

Immigrants feel ticking of clock

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Body

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UNO Federation Community Services in Clearwater, which serves Pinellas County's burgeoning Hispanic community, has fielded as many as 300 calls in recent months from undocumented **immigrants**.

They all wanted to know one thing: How could they become permanent, legal U.S. residents under a special federal program that expires April 30?

"We've had inquiries from here all the way to Hernando and also from the Wimauma area," said Ralph Alex Emmanuelli, UNO's executive director, who recently had a local immigration attorney offer a workshop to answer questions.

The federal program that has set local **immigrant** communities abuzz is not a general amnesty. Instead, it targets perhaps one in 10 illegal **immigrants**, or 640,000 nationwide out of more than 6-million estimated illegal residents of the United States.

LIFELAW30

Qualified **immigrants** - those who have family ties to U.S. citizens or specialized job skills - have until April 30 to apply to the INS for permanent residency in the United States and receive their green cards.

As long as they meet the deadline, they won't face the normal penalties for having entered the country illegally. Those penalties would otherwise include being forced to leave the U.S. and stay out for up to 10 years before being able to return.

Under the program, they will have to pay a \$ 1,000 fine and wait - perhaps for years - for their applications to be processed by the Immigration and Naturalization Service. Still, it's an opportunity many people are trying to grab.

"For some people who are here illegally, this law is the difference between black and white, round and square," said Clearwater attorney Ramon Carrion, who expects to file about 100 applications by April 30. "But they have to act quickly."

The brief window of opportunity opened in December, when President Clinton signed the Legal Immigration and Family Equity Act, or LIFE act, reviving an old immigration provision called 245(i). Specifically, it applies to illegal **immigrants** who:

Are the parents, spouses, children, brothers or sisters of U.S. citizens who want to petition for them to have residency.

Are the spouses or unmarried children of permanent residents who want to petition for them.

Immigrants feel ticking of clock

Have specialized job skills and a potential employer who wants to petition for them and can't find an American for the job.

Some people are disappointed that the law isn't broader.

The Akar family of Palm Harbor has only one member who is eligible to apply under the law. The Akars came to the United States to escape the violence in Lebanon 15 years ago.

Fouad Akar was able to get temporary permission to work here; he sells T-shirts and other merchandise to gas stations. But his wife, Ghada, has stayed past her original visa, and three of their four children weren't given the proper paperwork when they entered the country.

Mrs. Akar is applying for residency as a skilled worker - a cook of specialty Arabic foods - under the LIFE act. A restaurant in Palm Harbor has agreed to sponsor her and loan her part of the \$ 5,000 she's paying Carrion, a hefty sum for her family.

Meanwhile, her daughter, Ahlam, 20, is frustrated. Without a job skill or a U.S. husband, she probably won't apply to become a permanent resident. And without a green card, she can't go to college - though she received a state scholarship - to get a skill.

"I've got a chance for me," Mrs. Akar said. But, she added, "I'd rather have it for all my children.

"Sometimes I cry," she said.

Curiosity about the temporary immigration window has boosted calls to numerous local agencies like the Catholic Charities Foundation of the Diocese of St. Petersburg. The foundation's St. Petersburg office estimates it receives 150 calls daily.

Emmanuelli has been telling potential applicants - particularly those with little money - to call Catholic Charities' offices at (727) 893-1311, ext. 228, and (813) 631-4397, because they will file petitions for residency for only a few hundred dollars.

Joe Citro, executive director of Catholic Charities locally, said that there seems to be confusion about the opportunity and whom it applies to. He has encouraged his staff members to go on Spanish radio shows to try to explain the program.

Citro also said people should be warned that some immigration consultants - often called *notarios* in Spanish - are not reputable. He recommended that people carefully check out anyone they hire to help them file an application with the INS.

The INS' Tampa office has been busy, too. The program has boosted daily visitors there from 200 to about 400, said INS spokeswoman Maria Elena Garcia

INS officials will put a drop box outside the Tampa INS office until midnight April 30 for an expected wave of last-minute applications for residency under the special provision.

"We realize that we might see a big crunch on that day," Garcia said.

- Times news researcher John Martin contributed to this report.

Ghada Akar, center, a Lebanese ***immigrant*** seeking U.S. residency, stands outside her Palm Harbor home with her son Ahmad, 11, a U.S. citizen because he was born here. At right is her daughter, Ahlam, 20. Without a green card, she can't go to college, though she has a state scholarship.

Graphic

Photo, JILL SAGERS; Ghada Akar, a Lebanese ***immigrant*** seeking U.S. residency, stands outside her Palm Harbor home with her son Ahmad, 11, a U.S. citizen because he was born here and her daughter, Ahlam, 20 (ran LA, SE, CT)

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