

A BOOST FOR NEWS' SPECIAL IMMIG HOTLINE

Daily News (New York)

November 17, 2004 Wednesday, SPORTS FINAL EDITION

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Section: NEWS; Pg. 4

Length: 230 words

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Series: DAILY NEWS CUNY CITIZENSHIP NOW

Body

FOR YEARS, Teuta Rafti has helped her Albanian relatives and friends become U.S. citizens. Now, she's ready to help strangers.

Rafti, a 36-year-old accountant, read about the Daily News' immigrant helpline, and called to offer her services.

"I like helping people, and I think this is a great idea," the Brooklynite said.

After a training session, Rafti, who speaks Albanian, Greek, Italian and English, started yesterday.

In its second day, more than 1,000 callers flooded the Citizenship Now phone line, looking for advice on how to get on the path to U.S. citizenship.

Under the supervision of a pool of local attorneys, operators fielded phone calls from New York and beyond about everything from how to obtain U.S. immigration applications to how to fight a deportation order.

"There is an enormous, tremendous need for low-cost, free legal services for noncitizens," said Olivia Cassin, a staff attorney at Legal Aid Society. "People who are absolutely eligible to become a citizen don't know how to do it."

News columnist Allan Wernick, an attorney and director of CUNY's Citizenship and Immigration Project, which co-sponsors the helpline, said the project has dozens of more volunteers this time around.

"This shows the commitment of the immigrant service community," said Wernick, who is leading the panel of experts. "This shows how much education work still needs to be done."

Classification

Language: ENGLISH

Document-Type: SERIES

Publication-Type: Newspaper

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Subject: CITIZENSHIP (92%); IMMIGRATION (91%); LEGAL AID (90%); NATURALIZATION (78%); LAWYERS (74%); DEPORTATION (72%); IMMIGRATION LAW (72%); VOLUNTEERS (72%)

Organization: LEGAL AID SOCIETY (NEW YORK) (56%)

Industry: LEGAL AID (90%); LAWYERS (74%)

Geographic: NEW YORK, USA (79%); UNITED STATES (79%)

Load-Date: November 17, 2004

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