

Citigroup, C +0.10% the founding corporate partner, is contributing more than \$1.1 million.

The initiative comes as the number of legal immigrants becoming citizens is on the rise. Last year, naturalizations in the U.S. increased to 779,929, up nearly 3% from 2012, according to the U.S. Department of Homeland Security, which oversees immigration.

In the New York metro area, naturalizations have increased at the greatest pace among metropolitan areas nationwide, up roughly 37% in 2013 compared with 2011. In the Los Angeles metro area, naturalizations climbed about 12% between 2011 and 2013, while in the metro region that includes Chicago, the number of naturalizations has remained stagnant, mirroring many other places nationwide.

"Citizenship is a powerful poverty-fighting tool because it brings huge economic benefits to families and to communities," New York City Mayor Bill de Blasio said. "More than that, it helps keep families together."

A report to be released Wednesday—from the Center for Popular Democracy and the National Partnership for New Americans, two nonprofit groups, and the University of Southern California—shows the economic benefit that citizenship brings to local economies.

According to the report, the increase in earnings to immigrants, who otherwise wouldn't have become citizens, is estimated to add between \$1.8 and \$4.1 billion over 10 years to New York's economy; between \$1.6 billion and \$2.8 billion in Los Angeles; and between \$1 billion and \$1.6 billion in Chicago.

Among the nearly nine million permanent residents nationwide who are eligible for citizenship, there are currently about 450,000 New Yorkers who are "one step away" from becoming naturalized, Mr. de Blasio said. Many haven't completed the process because of the cost, Mr. de Blasio said, but the new initiative will help them navigate the legal process and obtain financial assistance.

Chicago Mayor Rahm Emanuel said his goal is to make Chicago "the most immigrant-friendly" city in the country.

Almost half of all new businesses are started by immigrants, Mr. Emanuel said. "So, you can't be pro-small business and anti-immigrant," he said. "They're inconsistent."

Bob Annibale, global director of community development at Citigroup, said statistics clearly show poverty levels are much higher among foreign-born residents than those who have become citizens.

"So, there really is a value in helping people not only to build a national identity, but with that, their financial identity," Mr. Annibale said. "And that's sort of the role where we felt we could be part of this."

As part of the initiative, the Mayor's Office of Immigrant Affairs in New York City will issue a study on the economic impact of citizenship programs for mayors across the country in hopes of demonstrating the value of funding naturalization programs as a way to combat poverty.

"Immigrants are the backbone of our economy," Los Angeles Mayor Eric Garcetti said. "It's time we encouraged their successful integration into our social and political tapestry to continue boosting our economy and not stand in the way of it."

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