

Immigrants face huge fee increases Many say the costs are excessive for people who often are struggling to settle in the U.S.

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Immigrants applying for the right to live and work in the United States will pay a steeper price starting July 30.

The fees that immigrants pay to request "green cards" will nearly triple to \$930. The cost of renewing working permits jumps 89 percent to \$340. And applying for citizenship will cost \$595, an increase of \$265.

Some children will pay less and immigrants who fall under the federal poverty line can apply for waivers, but most others will have to cough up more cash.

Immigration officials, who have hired staff and reallocated resources during the past year to reduce a years-long backlog to about six months, say the increases are necessary because the agency is solely funded by user fees.

The increases will raise more than \$2 billion, according to immigration officials.

But immigrants and their advocates complain that these costs are excessive for people who often are struggling to settle here while helping relatives in their homelands.

Under Secretary Emilio Gonzalez, head of U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services, unveiled the fee revisions in January, as the first major overhaul of immigration costs since 1998. The fees will become final after a public-comment period.

Gonzalez said in a written statement that the new fees are "both fair to our customers and vital to our Nation as we continue to build a secure and efficient national immigration service."

But some say the costs make citizenship less affordable.

"This is ridiculous," said Gail Seeram, an Orlando immigration attorney who files applications for many West Indian clients in Central Florida. "These aren't filing fees. These are penalties. . . . If you examine any other government fee structure in the U.S., there is none with such unrealistic set of fees."

Since higher fees were proposed earlier this year, many who qualified for citizenship but had not yet requested it rushed to submit their petitions.

A recent Orlando Sentinel analysis of filings during the past few months showed that immigrants have filed citizenship applications in record numbers.

At least 118,600 immigrants across the country requested citizenship in March, compared with about 74,200 in March 2006. In Florida, the number of citizenship applications was about 31,000 in the first quarter of 2007, an increase of 62 percent over the previous year.

Applications for green cards, the documents that entitle immigrants to live and work here legally, also increased in Florida and the U.S.

Miriam Vazquez, 37, a Dominican immigrant who works in a factory in east Orlando, was filling out her citizenship application Tuesday because she had heard buzz about the fee increase.

Vazquez said that even at the current cost of about \$400 for a citizenship application with fingerprinting and photos, she had to save for weeks to scrape the money together.

"With the minimum wage we make in this state, it's too little money to pay for all that," Vazquez said. "I am trying to rush and do it now, because it's going to cost more."

Richard Logue, who directs the Catholic Immigration and Refugee Services program of Catholic Charities in Orlando, said his office has seen more inquiries from immigrants.

Especially burdened, he said, are those who need to file "adjustment of status" forms to request green cards. Those applications will go from \$325 to \$930, a 186 percent increase. Many who file that application also need to request a work permit, which will jump from \$180 to \$340 every year.

Waivers of those fees, Logue said, are usually difficult to obtain for most immigrants.

"Families had a difficult time coming up with the old fees in our experience," Logue said, "so some working-class families will perhaps have to forgo getting their papers and citizenship."

Anne Yamasaki, 72, a German immigrant in Rockledge, is dependent on Social Security. She says she can't spare the extra \$100 her green-card renewal will cost next year. She won't even think about applying for citizenship, even though she has lived in the U.S. for more than 40 years, because of the cost.

But she also wants to see more-efficient service than she did during her last visit to the immigration office in south Orlando.

"I live on a very limited income," Yamasaki said. "But it might be worth it, because last time I went to immigration I was standing in a little alleyway for hours."

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