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### Immigration agency defends plan for higher fees

By LEAH RAE

THE JOURNAL NEWS

*(Original publication: February 25, 2007)*

NEW YORK - Immigration officials are promising speedier service as they defend an unpopular plan to dramatically increase fees for becoming a citizen or getting a green card.

The various fees would rise an average of 86 percent under a plan by U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services, one of three federal agencies that handle immigration. USCIS is required to sustain itself almost entirely through fees, and the agency says it's losing money under the current setup.

But as a public comment period continues through March, advocates for immigrants are pressing against the change.

"It's just too much to be putting on the back of indigent or low-income people," said Tom Shea of New York Immigration Coalition, a statewide advocacy group. He spoke at a forum for community organizations Thursday at USCIS' district office in lower Manhattan.

A decision on the fees will follow the 60-day comment period.

The fee to apply for a green card would increase from \$325 to \$905, for example. Filing an I-698 application to adjust from temporary to permanent resident status would cost \$1,370, up from \$180.

With the higher rates, the agency promises to accelerate processing times by 20 percent over the next three years.

The agency received an infusion of funding to reduce a huge backlog of applications, but that money is running out. In the New York office, which covers New York City, Long Island and the northern suburbs, a staff of 500 is already short 35 to 40 members, said Andrea Quarantillo, the new district director in New York.

Quarantillo said the office is trying to strike a balance between customer service and national security. Asked whether the agency would seek more funding to cover national security interests, Quarantillo said that was up to Congress.

"This is the reality we live in," she said. "We are a fee-based organization by law."

Quarantillo described changes designed to resolve cases more efficiently and guard against fraud. When individuals need to submit additional documents for their application - a birth certificate or divorce decree, for example - they would bring the papers by appointment instead of sending them by mail. This lets cases be resolved on the spot, without the hassles and delays associated with mail correspondence, she said.

Quarantillo said USCIS' new focus was "to finish what we start."

Robin Bikkal, an immigration attorney in White Plains, said that sounded like an improvement.

"The problem is, things are kept pending," Bikkal said. Cases can drag on when documents like birth certificates get lost in the filing system, she said. Some applicants are denied outright when documents are missing, and then must pay a new fee to start the process all over.

Susan Henner, another attorney in White Plains, said she wanted to see a better tracking system that would allow more people to find out the status of their applications online.

USCIS saw an increase in citizenship applications last year, when debates about illegal immigration heated up nationwide. But Henner said the agency is losing revenue partly because of more-restrictive policies that limit who can apply for permanent residence.

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Certain applicants used to be able to pay a \$1,000 fine in return for applying for a green card from within the United States, but that's no longer an option.

A possible change on the horizon involves decentralizing some functions to new community offices, Quarantillo said. USCIS is housed at 26 Federal Plaza, still known as the INS building. The Immigration and Naturalization Service handled immigration functions before it was reorganized three years ago under the Department of Homeland Security.

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This is just yet another excuse on the part of illegal-immigration advocates. Millions of illegals have been in this country for decades, long before the proposed increase in fees was even thought about. They didn't make an effort to become a voting, legally participating part of our country before, either. I think the solution is simple. Get legal, or get out.

Posted by: **USAroadtripper** on Sun Feb 25, 2007 10:08 am

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