

Final push to beat fee hike

San Jose Mercury News (California)

July 28, 2007 Saturday

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Section: LOCAL; State; National; News; Special Reports; Politics

Length: 633 words

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Body

Bay Area non-profit groups that help immigrants file federal paperwork are turning away scores of last-minute filers seeking to save hundreds of dollars before a **fee** increase begins.

Dozens of calls for assistance have poured into non-profit offices the past two weeks as immigrants scramble to avoid the increases - up to 86 percent - that go into effect Monday.

The U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services will only accept the lower **fees** for applications - including those for citizenship, green cards and family sponsorship - postmarked with today's date.

"We're getting a lot of frantic calls from people," said the Asian Law Alliance's Jackie Maruhashi. "Unfortunately, the organizations that help people are at capacity and have had to turn people away."

The increases include a spike from \$330 to \$595 for citizenship applications; petitions for family members go from \$190 to \$355; employment permits rise from \$180 to \$340; and fingerprinting costs go from \$70 to \$80.

Some organizations are now telling immigrants they shouldn't rush through the paperwork and, while the amount of money they'll spend may be a hardship, it's not worth making a costly error.

"It's better that they see a counselor and talk to them," said Adel Olvera, director of immigration and citizenship programs at the Center for Employment Training.

Since the beginning of the month, said Olvera, her office has helped 150 people complete their citizenship applications, but turned away 200.

Those clients were referred to other non-profits that ultimately told them they were backlogged and couldn't help with their applications at the time.

While immigrants could complete the paperwork on their own, Olvera suggests that immigrants wait until experts can help guide them through the process because mistakes could result in them losing their application **fees**.

Other missteps, such as saying they speak English on citizenship applications that eventually require passing a test in the language, also could **push** them back on the list, she said.

The **fee** increases, which were announced in January and are expected to generate \$1 billion for the government agency, resulted in a flood of applications, said Immigration Services spokeswoman Sharon Rummery.

In the first four months of the year, the agency's San Francisco office received more than 34,580 immigration-related applications - nearly 10,000 more than the amount it received for the same period in 2006.

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In May, 5,100 applications were mailed - almost twice the 2,650 mailed in May 2006.

Fu You Liu was one of the citizenship applicants who made the cutoff date, something that made the 83-year-old from China proud about the prospects, said her niece, Jeanne Wun.

She immediately began quizzing herself about American politics, even though she won't know if her application has been accepted for up to three months. It could take up to a year before she's tested.

"At age 83, to become a citizen is a big deal - the prospects are amazing," said Wun, who spoke for her aunt, who speaks only Chinese.

Liu immigrated to this country 16 years ago under a family sponsorship visa, settling in Salinas and quickly becoming a legal permanent resident.

She applied for citizenship a year later, but it was denied after she failed the English test and was told she'd have to wait 15 years before she could take it in her native language.

The mother of six grown children - one of whom lives in this country - waited until now to apply.

She's up on all her politics, reads a Chinese-language paper daily and "is extremely sharp," Wun said.

If she becomes a citizen, she's considering sponsoring her other children to immigrate.

"This," Wun said, "is huge for her."

Mercury News wire services contributed to this report.

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Classification

Language: ENGLISH

Publication-Type: Newspaper

Subject: CITIZENSHIP (92%); IMMIGRATION (91%); NONPROFIT ORGANIZATIONS (90%); ASSOCIATIONS & ORGANIZATIONS (90%); PASSPORTS & VISAS (78%); US FEDERAL GOVERNMENT (78%); FAMILY (77%); PETITIONS (73%)

Company: CENTER FOR EMPLOYMENT TRAINING INC (54%)

Geographic: SAN FRANCISCO BAY AREA, CA, USA (59%); CHINA (79%)

Load-Date: August 22, 2007