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INS to Waive Naturalization Interviews

By Carl Shusterman

One year ago, the number of applications for naturalization received by the INS office in Los Angeles was a "mere" 500 per day. By the fall of 1994, daily receipts had increased to over 1,000. Now, the number of receipts is 2,500 per day and growing.

Why This Avalanche of Applications?

What accounts for this exponential rate of growth? In part, it is fear caused by the passage of Proposition 187 and various bills proposed in Congress which would cut off a number of federal benefits to lawful permanent residents. However, most of the new applicants are persons who obtained their green cards in 1989 and 1990 through the amnesty program. In addition to the 800,000 persons who are granted permanent residence in any given year, during those years, an extra three million persons became permanent residents through amnesty. Over one-third of the total were residents of Southern California.

Given present trends, the number of naturalization applications filed daily could have reached over 5,000 by the end of 1995. Presently, INS has the capability to interview only 500 to 600 applicants per day.

Lack of Funding Leads to Change in Policy

The present waiting time from submission of a naturalization application to interview averages between eight and ten months. Another two or three months are required before the applicant is naturalized by a Federal Court judge. If present trends continue the waiting times could quickly increase to two or three years.

Congress failed to appropriate any additional funds for the naturalization program proposed by INS Commissioner Doris Meissner. Therefore, INS decided to reconsider all aspects of the naturalization program and devise a way to cope with the growing backlogs without a huge infusion of money.

Commissioner Meissner announced that INS's Los Angeles office would be allocated an additional 100 positions for immigration examiners. In addition, INS is considering eliminating the interview requirement in five major cities, including Los Angeles and Miami, for applicants whose applications are clearly provable. The

English and the history and government tests will be administered by private agencies for an additional fee. INS will still send each applicant's fingerprints to the FBI to check for any criminal record.

"...INS is considering eliminating the interview requirement ...tests will be administered by private agencies ... 75 percent of the total will be sworn in as U.S. citizens without the necessity of undergoing an interview."

However, those applicants who are obviously eligible for naturalization, approximately 75 percent of the total, will be sworn in as U.S. citizens without the necessity of undergoing an interview. It is hoped that this new system will enable INS to keep backlogs from increasing without compromising the quality of their adjudications. ■