

## **Immigrants face long citizenship wait in Atlanta**

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### **Body**

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**Immigrants** who apply for **citizenship** in **Atlanta** **wait** up to four years to be sworn in --- **longer** than anyone else in the country, according to a national organization of immigration lawyers.

Although an Immigration and Naturalization Service official in Washington disputes the figures, INS officials in **Atlanta** said the numbers aren't far off. "Our backlog is still growing," said Fred Alexander, deputy district director of the **Atlanta** INS office, which covers Georgia, Alabama, North Carolina and South Carolina. Alexander said Tuesday it takes about 28 months to become a citizen.

The **wait**, however **long**, means that while **immigrants** pay taxes and can work, they cannot receive government benefits or bring in other family members who live abroad. And without **citizenship**, they cannot vote. In most cases, **immigrants** have already **waited** five years to apply and now have to **wait** even **longer** to become citizens.

"If you were **waiting** two years to get a Social Security card, you'd be very upset, because you expect a government to give you service," said Charles H. Kuck, an **Atlanta** immigration lawyer and president of Georgia's chapter of the American Immigration Lawyers Association. "It's not fair that you can become a citizen faster someplace else."

The data come from monthly surveys of AILA chapter members on how **long** it takes local INS offices to process **citizenship** applications.

The **waiting** times vary, according to the survey. In Hartford, Conn., for instance, the **wait** is six months, which is how **long** it used to take everyone before a national backlog became evident several years ago. In Miami, it takes about two years, and **immigrants** in New York **wait** up to 18 months.

An INS spokesman in Washington said Tuesday that people in **Atlanta** don't **wait longer** to become citizens. "**Atlanta** is small potatoes compared to the major six cities where our backlog is greater," said Andrew Lluberes of the survey.

The biggest backlog is in Los Angeles, he said, followed by New York, San Francisco, Miami, Chicago and Newark, N.J. **Immigrants** in those cities **wait** 18 months to two years to become citizens, he said, adding he had no specific figures on **Atlanta**'s backlog.

Nationwide, the INS says, more than 2 million **immigrants** are **waiting** to become citizens, the largest backlog of applications since the government began keeping records at the turn of the century. In **Atlanta**, 23,000 **immigrants** are **waiting** to become citizens.

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The backlog is a result of an antiquated processing system in which some applications are done by hand. There also has been a huge increase in the number of people applying for **citizenship** because of recent changes in the law that cut benefits to noncitizens.

The backlog is so great that it has created another problem for the INS. Some people have **waited** so **long** to have their cases reviewed that their criminal background checks have expired. In **Atlanta**, about 1,200 **immigrants** fall into this category and may have to have their fingerprints taken again. Nationwide, about half a million people are in this situation.

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