

Pending boost in fees spurs rush to apply for U.S. citizenship

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Jon Reveles has lived in the United States for more than 40 years, but he's never voted.

He hopes by applying to become a U.S. citizen this week he'll be able to vote in the 2008 presidential election. Reveles, a U.S. permanent resident who moved here with his parents from Mexico in 1964, said he's thought about filing his paperwork but he just "procrastinated."

"My dad said, 'You're part of this country and you need to fulfill your civic duty,'" Reveles said of his late father who became a U.S. citizen and always voted. "I did it because it's time."

On Tuesday, Reveles was one of more than a hundred immigrants who stopped by for advice on filing their citizen or resident applications during an immigration legal clinic at Poder Para La Familia Hispana in Salt Lake City.

The seven-hour free event was organized by Proyecto Latino de Utah and immigration lawyers to help immigrants fill out their applications correctly and get it postmarked no later than Friday before a fee hike.

Starting Monday, some U.S. immigration application fees will be doubling and tripling - the average fee increase is about 90 percent. To become a U.S. citizen, the application fee will increase by 105 percent from \$330 to \$675. To become a U.S. resident, it will jump by 211 percent from \$325 to \$1,010, according to U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services (USCIS). The USCIS, a fee-based agency, has said the increase is needed to improve customer service, security and technology and infrastructure.

In Utah, USCIS immigration filings have increased by some 70 percent from last year. In May 2006, 310 applications were filed compared to the 522 applications in May, according to USCIS records.

Reveles heard about the clinic on the radio and decided to file this week. He said he hadn't done it before because his Mexican citizenship was the only connection he had to his birth country, which he left as a boy. But with immigration being such an important issue that is "being quietly neglected" by political leaders, he hopes by becoming a citizen his vote will help change the country's leadership.

"This time I really feel like I want to vote," he said.

If granted citizenship, Reveles would be the last of his parents' nine children to do so.

It was the Pioneer Day holiday in Utah on Tuesday, but about 20 volunteers throughout the day stayed busy in the crowded and warm offices. Some volunteers helped immigrants fill out their 10-page applications on the computers as adults and children waited in line.

Marlene Gonzalez, a lawyer and executive director of the Multi-Cultural Legal Center, said she volunteered because it's important that immigrants get involved in their communities and become citizens to have a voice.

"The more immigrants we can get to become U.S. citizens, the more power immigrants can have in the political process," she said.

After living in the United States for more than 25 years as a permanent resident, Salt Lake City construction worker Gustavo Hernandez is applying for citizenship this week to save a few hundred bucks before the fee increase. His two grown sons are also applying, but his wife refuses because she's afraid of the process.

"I want more rights and to have more security for my family," he said in Spanish.

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