

## **IMMIGRANTS GET HELP ON ROAD TO CITIZENSHIP**

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### **Body**

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As a clothing saleswoman, Francy Cruz earns a salary that's a little more than minimum wage.

Still, when she saw a television ad urging eligible immigrants to apply for U.S. citizenship - a process that will cost her \$1,350 for herself and her daughter - she decided to delay no more.

"It's an important step," said Cruz, who is from the Dominican Republic. "The United States means freedom and opportunity."

Cruz, 43, of Tampa will join dozens of other permanent residents today during Naturalization Day, an event held by local attorneys offering free legal advice and assistance to immigrants applying for citizenship.

Immigration lawyers and advocates say legal residents often put off applying for citizenship because of the \$675 federal naturalization fee or the English-language requirement, though citizenship carries far more rights and benefits - including the ability to vote - than residency.

In one high-profile example that has showcased the risks of forgoing citizenship, U.S. immigration officials arrested former University of South Florida student Youssef Megahed days after a jury acquitted him of explosives charges. Megahed, a permanent resident whose family had already applied for his citizenship, was jailed and put in deportation proceedings.

That probably wouldn't have happened if he were already a citizen, said John Dubrule, director of litigation at Gulfcoast Legal Services Inc. in St. Petersburg, which will host the day of free legal assistance.

A naturalized citizen could be stripped of citizenship and subject to deportation, but the government would have to prove that the immigrant had committed fraud or terrorist acts before or in the process of becoming a citizen, he said.

Sometimes permanent residents who, years earlier, paid penalties or served sentences for nonviolent offenses, such as marijuana possession, find a big surprise waiting when they apply for citizenship, Dubrule said.

"We see a fair amount of people who come into our office from citizenship applications having been put into immigration deportation proceedings," he said.

A Human Rights Watch report released earlier this week showed that between 1997 and 2007, the government deported almost 900,000 noncitizens from the United States after they served their criminal sentences. Of those, 20 percent were legally in this country. The government expelled 77 percent for committing nonviolent offenses.

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"Some of these noncitizens have been forced into permanent exile for nonviolent misdemeanor offenses, even if they served a short sentence with a perfect record of good conduct" followed by years of employment and roots in a community, according to the report, dubbed "Forced Apart."

The report raised questions about Immigration and Customs Enforcement's public touting of the deportation of violent immigrant criminals, when those immigrants make up the minority of deportations.

But for immigrants such as Franci Cruz, a criminal record is not the problem. Money is.

A single mother, she plans to seek legal advice at today's event. But she still doesn't know how she will pay for the application fee for herself and her 19-year-old daughter.

She'll find a way, she said. As a citizen, her college-bound daughter, who wants to become a lawyer, would qualify for more student loans. And Cruz could use loans to return to college and realize her own dream of becoming a nurse.

"If I'm a citizen, things will be much better," she said.

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## FAST FACTS

If you go

The American Immigration Lawyers Association sponsors Naturalization Day today from 10 a.m. to 2 p.m. at Gulfcoast Legal Services Inc., 641 First St. S in St. Petersburg. To make an appointment, call 1-800-230-5920.

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