

NEW CITIZENS MAY LOSE RIGHTS

INS TARGETS CRIMINAL IMMIGS

Daily News (New York)

February 10, 1998, Tuesday

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Section: News; Pg. 16

Length: 376 words

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Body

WASHINGTON in an unprecedented move, federal officials will try to strip U.S. citizenship from thousands of immigrants whose arrest records went undetected during the Citizenship USA program in 1995-96.

The Immigration and Naturalization Service yesterday said reviews conducted with KMPG Peat Marwick, an outside auditing firm, found 369 people were naturalized despite having been convicted of a felony or a crime involving "moral turpitude."

An additional 5,954 also should not have been naturalized 5,634 for failing to reveal arrests for serious crimes, the INS said.

"If we determine that a person provided false testimony about having been arrested, they would not meet the 'good moral character' standard for citizenship," said INS Commissioner Doris Meissner.

As of Jan. 1, the INS has completed final review on 2,158 of the total of 6,323 cases and decided 1,481 should face citizenship revocation proceedings.

Never before has the INS tried to strip citizenship from so many. in the four years from 1993 to 1996, only eight people had citizenship revoked, INS officials said.

INS won new powers to revoke citizenship in recent immigration legislation.

Losing citizenship would not automatically mean deportation. INS spokesman Andrew Llubares said it would depend on whether the criminal offense was "deportable," and whether or not the statute of limitations has expired.

The Citizenship USA program aimed to streamline procedures and naturalized 1.05 million immigrants. But investigators found the corner-cutting caused citizenship to be granted without adequate background checks in what Republicans charged was a Clinton administration rush to qualify potential new Democratic voters.

The review covered naturalizations from August 1995 to September 1996. INS officials said they would consult with the Senate Judiciary Committee on whether to review cases as recent as June 1997.

Meissner announced new procedures yesterday aimed at "strengthening the system's integrity" and at the same time reduce application backlogs.

They include the opening of fingerprinting centers to collect the images digitally, keep them in the INS' hands, prevent tampering and speed checks against FBI fingerprint files.

Classification

Language: ENGLISH

Subject: CITIZENSHIP (94%); **CRIMINAL** OFFENSES (94%); IMMIGRATION (93%); DENATURALIZATION (93%); DEPORTATION (90%); ARRESTS (90%); IMMIGRATION LAW (90%); INVESTIGATIONS (89%); US REPUBLICAN PARTY (79%); US FEDERAL GOVERNMENT (78%); BACKGROUND CHECKS (78%); LAW ENFORCEMENT (78%); LEGISLATIVE BODIES (78%); FINGERPRINTING (78%); NATURALIZATION (78%); SPECIAL INVESTIGATIVE FORCES (78%); EVIDENCE (76%); **CRIMINAL** CONVICTIONS (73%); STATUTE OF LIMITATIONS (73%); FELONIES (73%); POLITICAL PARTIES (69%); VOTERS & VOTING (50%)

Company: IMMIGRATION & NATURALIZATION SERVICE (94%); IMMIGRATION & NATURALIZATION SERVICE (84%)

Organization: IMMIGRATION & NATURALIZATION SERVICE (94%); IMMIGRATION & NATURALIZATION SERVICE (84%)

Industry: ACCOUNTING (72%)

Geographic: UNITED STATES (93%)

Load-Date: February 10, 1998