

## **ALL ABOARD THE CITIZEN SHIP;**

### **THE RUSH FOR NATURALIZATION, DRIVEN PARTLY BY NEW WELFARE RULES, IS KEEPING INS OFFICES IN THE TWIN CITIES BUSY. BUT MANY OLDER, NON-ENGLISH-SPEAKING RESIDENTS MAY BE LEFT BEHIND.**

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## **Body**

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It's the year of the flood all right - a flood of legal immigrants and refugees applying for U.S. citizenship. In Bloomington, they crowd the waiting rooms and line the corridors of the U.S. Immigration and **Naturalization** Service's district **office**.

Don't bother calling. Immigration service officials say they don't have the staff to answer most calls, so people must go to the **office** on 2901 Metro **Drive**, near the Mall of America.

"What we're doing is losing ground," said Bill Adams, a district INS official. The processing lag of six months, Adams said, could stretch longer because of the influx. Currently, 4,463 cases are pending.

Altogether, as **many** as 10,000 Minnesota **residents** could apply for U.S. citizenship in the fiscal year that ends Sept. 30. If that happens, last year's record number of newly **naturalized citizens** - about 5,300 - will be easily eclipsed.

The **new** federal **welfare** cuts are **behind** much of the surge. Most noncitizens are ineligible for such benefits as Supplemental Security Income grants and food stamps. Unless they become U.S. **citizens**, most noncitizens will lose the monthly SSI grants by Aug. 22. The state's elderly Southeast Asian refugees are particularly dependent on the grants, which average less than \$500 a month.

But securing federal aid is only one motivation.

Upgrading legal status is like going from coach to first class in American life. **Citizens** can vote. Noncitizens cannot. **Citizens** get preferential treatment if they want a relative living abroad to come to the United States. Noncitizens don't. **Citizens** cannot be deported for crimes committed. Noncitizens can.

U.S. immigration officials see some good in the scramble for citizenship, even though it means heavier workloads for them.

"**Many** of the ethnic groups have lived within their own communities and **many** times have not learned the English language because the need wasn't there," said Dean Hove, INS acting district director. "They never thought it was going to be necessary to become **citizens**."

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"The new welfare legislation has changed their focus. It's going to have a major impact. It's going to make people much more likely to adapt to our society than they were in the past. They're going to get out of their comfort zone a little bit. Because of that, they might be more likely to end up in gainful employment as well. I guess that's the whole purpose of it."

Despite the long lines and delays, Minnesota officials are speedier at processing applications than regional officials in such immigrant-saturated states as New York, California and Texas.

Locally, there also is a modest, fairly well-defined upper limit: One INS official estimated that Minnesota has only 75,000 legal permanent residents, of whom 40,000 are eligible to seek U.S. citizenship.

But many noncitizens aren't able to meet the requirements for U.S. citizenship, particularly those requiring proficiency in the English language.

The parents of Sabab Xayarath, 28, of Eagan, are among that group. On a recent day at the INS office, Xayarath waited in line for more than an hour to file his parents' applications for U.S. citizenship.

But the Laotian got only bad news from INS information officer Louise Platt, who screens applications and dishes out a plethora of forms such as the G-325, the N-400, I-90 and the I-130.

Xayarath said his parents, Sorn and Muang, want to become U.S. citizens to remain eligible for his father's \$400 monthly SSI grant. Xayarath said the Social Security Administration notified his father that the aid will be cut this summer because he is not a citizen.

But when Xayarath got to the head of the line, the INS' Platt told him that his parents don't speak English well enough to become naturalized citizens. Therefore, Platt said, the INS would not accept the applications.

Despite being in their 60s, Xayarath's parents have only been in America for eight years - not long enough to qualify for an exemption of the language requirements.

Applicants need to be at least 55 years old and have legal residency of 15 years, or 50 years old with 20-year residency, to qualify for the English-language waiver.

Xayarath said he doesn't believe his parents can learn enough English at this stage in their lives.

