

# **LAWMAKERS AIM TO HELP IMMIGRANTS NATURALIZE; STATE MEASURE WOULD COORDINATE AID**

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## **Body**

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About half of California's **immigrants** who are eligible to become U.S. citizens don't bother applying for **naturalization**, due in part, say advocates, to a shortage of services that guide them through the complicated immigration process.

Hoping to boost the citizenship rate, some **lawmakers** want **state** government to take a more direct role in **coordinating** hundreds of community-based organizations that provide programs such as civics classes, English instruction and assistance with filling out immigration forms.

Details of a supportive **state** Assembly **measure** will be presented today at the annual Citizenship and **Immigrant** Pride Day program in San Jose. The free event, which provides citizenship orientation in 19 languages, will be from 9 a.m. to 2 p.m. at the Center for Employment Training, 701 Vine St.

The **measure** introduced in the Assembly last month by Hector De La Torre, D-South Gate, and co-sponsored by Alberto Torrico, D-Fremont, would require the Department of Community Services and Development to administer a "**naturalization** services program," which would fund local governments and non-profit groups to **help** legal permanent residents become citizens.

"We want to make sure the process is easier," said Torrico on Friday, "and that there is no information barrier for people to become citizens."

AB 930 would cost an estimated \$5 million to **help** 33,000 **immigrants** per year move through the **naturalization** process.

To become a **naturalized** citizen, applicants must be legal permanent residents, also known as green-card holders; read, write and speak English; and know about U.S. history and government, among other requirements.

Hundreds of non-profit groups provide services and programs for citizens-to-be, but the organizations work independently. Under the proposed law, known as the New Californians Initiative, the **state** would require regional coordination of the agencies. That way, **immigrants** will have better access to information that will **help** them apply for citizenship, such as a list of adult schools that teach English as a Second Language, or referrals to immigration attorneys.

"There's a big push for **immigrants** to be integrated into society, and yet we're providing them with piecemeal services," said Larisa Casillas, policy director for Services, **Immigrant** Rights and Education Network, a San Jose advocacy group. "We know that when **immigrants** become citizens, that's the first step of their journey to be involved in our community."

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The proposal was partly modeled after a smaller but successful program sponsored by Santa Clara County's Office of Human Relations. For eight years, the program has **coordinated** a collaborative of non-profit agencies that **help immigrants** become citizens.

The **state measure** was introduced in the Assembly on Feb. 18 and qualifies for its first committee hearing as early as March 22.

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