

ANGUISH RESIDES IN NEW IMMIG LAWS

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Body

A SENSE of foreboding permeates the Corona offices of Concerned Citizens of Queens, a not-for-profit pro-immigrant organization.

It is the eve of Sept. 27, when according to last year's new immigration laws, many immigrants were supposed to leave the country.

The office is filled with anguished people, many of them with children in tow, desperately searching for answers to myriad questions about their future. Some are willing to talk about their situation, but none wants to be identified.

"If I leave, what will happen to my daughter and her girls?" asks a sweet little old Ecuadoran lady. "Who is going to help them? My daughter can't afford a baby-sitter."

Her daughter, 34, is a single mother with three girls 10, 8 and 4, all born in Queens. She works as a welder at an alarm factory. It will be 2:30 a.m. before she comes back from work. She has been in New York 13 years and got her green card four years ago. Her mother is undocumented.

"I am my family's only means of support," the daughter says. "My mother doesn't take any government aid. We manage with what I make. If she leaves, I don't know how I will go to work."

These days their predicament is rather common. Their fear is just one more example of the panic that immigrant communities are going through. The reason: Last year's broad immigration reforms radically curtailed the ability of illegal immigrants to stay in the U.S.

The irony is that the ones most affected are those who should not be affected at all because they have only a few months to wait before becoming legal residents. Yet, those who have no way of legalizing their situation will stay put they won't risk leaving and not being able to come back.

"Many people are leaving behind what they have acquired with much sacrifice," says Rafael Grasso, Concerned Citizens' knowledgeable executive director. "They are leaving family, businesses, homes, cars. It's not fair."

Grasso is talking about the effect of regulation 245i, a provision enacted in 1995. Until last year, under 245i, illegal immigrants who married a citizen or legal resident, or were sponsored by a parent or employer, could remain in the country while their application was pending by paying a \$ 1,000 fine. No more.

Due to expire tomorrow, it was announced Friday that the House would grant a three-week reprieve of 245i.

Nevertheless, because of the changes in the laws, illegal immigrants applying for legal status through marriage to a legal resident instead of a citizen, or sponsorship of a legal relative (except a parent who is a citizen) or employer, should have left anyway by Sept. 27 no matter what legal steps they had taken until that point.

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This was the case of a 25-year-old Peruvian woman married to an Ecuadoran legal resident. She worked at the cosmetics counter of a posh Manhattan store and attended Queens College.

"If I stay until the 29th, will that count against me when I go to get my visa at the consulate?" she asks Grasso, uncertain about leaving or staying. Because her husband, not a citizen, was the one who petitioned her in January, she will have to wait four years for her green card in her country. If he becomes a citizen, the waiting period will be only months.

But the law says that only those who applied for legal residency by marrying a citizen or by being sponsored by a parent who is a citizen can remain after September.

So Grasso can give only one answer. "No one knows what the INS [Immigration and Naturalization Service] is going to do. But the law says you must leave the country the 27th before midnight. [It] is your decision."

A momentous, life-altering decision. Yet thousands of people were forced to make it in the dark, with no clear sense of its consequences.

BEYOND foreboding, by now sadness pervades Concerned Citizens. Sadness for the immigrants. Sadness for the bureaucrats who don't give a damn about them. As the little old Ecuadoran lady felt compelled to remind everybody: "We are human beings, too."

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