

20 Charged With Helping 13,000 Cheat on Test for Citizenship

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Body

Federal officials indicted 20 people today on charges of falsifying the naturalization examinations of more than 13,000 legal immigrants in 22 states over the last two years.

The fate of those immigrants remains uncertain, but at a minimum they face re-testing and at a maximum being stripped of their citizenship and deported. The indictments exposed an embarrassing hole in the naturalization process, for which 1.6 million people applied last year, making United States citizenship the most sought-after in the world.

The charges also prompted the Immigration and Naturalization Service to announce today that it would revamp the entire procedure. This includes reconsidering its 1991 decision to privatize the testing to make the exams more accessible in neighborhoods where immigrants live. The companies subcontracted with hundreds of private individuals nationwide to conduct the tests.

"This raises questions about the testing program," said Michael R. Bromwich, the inspector general of the Justice Department. Mr. Bromwich said the procedure had broken down because of a lack of supervision between accredited testing organizations and the subcontractors. The subcontractors, he said, "had a tremendous amount of autonomy."

Officials said the subcontractors had sent recruiters, or runners, into ethnic neighborhoods in several states, mainly New York and California, to solicit money from immigrants in exchange for a guarantee that they would pass the naturalization examination. They said private subcontractors in some cases would take the tests for the immigrants. In some cases, they supplied the answers. In others, they simply certified that the immigrants had passed the test when they had not even taken it.

The immigrants were said to have paid up to \$500 per person for passing the examinations, collectively paying the testers more than \$3 million from 1995 to 1997.

Paul L. Seave, the United States Attorney in Sacramento, announced the indictments and said 15 of the 20 were arrested this morning in New York, California, Nebraska and Oregon. Among those arrested in New York was Daud Mohammad Amiri, 36, of Flushing, Queens. Still sought by the Justice Department is Khalilullah Raouf, 35, of Flushing. Officials said the two were involved in recruiting immigrants from Afghanistan. Like the others, they face a maximum of 10 years in prison and \$1 million in fines on each of several counts of conspiracy.

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After receiving a tip from the Educational Testing Service of Princeton, N.J., Federal officials went undercover and sought out a private subcontractor.

"We told them we had nine people who wanted to become citizens," said Daniel S. Linhardt, an assistant United States Attorney in Sacramento who is to prosecute the cases. "We gave them \$300 for each person, and nine certificates came back saying we had passed the test."

Johnny Williams, regional director of the immigration service, acknowledged today that "the testing process doesn't meet muster" and said that it would be "re-engineered" within the next few months.

"Everything is on the table," Mr. Williams said, including whether to discontinue contracting with private testing firms.

Still, he said, the indictments today should not give the impression that the entire system is tainted. Only about 15 percent of the exams were conducted by private concerns, he said. As for the immigrants, he said, each will be evaluated individually. Some, he said, were unknowing victims of fraud; others "can be criminally prosecuted and deported."

Passing the exam, which tests a person's proficiency in English and knowledge of American history, is a crucial step but not the only one that a legal permanent resident, someone who has lived in this country for five years, must take before becoming a citizen. Mr. Williams said other steps in the process, including an oral exam with an immigration officer, could catch problematic applicants. Of the 1.6 million immigrants who applied for **citizenship** last year, 700,000 were granted it.

Citizenship allows a person to vote, join the armed forces and, now, receive certain welfare benefits. A revocation of **citizenship** would reduce a person's status to that of legal permanent resident, which would still allow him to work in the United States.

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