

If you're married, try answering these questions . . .

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Attorneys recommend that married applicants for legal status be ready to answer personal questions when they face immigration officials.

If there are discrepancies between you and your spouse, it could raise a red flag and turn your interview into a wide-ranging investigation.

Your case could also be complicated by petitions from previous marriages; deportation orders that may have been issued without your knowledge; or scant documentation to prove a commingling of financial resources.

Immigrants who overstayed visas will have some explaining to do. And those who entered the country illegally will have to return to their country of origin for their interview. However, they may be banned from re-entering the U.S. depending on how long they've been in the country without documentation.

"The burden of proof has become really, really exorbitant," said Ralph Pineda, an immigration attorney in Orlando.

Pineda said the general requirements for immigrants seeking legalization through a spouse are: entering into a legitimate marriage with a U.S. citizen or legal resident; having a clean criminal record; showing that the immigrant will have financial solvency and won't become a public burden; filing the appropriate paperwork and paying required fees.

"My advice to people is: Do not get married just to get immigration benefits," Pineda said. "You do not want to commit fraud against the U.S. government."

There's hope for most legitimate applicants who get timely legal advice, said Gail Seeram, an attorney in Orlando who hosts a local radio show on immigration matters.

Don't go at it alone, Seeram said.

"A lot of times applicants don't understand how tough it can be with these cases," she said. "It's not just about loving your spouse, but having proof that they should stay here."

Some tips from Seeram and Pineda:

- * Be prepared. You and your spouse may be interviewed separately and asked several personal questions.

- * Don't ask your spouse for help answering questions during the interview. Let the immigration officer direct questions to you both. Ask for clarification if you don't understand a question.

- * If you need legal advice, find an experienced immigration lawyer. You can seek referrals from the American Immigration Lawyers Association (aila.com).

- * Bring a reliable translator if English is not your first language.

- * Provide all original documents. And if you wear reading glasses, don't forget to bring them!

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