

IMMIGRANTS RACE TO APPLY FOR LEGAL RESIDENCY; INTEREST IS 'PHENOMENAL,' LAWYERS SAY

Saint Paul Pioneer Press (Minnesota)
January 14, 2001 Sunday CITY EDITION

Copyright 2001 St. Paul Pioneer Press All Rights Reserved

Section: LOCAL; Pg. 1B

Length: 809 words

Byline: Todd Nelson, Staff Writer

Body

Thousands of undocumented **immigrants** in the Twin Cities are expected to seek to become **legal** permanent residents under a new federal law.

The response is so great because the law temporarily lets certain illegal **immigrants** get a green card without leaving the United States, where many have lived, worked and raised families for years.

Signed by President Clinton in December, the law allows people to avoid the usual process of going back to their native country to **apply** and waiting as long as 10 years to return.

Lawyers who handle immigration cases in both private and nonprofit **legal**-aid practices cannot answer all the calls the new law is generating, and **immigrants** seeking details are packing the U.S. Immigration and Naturalization Service district office in Bloomington.

Some **lawyers** have added night and weekend hours to keep up, while others already have stopped taking new cases in the face of the demand.

"To me it's just **phenomenal** how much **interest** there is," **said** Steve Thal, an immigration **lawyer** who has begun scheduling Saturday and weeknight appointments in response to calls stemming from the new law. "These people are just coming out of the woodwork."

Adding urgency is the relatively tight deadline Congress imposed on certain **immigrants**, giving them until April 30 to **apply**.

Also underlying the surge is **interest** is a mistaken belief that the law created a general amnesty, perhaps because Clinton initially proposed a bill that would have eased the process of gaining **legal residency** for more than a million **immigrants**.

While far from a general pardon, the final bill will help smooth the process for hundreds of thousands of **immigrants** seeking green cards, which bestow permanent **residency**. The provision in the bill that is getting the most attention temporarily revives a benefit that Congress had extended to **immigrants** from 1994 through 1998.

The reinstated 245i provision allows certain undocumented **immigrants** living in the United States to file for permanent **residency** without leaving the country if they pay a \$1,000 fine and **apply** by April 30. Without the provision, they would have to return to their native countries to file and face a bar of up to 10 years on their return.

IMMIGRANTS RACE TO APPLY FOR LEGAL RESIDENCY; INTEREST IS 'PHENOMENAL,' LAWYERS SAY

Those eligible under the provision are immigrants who otherwise qualify for permanent residency but are not allowed to file in the United States because of violations, such as entering the country illegally or overstaying a tourist visa, Leslie Guyton, an immigration attorney in St. Paul, said.

Most who fall into that category are immigrants who have lived here for years and likely would stay illegally rather than leave jobs and families to return to their native countries to apply and then face 10 years outside the United States, Guyton said.

"We're talking about people from all over the world who could benefit from this law," said Pamela Santer, an immigration attorney in Minneapolis. "It will be very important in preventing families from being separated and keeping good productive people in the United States."

Immigration officials and lawyers who work with immigrants in the metro area are bracing for the thousands of applications they expect will pour in at an increasing rate as the deadline approaches. Congress passed the bill without providing for additional immigration inspectors or staff for nonprofit legal-aid offices.

"It's going to be a large number," said Dean Hove, deputy director of the INS district office that serves Minnesota and the Dakotas. "I'm guessing it's going to be in the thousands, but I really don't know how to predict it. I don't know how we're going to think about handling the workload without an infusion of more resources."

Centro Legal in St. Paul, a nonprofit community law office for Latinos, is getting 200 to 300 extra calls a day from people asking about the new law, said Jorge Saavedra F., chief legal officer. He estimated that 8,000 to 12,000 Latinos in the Twin Cities would apply.

The agency hopes to take up to 600 of those cases, but it will have to do some fund raising to hire lawyers and other staff or find volunteers to help get the work done on time, Saavedra said.

"After the holidays, we started getting pounded," Saavedra said of the phone calls. "We have been getting completely overwhelmed."

FYI The U.S. Immigration and Naturalization Service has posted a notice about the new law on its Web site: www.ins.usdoj.gov/graphics/publicaffairs/advisories/lifeadv.htm.

Attorneys from Centro Legal, a community law office representing Latinos, will have workshops on the law at 2:30 p.m. today and 3 p.m. Jan. 27 at St. Stephens Catholic Church at 2211 Clinton Ave. S. in Minneapolis and at 6 p.m. Jan. 22 at Our Lady of Guadalupe at 401 Concord St. in St. Paul.

Todd Nelson can be reached at tanelson@pioneerpress.com or (651) 228-5575.

Classification

Language: ENGLISH

Subject: IMMIGRATION (94%); US FEDERAL GOVERNMENT (90%); LEGISLATION (90%); IMMIGRATION LAW (90%); LAWYERS (90%); PASSPORTS & VISAS (89%); ILLEGAL IMMIGRANTS (89%); CITIZENSHIP (78%); AMNESTY (78%); NONPROFIT ORGANIZATIONS (75%); LEGAL AID (73%); FINES & PENALTIES (71%)

Organization: IMMIGRATION & NATURALIZATION SERVICE (56%); IMMIGRATION & NATURALIZATION SERVICE (56%)

Industry: LAWYERS (90%); LEGAL AID (73%)

IMMIGRANTS RACE TO APPLY FOR LEGAL RESIDENCY;INTEREST IS 'PHENOMENAL,' LAWYERS SAY

Geographic: MINNEAPOLIS, MN, USA (79%); MINNESOTA, USA (79%); UNITED STATES (94%)

Load-Date: November 1, 2001

End of Document