

SUIT CLAIMS FEDS DENY LEGALS RIGHT TO VOTE IN NOV.

Daily News (New York)

April 13, 2008 Sunday, SPORTS FINAL EDITION

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Section: SUBURBAN; Pg. 34

Length: 572 words

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Body

YOU'RE DAMNED if you do and damned if you don't.

That seems to be the message the **federal** government is sending to hundreds of thousands of legal immigrants who want nothing more than to become full-fledged Americans.

They are the 1.1 million people across the country - 90,000 of them in New York State - who have jumped through hoops, followed all the rules and paid every fee to become citizens - and to do it in time to participate in the **November** election.

They are the "legal immigrants" that those who indignantly **claim** not to be "against immigration but against illegal immigration" profess to love.

Yet the applications of hundreds of thousands of them will not be processed on time by the U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services (USCIS), an agency plagued by chronic inefficiency and tied down by vague rules about security.

That's why on March 7, the Puerto Rican Legal Defense and Education Fund (PRLDEF) filed **suit** on behalf of Latino immigrants, charging that the U.S. government has "failed to meet one of its core responsibilities - to grant citizenship and the **right to vote** to those entitled to it."

In order for new citizens to have enough time to register to **vote**, the lawsuit demands that USCIS process all applications filed before March 26 by Sept. 22.

"They have been fingerprinted, passed background checks, paid their application fees, they passed their English test, proven their knowledge of our nation's history and still their citizenship is being withheld," César Perales, PRLDEF's president and general counsel, has said.

There is no lack of excuses from the immigration service. The favorite one, though, is the dramatic surge in the number of applications from people trying to beat last summer's steep hike in the cost of applying for citizenship.

As you may remember, the price of becoming a U.S. citizen increased from \$350 to \$595. That thousands of people had tried to beat the exorbitant new fees did not come as a surprise to anyone - except to the USCIS. That and the fact that this is a presidential election year, and thousands of immigrants who feel threatened and discriminated against are intent on casting their **vote** in **November**.

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Ironically, at the time, the USCIS promised to reduce waiting times, modernize its operation and serve the public better. Instead, the exact opposite has happened, and many of the applicants affected by the processing delays are the ones who paid the higher fees.

"This is not only a bureaucratic problem. This is excluding a whole segment of voters that will not be able to exercise their rights," said Chung-Wha Hong, executive director of the New York Immigration Coalition. "It undermines democracy in a major way."

The environment in the country - it has been said before - is one of unprecedented hostility toward the foreign-born. There are thousands of poor, decent, hardworking undocumented immigrants who are kept detained in terrible conditions. And there are hundreds of immigrant families mercilessly torn apart by raids and deportations.

Then, there also are hundreds of thousands of legal immigrants whose road to exercising their rights as full Americans has been obstructed by carelessness and the indifferent "damned if you do and damned if you don't" official attitude toward new citizens.

Maybe the time will come when actions like PRLDEF's lawsuit are not needed. Let's hope so. In the meantime, let's hope for its success. aruiz@nydailynews.com

Classification

Language: ENGLISH

Document-Type: COLUMN

Publication-Type: Newspaper

Subject: CITIZENSHIP (93%); IMMIGRATION (92%); US FEDERAL GOVERNMENT (90%); SUITS & CLAIMS (90%); ELECTIONS (89%); CAMPAIGNS & ELECTIONS (89%); IMMIGRATION LAW (89%); LITIGATION (88%); VOTERS & VOTING (87%); HEADS OF GOVERNMENT ELECTIONS (78%); TYPES OF GOVERNMENT (78%); DISCRIMINATION (77%); NATURALIZATION (77%); CIVIL RIGHTS (76%); LAWYERS (74%); DEMOCRACIES (73%); CORPORATE COUNSEL (72%); ILLEGAL IMMIGRANTS (72%); HISPANIC AMERICANS (72%); BACKGROUND CHECKS (69%); EXECUTIVES (63%); HISTORY (50%)

Organization: PUERTO RICAN LEGAL DEFENSE & EDUCATION FUND (56%)

Industry: LAWYERS (74%); CORPORATE COUNSEL (72%)

Geographic: NEW YORK, USA (92%); UNITED STATES (93%)

Load-Date: April 14, 2008