

SLAPS IN THE FACE FOR IMMIGRANTS - LEGAL OR ILLEGAL

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Body

PLAYING BY THE RULES is about to become prohibitively expensive for thousands of immigrants in the U.S.

On July 30, an exorbitant hike in the application fees for naturalization and permanent residency will become effective.

The increase, announced by the U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services on Tuesday, is so steep as to place these procedures out of financial reach for thousands of immigrant families.

Incredibly, the cost of initiating the process of becoming a U.S. citizen will almost double, going from \$350 to \$675. Yet that hike looks almost reasonable when compared with the outrageous jump - from \$325 to \$1,030 - in the cost of applying for permanent resident status.

"In a city that is 40% foreign-born," said City Councilman Hiram Monserrate (D-Queens), "this policy will essentially shut the door on citizenship and legal immigration in our communities."

At the same time, massive raids and flash deportations of immigrants are increasing dramatically all over the country.

Hundreds of frightened children have seen their parents pulled from their homes at the break of dawn by Immigration and Customs Enforcement agents in black uniforms. Hundreds of parents - poor, powerless working men and women - have been torn from their families with a fury better suited for storming terrorist hideouts.

In other words, while the government is relentlessly persecuting the undocumented, it is erecting new obstacles in their way to legalization or citizenship. Doesn't make much sense, does it?

To top it all off, by now few believe that higher fees will translate into better services or a reduction in the citizenship applications backlog.

After all, this is not the first time citizenship fees have gone up. Actually, they have increased fourfold since 1998, without any noticeable improvement.

"The new fee structure will price good people out of the citizenship process," said Rep. Luis Gutiérrez (D-Ill.). "The administration should stop trying to fix its failures and its inefficiencies on the backs of low-income working families."

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The fact that USCIS was swamped with negative public reactions after it first announced its plan to increase fees obviously did not do much good.

It got 3,900 comments from all segments of society, from refugee and immigrant organizations, public policy groups, educational and religious institutions to corporations and agricultural concerns. The USCIS all but ignored them.

Now though, there is a much more pressing agenda for those who favor a real and fair immigration reform.

With Congress back from Memorial Day break, the second week of debate is about to begin.

And as Benita Jain, staff attorney of the Immigrant Defense Project of the New York State Defenders Association, said: "This bill [in the Senate] and proposed amendments increase the detention and deportation of our communities. Their hidden measures reduce the actual number of people who will be able to gain and keep lawful permanent residency."

If this is the case, this is not reform but a minefield. What immigrant families - and the country - need, though, is real immigration reform. One in which legalization is made more - not less - accessible, family reunification remains the foundation of the law, workers are protected and due process is revived and respected.

Call your representative and give him or her a piece of your mind.

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