

## **NATURALIZATION NUMBERS INCREASE BUT BARRIERS TO CITIZENSHIP REMAIN**

### **WE NEED YOUR HELP TO PROTECT ACCESS TO CITIZENSHIP**

U.S. citizenship is an important part of achieving the American Dream and full participation in civic society. The recent elections demonstrate increased energy among Latinos in taking advantage of the privileges of citizenship – exit polls show that the Hispanic vote increased over the last election and played a pivotal role in key elections. (See NCLR 2006 Poll of Latino Voters and [www.immigration2006.org](http://www.immigration2006.org))

The energy in immigrant and Latino communities which mobilized historic immigrant rights rallies last spring has also had an impact on citizenship rates. Over the past year, the number of naturalization applications has increased, as more and more long-term immigrants take the last step toward U.S. citizenship. The “Today We March, Tomorrow We Vote” slogan of last spring’s marches has translated into increased levels of naturalization. Over the past several months, organizations have conducted citizenship drives and naturalization workshops, helping thousands of long-term immigrants become U.S. citizens.

These are all hopeful signs that our community is energized and beginning to demonstrate major impact. However, this momentum is very much at risk because of proposed changes in the naturalization process. Indeed, **it is possible that the Administration will implement major new barriers to naturalization that could severely undermine immigrants’ ability to obtain citizenship, access to the vote, and meaningfully participate in U.S. civic life.** There are currently more than eight million legal permanent residents eligible for citizenship but they have not yet applied. NCLR wants to ensure that all eligible immigrants have a fair opportunity to become citizens. Unfortunately, changes in the naturalization process and the cost are likely to present serious barriers to naturalization for many individuals who want to become U.S. citizens.

These measures go far beyond the debate over undocumented immigration and threaten legal immigrants’ ability to become citizens and have their voices heard.

NCLR is closely monitoring the following developments:

#### **1. Application fees could nearly double**

The current fee for the N-400 naturalization application is \$400 per adult and \$255 for each child’s N-600, plus the cost of fingerprints, photographs, English language and civics instruction, and application assistance. A family of four currently needs to pay more than \$1,000 to naturalize.

Yet, the U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services (USCIS) has announced that they will seek another fee increase in 2007. The new fee may be as high as \$600 per N-400. There have also

been reliable rumors that additional fee increases may drive the cost up to as much as \$1,000 per application.

The new fee increase puts the dream of U.S. citizenship beyond the reach of many of our nation's immigrants and discourages applicants. The first fee increases are expected to be announced in the *Federal Register* in January. NCLR will alert you about proposed fee increases and will work with our coalition organizations to try to prevent fee increases.

**What you can do: We urge you to write to your senators and representatives and to USCIS now and urge them not to increase naturalization fees.**

## **2. New naturalization exam may discourage applicants**

For years, the USCIS (and INS prior to that) have been moving toward redesigning the naturalization English language and civics exam. The questions for the newly redesigned history and civics test were recently unveiled and are attached. The new questions are quite different from the old questions in terms of the scope of knowledge tested and vocabulary required. The new questions will be pilot tested in various cities around the country, and the final set of questions will be determined by the results of the pilot.

A new test also means there will be a need for new study materials, new test preparation, and new curricula for English language and civics instructors. Additional outreach to the immigrant community will also be necessary to educate potential applicants about the new test content and procedures and to encourage naturalization.

**What you can do: You can pilot test the questions. Give your students or clients the new test questions and see how they do. Report your findings to NCLR.**

## **3. Application procedures could increase the cost and complexity of applying**

USCIS is in the process of developing an electronic filing system for all immigration applications. We understand that applicants would have to fill out a lengthy form and pay a fee to open an Immigration Account prior to online filing. While online filing may be a welcome option for many, other populations may be negatively affected if they are forced to file their applications electronically. Many immigrants lack access to computer systems, and opening an Immigration Account is a daunting process. Electronic filing would mean that community organizations would have to take on the additional task of educating immigrants about online processing and assisting them with the process.

Each of these developments has the potential to make the naturalization process more difficult for eligible immigrants. NCLR believes that U.S. citizenship is the key to full political participation and improving the life opportunities for our communities. We will continue to update you on these developments and will work with you to ensure that naturalization remains fair and accessible. Please look out for action alerts, updates, and other advocacy opportunities.

Articles about increases in naturalization applications and the proposed changes are pasted below. Attached are sample letters to USCIS urging them to break down the barriers to citizenship.

**What you can do: We urge you to write letters, place op eds, and get the word out. We need everyone's help to protect access to citizenship and the vote!**

For more information, please contact Michele Waslin, Director of Immigration Policy Research, at [mwaslin@nclr.org](mailto:mwaslin@nclr.org).