

## **IMMIGRANTS GET HELP IN QUEST FOR CITIZENSHIP**

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### **Body**

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Dozens of elderly and disabled legal immigrants turned out on Saturday at the Center for Employment Training in San Jose, anxious to get help in becoming naturalized citizens so they won't lose federal benefits that would otherwise be cut off Aug. 22.

Santa Clara County officials believe this is the first county-run citizenship drive in the nation.

One of those attending the citizenship day was 82-year-old Truc Nguyen.

Leaning on a metal cane, her shoulders stooped and her gray hair brushed from her weathered face, Nguyen slowly, but surely made her way into the bustling room to do something she hoped would allow her to live the rest of her days in this country.

"Legal immigrants who have followed the rules and, in many instances, worked here for years, are losing their survival income," said Richard Hobbs, the county's first director of citizen and immigration programs. "Without it, many will become homeless, food-less and hopeless."

The changes are coming because federal welfare reform requires legal immigrants to become citizens to continue receiving Supplemental Security Income, food stamps, Medi-Cal, welfare and in-home support care services.

If legal immigrants remain non-citizens, lose their benefits and go on county-funded general assistance payments, it also could cost the county more than \$36 million a year, Hobbs said.

As a result, county officials have taken aggressive action to help immigrants become citizens. They sent out letters notifying them that their federal benefits may be cut off. And for the next two months, they will host citizenship drives every Saturday throughout the county to help immigrants fill out Immigration and Naturalization Service applications to become naturalized.

Their goal is to reach all 20,621 legal immigrants in the county who receive Supplemental Security Income, which averages about \$650 a month. Many of the workers are bilingual to help with the 4,000 people receiving SSI who are Vietnamese-American and 1,100 who are Mexican-American.

For Saturday's citizenship drive, 851 legal immigrants were invited. Of those, 60 showed up. One third of those invited had already begun applying for citizenship, Hobbs said. Fifty percent did not reply. And 12 percent are homebound and unable to travel to any center, so county officials will go to them.

Language a barrier

Still, many people managed to get to the center Saturday, some in wheelchairs, some as old as 97, and some suffering from Down's syndrome, Alzheimer's disease or post-traumatic stress syndrome.

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About 3,000 legal immigrants receiving SSI in Santa Clara County would likely be unable to learn English or pass the U.S. government and history tests because they have memory loss or other mental impairments, Hobbs said. These immigrants would qualify for a disability waiver with a letter from their doctor.

Trying again

On Saturday, with a \$95 INS application fee in hand, immigrants hoping to become citizens received assistance in filling out forms, getting fingerprinted and being photographed. Catholic Charities and CET employees will take the completed applications to the INS office for the applicants. If everything is approved and all tests passed, these applicants will become naturalized citizens in about nine months.

Miguel, who didn't want his last name used, had tried to become a citizen 20 years ago. But the Mexican immigrant's English wasn't up to par, and he was so nervous that he failed the test. Saturday, though, the 70-year-old was back to try again.

Reform confusion

Wheelchair-bound since a brain aneurysm nearly took his life five years ago, Miguel had been a welder. For 15 years, he worked 18 hours a day, he said. Now, he gets by with \$738 a month in SSI and must have a caregiver at home to help him.

Welfare reform has been confusing to many immigrants like Miguel. The San Jose resident thought he would lose his benefits because he wasn't a citizen, but because he has worked more than 10 years, he had nothing to fear. Legal immigrants who have paid Social Security taxes for 10 years do not need to become citizens to retain federal benefits.

Still, Miguel said he decided to become a citizen because it was the right thing to do.

"I haven't gone to Mexico for 40 years," he said, "And I realize I'll live here the rest of my life."

## Notes

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### IF YOU'RE INTERESTED

The next citizenship day drive will be Saturday at St. John Vianney Church, 4601 Hyland Ave., San Jose. Appointments also can be set up during the week for assistance in filling out applications. For more information, contact Catholic Charities at (408) 944-0691 or the Center for Employment Training at (408) 534-5451.

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