

Giuliani Proposes That New York Help Immigrants Become Citizens

The New York Times

May 6, 1997, Tuesday, Late Edition - Final

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Distribution: Metropolitan Desk

Section: Section A; ; Section A; Page 1; Column 1; Metropolitan Desk ; Column 1;

Length: 1005 words

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Body

In a reflection of the rising political and economic influence of immigrants in New York City, Mayor Rudolph W. Giuliani will call this week for the creation of a city agency to recruit and assist legal immigrants who want to become citizens.

Mr. Giuliani's aides said yesterday that the Mayor would propose spending \$12 million to set up six offices around the city to help immigrants at every stage of the naturalization process, from filling out forms to preparing for citizenship tests to negotiating the complicated bureaucracy of the Immigration and Naturalization Service. The money will be included in the budget plan he will make public on Thursday.

The Mayor said he would discuss the program in a speech on immigration policy to the American Jewish Committee in Washington on Wednesday. It is the latest in a series of speeches Mr. Giuliani has given on the topic ever since Congress passed a welfare bill last year to severely restrict benefits to immigrants living in the United States.

Mr. Giuliani warned that the cut in Federal money could be expensive to New York, because the city would be forced to make up for the lost aid. Mr. Giuliani said yesterday that New York would be spared some of those costs because of a deal reached last weekend between President Clinton and Republicans restoring some of the cuts, and that his citizenship program would save the city more money by helping as many as 60,000 immigrants in New York City become citizens by the end of 1998.

Though unusual, the city's plan is not unique. Gov. Christine Todd Whitman proposed spending \$2 million to help some poor immigrants in New Jersey become citizens, and similar efforts have been started in California and Florida. But national immigration advocates said Mr. Giuliani's plan appeared to be the most ambitious effort by a local government to assist immigrants, and was particularly striking at a time when many Republicans have been associated with anti-immigration policies.

That Mr. Giuliani decided to provide money for the program, and highlight it at the start of a week that traditionally has been marked with leaks about budget proposals, is the latest indication of the extent to which immigrants have become part of the political and economic culture of New York.

It is also the latest effort by Mr. Giuliani to stake out pro-immigration policies as a central part of his political identity, distancing himself from Republican policies and appealing to the rising number of naturalized citizens who will be eligible to vote this November, when Mr. Giuliani is up for re-election. In recent months, Mr. Giuliani has

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lobbied Republicans in Washington, filed lawsuits against the Federal Government and formed a coalition of well-known Americans to extol the virtues of immigration.

Frank Sharry, executive director of the National Immigration Forum, an immigration advocacy group in Washington, said: "When he started speaking out on this, a lot of people were sort of scratching their heads and saying, 'What the hell is he doing? Is he going to become a Democrat?' I think in many respects he's emerged as one of the leading champions on immigration."

Mr. Giuliani described his efforts as "a matter of fairness."

"If people are allowed into this country legally," the Mayor said, "and they are expected to pay taxes at the same level as everyone else, they should be treated the same way as everybody else. The only way we can absolutely assure that in the future is to make them citizens."

But there is clearly a budgetary motive in the Mayor's proposal. City officials say that under the welfare law pushed through Congress by Republicans last year, at least 150,000 immigrants in New York City would have lost food stamps and disability payments. That would have forced New York City to spend \$76 million to replace cash benefits for those losing disability money in the fiscal year starting July 1.

The agreement struck by Mr. Clinton and Republicans to eliminate some of those cuts, however, means that city officials are now recalculating both the cost of the Federal welfare revisions and how the new program will work. Mr. Giuliani said one effect is that his program will seek to help immigrants beyond those in danger of losing their benefits, and his aides emphasized that they viewed the office as a permanent addition to the city government.

City officials estimated that 1.2 million of the city's 7.3 million residents were legal immigrants.

The money for the program, \$11.8 million, will be included in Mr. Giuliani's 1997-98 executive budget, which he will present to the City Council on Thursday.

The city would hire 100 people, who would work out of offices in the Bronx, Manhattan, Brooklyn and Queens. City Hall officials said immigrants would be recruited by mail and at-home visits.

Mr. Giuliani's aides likened the workers to social service caseworkers. They said that in addition to helping immigrants fill out forms, the workers might refer them to lawyers or helping them be fingerprinted, among other things.

The new agency would be in the Department of Youth and Community Development.

If the office is successful, it seems certain to create new problems for the I.N.S., which already has backlogs up to 10 months in its New York City office. Lucas Guttentag, director of the Immigrants' Rights Project of the National Office of the American Civil Liberties Union, praised the New York plan, but said it demonstrated the deficiencies of Federal policy.

"It's unfortunate that the I.N.S. has made the process unnecessarily cumbersome and difficult so cities have to step in and help," he said.

Russell A. Bergeron Jr., a spokesman for the I.N.S., said the agency welcomed Mr. Giuliani's plan. "The reality of the situation is we are the biggest supporters of citizenship there is," he said. "We are delighted that individuals who have not actively pursued citizenship are doing so."

"Granted, it does present a significant challenge for us."

Classification

Language: ENGLISH

Giuliani Proposes That New York Help Immigrants Become Citizens

Subject: CITIZENSHIP (93%); IMMIGRATION (92%); US FEDERAL GOVERNMENT (90%); IMMIGRATION LAW (90%); MAYORS (90%); NATURALIZATION (90%); US REPUBLICAN PARTY (89%); POLITICAL PARTIES (89%); PUBLIC POLICY (89%); ELECTIONS (78%); REGIONAL & LOCAL GOVERNMENTS (78%); CAMPAIGNS & ELECTIONS (78%); US PRESIDENTIAL CANDIDATES 2008 (78%); PUBLIC HEALTH & WELFARE LAW (77%); PLATFORMS & ISSUES (74%); LOBBYING (73%); POLITICAL CANDIDATES (73%); EXECUTIVES (65%); VOTERS & VOTING (65%); LITIGATION (60%); SUITS & CLAIMS (50%)

Company: AMERICAN JEWISH COMMITTEE (56%); AMERICAN JEWISH COMMITTEE (56%)

Organization: AMERICAN JEWISH COMMITTEE (56%); AMERICAN JEWISH COMMITTEE (56%); AMERICAN JEWISH COMMITTEE (56%); AMERICAN JEWISH COMMITTEE (56%)

Industry: BUDGETS (89%); BUDGET PROPOSALS (76%); BUDGET PLANNING & MANAGEMENT (75%)

Person: RUDY GIULIANI (79%); BILL CLINTON (78%)

Geographic: NEW YORK, NY, USA (92%); NEW YORK, USA (94%); NEW JERSEY, USA (79%); CALIFORNIA, USA (79%); UNITED STATES (95%)

Load-Date: May 6, 1997