

AT LAST! INS GETS BEEFED-UP STAFFING

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Body

FOR years San Jose has been home to one of the worst bottlenecks on the road to U.S. citizenship.

The local office of the Immigration and Naturalization Service takes nearly two years to process citizenship applications and currently has a backlog of 50,000 cases. That's 50,000 people waiting for the right to vote and waiting for government services that are available only to citizens.

By comparison, INS offices in San Francisco and Fresno take eight to 10 months to process applications.

But things are looking up.

The INS is finally about to beef up the staff in its beleaguered San Jose office. As soon as workers can be hired and trained, the office will have 15 new hearing officers and nine new clerks to process applications. That is in addition to the 24 hearing officers and 17 clerks now on staff.

With a 65 percent increase in hearing officers, the San Jose office will be able to start whittling away at that stack of applications.

San Jose is not the only office that has been swamped with applications from prospective citizens. After Proposition 187 passed in 1994, immigrants throughout California who had lived in this country for years suddenly decided to become citizens so they could vote.

In 1996, Congress cut off benefits to non-citizens as part of welfare reform, touching off another wave of new applications. Santa Clara County officials encouraged legal immigrants to become citizens so they wouldn't be forced off the food stamp rolls, adding to the pressure on the INS.

South Bay lawmakers have complained about the staffing problems in the San Jose office for years. We're glad that they finally got some action from the feds.

New citizens have always been a source of strength for this country, and for our community. We should be doing all we can to encourage immigrants who have made new lives here to take on the responsibilities, as well as the benefits, of citizenship. Putting them on hold for two years is no way to do that.

Notes

EDITORIAL

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