"They learned before, but they can't remember it," Xayarath said. "I have no idea what to do now, but they want to become American citizens."

Another person in the INS line was Hoi Pham, 63, a native of Vietnam. After more than five years in the United States, Pham is finally eligible to seek U.S. citizenship.

Although Pham speaks English haltingly, she has studied hard and thinks she will pass the English tests. Pham was at the immigration center to get photographed and fingerprinted for her FBI background check.

Because of a national flap over granting citizenships to aliens with disqualifying criminal records, the INS no longer schedules citizenship interviews until the background checks have been completed. The processing time is now four months or longer.

For Pham, the delay means that - assuming she passes the other requirements - she probably won't get to take the oath of citizenship until late this summer. Fortunately for her, no loss in benefits is at stake. "I want to vote," Pham said, explaining her desire to become a citizen.

Many ethnic minorities in Minnesota have organized to help each other get through the citizenship process.

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Kao Lee, editor of the monthly Hmong American Journal, is also an active member of the Hmong American Alliance Church in St. Paul. The 2,000-member congregation conducts citizenship classes to help train members about the citizenship process.

"I have close to 100 students in my class," said Lee, who was at the INS office the other day to serve as a volunteer translator for applicants who qualify for the English-language waiver.

Various other organizations and agencies, such as the International Institute of Minnesota in St. Paul, also offer citizenship classes.

To be eligible for U.S. citizenship, the basic requirements for most people - besides paying a \$95 application fee - are:

18 years of age or older;

three years of lawful permanent residency ("green card" holder), if married to a U.S. citizen, and five years of legal residency if not;

ability to speak, read, write and understand ordinary English words and phrases.

ability to demonstrate knowledge and understanding of the fundamentals of U.S. history and principles of American government;

passing an FBI criminal background check;

an interview with an INS officer; and

ability to take and understand the oath of U.S. citizenship.

Some lawmakers and immigrant advocates are searching for ways to ease the requirements for some noncitizens, especially those with physical and mentally disabilities or other special circumstances.

For example, U.S. Rep. Bruce Vento, D-St. Paul, has attempted for years to persuade Congress to pass legislation exempting Hmong veterans and their families from the English tests.

Recently, the immigration service issued regulations that could lead to more people qualifying for an language waiver on the basis of a mental or physical disability.

Immigrant advocates had complained that the immigration service's interpretation of a 1994 law was too narrow and that too few exemptions were granted. To qualify, a physician must certify that a person suffers from a serious, medically determinable physical or mental impairment. Post-traumatic stress disorder, experienced by war veterans, does not qualify a person for the exemption.

But Hove, the acting INS district director, expects that many Southeast Asians might meet the requirements for such a waiver.

## Graphic

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3 Photos: Janet Hostetter, Pioneer Press

1) Record numbers of applicants for U.S. citizenship keep the waiting

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rooms crowded at INS offices in Bloomington. Hoi Pham, from Vietnam,

passes the hours with her sister, Amy Pham, who is already a citizen.

[Photo appeared in MN edition]

2) Beverly Peterson, left, fingerprints Hoi Pham. Before citizenship interviews can be scheduled, INS caseworkers must take applicant fingerprints for FBI criminal background checks, a procedure

necessitated by a recent flap over criminals being naturalized.

3) U.S. Immigration and Naturalization Service caseworker Beverly

Peterson, left, assists Hoi Pham before taking her photo, one step in

the naturalization process.

Graphic: Pioneer Press

Citizenship applications on the rise

The number of immigrants and refugees seeking U.S. citizenship is on the rise in Minnesota. Last year, the U.S. immigration and

Naturalization Service said that a record 5,300 people were

naturalized. That total will be easily surpassed this year.

The number of Minnesota residents who applied for U.S. citizenship in the last three fiscal years

In the first five months of the current fiscal year, the surge in applicants continued. Applicants:

[See micro film for more detail]

## Classification

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