

ALIENS LEAVE THE SHADOWS AS YEAR OF AMNESTY DAWNS

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Body

Thousands of illegal aliens stepped out of the shadows yesterday, lining up at Government centers around the country to apply for legal status under the new immigration law.

In New York, Chicago, Los Angeles and other major cities, small groups of aliens began lining up before dawn at new legalization centers, which opened for business at 8 A.M. and will continue taking applications for amnesty until May 4, 1988.

"I want to be the first," said Isabel Isamit, a 74-year-old native of Santiago, Chile, who has been living in Chicago since 1969 and arrived at one of that city's 15 legalization centers at 3 A.M. yesterday.

At a legalization center in Long Island City, Queens, Reshad Lata and his wife produced income tax returns, gas bills and an apartment lease to show that they had lived in Brooklyn since 1981.

Chance for a Reunion

For the Latas, the amnesty program means a chance to reunite their entire family. One of the Lata children, who is 5 years old, was born in New York City, and has American citizenship. But another child, now 7, was left behind when they moved to Brooklyn from Yugoslavia in 1981 and has been living with Mr. Lata's parents.

"He doesn't know us," said Mr. Lata, a security guard, whose status as an illegal alien had prevented him from bringing the older child to New York. If his application for amnesty is approved, however, he said he hopes to reunite his family within 18 months.

Government officials had been scrambling under tight deadlines to staff, equip and open the legalization centers on time. And when they opened yesterday, most of the centers operated in an atmosphere of uncrowded calm.

"The Government is more than prepared for this program," said Alan C. Nelson, the Commissioner of the Immigration Service, who attended the opening on West 24th Street of one of the New York City legalization centers. "Given six months to get ready, we have accomplished an amazing task."

Only 173 Apply in New York

Still, the number of people applying for amnesty on the first day of the program fell far short of the crush that some had expected. In New York, for example, where the new centers are equipped to process 1,150 applications a day, only 173 applicants turned up. Officials attributed the light turnout nationally to a reluctance among many illegal aliens to identify themselves to the Immigration Service, even if they are qualified for amnesty and resident status.

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Although uncrowded, many of the the legalization centers took on an atmosphere of shared optimism.

"I will never be afraid again," said Shakia Hydri, a Chicago bartender, came to the United States from Pakistan in 1977, and who presented immigration officials in Chicago with his documents yesterday. "We are in a free country - with all its benefits."

The amnesty program is also a family matter for Maquel Morales, a native of the Dominican Republic who moved to New York in 1978. A cook at a Manhattan restaurant, Mr. Morales said he and his wife have been in court five times since 1980 to appeal a deportation order, even though two of their children were born in the United States and are citizens.

Looking for a Photographer

As he was awaiting an interview with Immigration Service officials, Mr. Morales spoke for a moment of the Dominican Republic. "My kids are Americans," he said. "How could I take them back?"

And in New Jersey, where dozens of aliens showed up at a legalization center in Paterson, Chac Boi Kwan, a 32-year-old native of Vietnam, was less well prepared than most. After arriving at 8 A.M., he realized he had forgotten to bring a photograph of himself, as required, and had to scramble to find a photographer.

"Despite this, I feel pretty good," said Mr. Kwan, who works as an actuary. He finally found a photography shop that opened hours after he arrived at the Paterson Center.

Amnesty "will make life easier for me," he added. He said legal status will help him in his career and allow him to visit his mother, who lives in Hong Kong, without fears of violating the immigration laws.

Short Lines in West

In San Francisco, where the turnout of amnesty applicants was light and orderly, 100 demonstrators, many of them associated with immigrant rights groups, marched in front of the Immigration Service offices to protest the new law, which they said unfairly discriminates against aliens who arrived in the United States since 1982. In that city's Mission District, a largely Hispanic neighborhood, the waiting area in a newly opened processing center was half empty.

Chicago's legalization centers began emptying out at mid-day.

In Los Angeles, where officials say there are more illegal aliens than in any other city, the lines at 15 new legalization centers were short or nonexistent.

"There is going to be a need for trust building," said Muzaffar Chisti, director of the Immigration Project of the International Ladies Garment Workers Union in New York. He added that illegal aliens "distrust the system, and they are not going to take a chance the first day."

Number Expected to Grow

The amnesty program, signed into law by President Reagan last November, provides legal status to aliens who are able to demonstrate that they have been living in the United States since Jan. 1, 1982.

Some New York officials said they were not surprised by the light first-day turnout because neither the illegal aliens nor a host of nonprofit groups that are guiding them through the application process have had sufficient time to gear up.

"We expect the number of people being processed to increase very soon," said Charles C. Sava, director of the Immigration Service's New York District.

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Indeed, the level of activity yesterday was more hectic at churches, union offices and other nonprofit centers around the country that have established programs to counsel aliens on their rights, help them collect documents, and guide them through the amnesty process.

Scores of Telephone Calls

At the International Ladies Garment Workers Union, which has been assisting its members and their families throughout the nation, Mr. Chisti said more than 100 phone calls were coming in each hour from aliens seeking information about the new immigration law. "We're going crazy over here," he said.

And at an office set up last month by the Congress of Racial Equality in Brooklyn, volunteer workers said more than 150 aliens walked in yesterday to seek advice and assistance, far more than any previous day.

"At this point, we are the ones feeling the crush," said George Holmes, a CORE official. "As word of the program spreads, and as the aliens get their documents together, the INS will have a crush of its own."

But some officials who have been counseling aliens said their fears of the Immigration service are difficult to break down, and the amnesty program is unlikely to attract anywhere close to the 3.9 people the Government estimates have been living illegally in the United States since January 1982 and may qualify for legal status.

"It's the kind of thing where one mistake might take years to correct," said Mary To, a director of a counseling center run by the International Institute of Los Angeles. She added that illegal aliens "are in no rush" to step forward.

Among those who applied yesterday, many had looking forward to the amnesty program for months. Most were interviewed briefly by Immigration Service officials, and presented the officials with stacks of rent receipts, medical bills, pay check records, and other documents necessary to prove that they qualify for legal status.

Graphic

photo of Isabel Isamit (NYT); photo of aliens checking their amnesty applications (NYT/Steve Kagan); photo of a lawyer explaining forms to Chinese applicants (NYT/John Sotomayor)

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