

MORE COUPLES MARRYING TO TRY TO AVOID DEPORTATION

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Body

With an April 1 deportation deadline looming, marriage bureaus are being swamped with couples who are either really in love or just in love with America.

Hundreds of sweating, edgy couples, some holding hands, waited in a stifling hot corridor of Manhattan's city-run marriage office recently to get a \$ 30 license that for some holds the key to freedom.

As tempers exploded around them, overwhelmed security guards blocked the door that leads to the red-carpeted marriage "chapel" as the horde pushed and screamed to get ahead.

" 'Scuse me! 'Scuse me!" a woman who gave up yelled above the mix of foreign languages as she escaped through a sea of Sikh turbans, dreadlocks, saris and even a few corsage-adorned, white wedding dresses.

The tougher immigration laws make it easier to deport illegal aliens unless they can prove that being forced to leave would result in "exceptional and unusual hardship" to a family member who is an American citizen or permanent legal resident.

The overall crackdown on immigration also might have something to do with the surge. With federal benefits being cut off even for legal noncitizens, people in the country on temporary visas apparently feel that marrying a citizen or legal resident will put them on safer ground.

Marriage to a citizen does not guarantee legal residency. Couples must prove later to the Immigration and Naturalization Service that they are together for real - an ordeal that prompts some to carry photo albums and love letters into their interviews.

Amid such hopes and fears, the number of weddings in immigrant communities is soaring. In Manhattan last month, there were 2,109 marriages, an 88 percent increase over the same time last year.

In the Miami area, 2,532 marriage certificates were issued last month, up from 1,973 from January of last year.

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