

## **CITIZENSHIP DRIVE GATHERS STEAM RESPONSE: 300 SIGN UP FOR A WORKSHOP ORGANIZED IN SAN BENITO COUNTY.**

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**Byline:** DALE RODEBAUGH, Mercury News Staff Writer

### **Body**

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A six-month effort to help immigrants in **San Benito County** become citizens is gaining momentum, said Margaret Rebecchi, who **organized** the **drive**.

"It's a very intimidating process for many people, so we're taking them by the hand and saying, 'It's not difficult to become a citizen,' " Rebecchi said.

As evidence, Rebecchi noted the nearly **300** immigrants who **signed up** for a **workshop** last week to review **citizenship** applications and have their photographs and fingerprints taken.

The **workshop** was the first conducted in Northern California by the National Association of Latino Elected and Appointed Officials, Rebecchi said.

Residents of Gilroy as well as **San Benito**, Monterey and Santa Cruz **counties** were among those who enrolled, Rebecchi said. While the majority were Mexican-Americans, the **sign-up** sheet included names of immigrants from Portugal, the Philippines, Iran and Italy.

Beginning next month, mock interviews will be conducted to prepare applicants for their face-to-face quizzing by Immigration and Naturalization Service officials, Rebecchi said.

The culmination will occur at a ceremony July 3 in Hollister to swear in new citizens, Rebecchi said. It will mark the first time that a swearing-in ceremony has been held in the **county**.

When she learned from a survey in June that 400 parishioners of Hollister's Sacred Heart Church were interested in becoming citizens, Rebecchi, 45, a daughter of Mexican farmworkers, knew what she had to do.

Taking a six-month leave from her teaching job, Rebecchi persuaded the **San** Jose-based Center for Employment Training to offer classes in U.S. history and government at Sacred Heart Church. The agency also agreed to administer the final test in Hollister, saving students the **drive** to **San** Jose.

Rebecchi then began to get out word about what she called the **San Benito County Citizenship** Project. She recorded radio spots, spoke to church and senior citizen groups, distributed fliers to businesses and visited farm labor camps.

Ten to 15 regular volunteers helped by showing the immigrants how to fill out applications.

"The controversy over Proposition 187 and the Simpson bill in Congress that would deny benefits to aliens legally in the country had a lot to do with people getting interested in becoming citizens," Rebecchi said.

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In addition to preparing immigrants for their interview with the INS, the training program beginning in December will include English and a course on the voting process, Rebecchi said.

"I've learned that new citizens - and even natural-born citizens - don't vote because they're intimidated by the process. They don't know how to fill out a registration form, ask for an absentee ballot or find a polling place," Rebecchi said.

While the employment training program focuses on non-citizens, Rebecchi in February will offer non-voting citizens a class on the voting process.

"There is so much apathy because people have given up on politicians and are unhappy with government. I want justice for all citizens. But they have to participate, they have to exercise their right to vote," Rebecchi said.

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