

The cost of applying for U.S. citizenship is dramatically increasing

Daniel Gonzalez

August 5, 2020

It's going to cost more to apply for U.S. citizenship. A lot more.

Starting Oct. 2, legal immigrants eligible to apply for citizenship will pay \$1,160 if they submit their application online, or \$1,170 if submitting a paper application.

Under the new fee, immigrants will pay at least \$520 more to apply for citizenship. That is more than 80% higher than the current application fee of \$640.

It's also the second biggest jump in the naturalization application fee in history, analysts say.

Most of the fee waivers that allowed lower income immigrants to apply for naturalization for free are also being eliminated.

And for the first time, people fleeing persecution in their home countries will have to pay a \$50 fee to apply for asylum if they are not in deportation proceedings. In the past, there has been no cost to apply for asylum.

The new fees and elimination of many fee waivers are part of an overall adjustment of immigration benefit fees that will increase by 20% on average and generate an estimated \$1 billion in revenue.

The new fees were finalized Monday.

U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services, the agency that processes immigration benefits, says the fee increases are needed to offset the higher cost of processing applications for immigration benefits, including the Trump administration's attempt to crack down on fraud and increase the vetting of immigrants applying for benefits.

"USCIS is required to examine incoming and outgoing expenditures and make adjustments based on that analysis," Joseph Edlow, USCIS deputy director for policy, said in a statement to The Arizona Republic. "These overdue adjustments in fees are necessary to efficiently and fairly administer our nation's lawful immigration system, secure the homeland and protect Americans."

The agency relies almost entirely on fees. The agency is facing a huge budget shortfall this year and has asked Congress for \$1.2 billion to cover the gap.

Fees are reviewed every two years. Some fees will decrease under the new changes. The agency last adjusted fees in December 2016 under the Obama administration on average overall by a 21% increase.

Supporters say the fee increases are long overdue, and will help make the agency financially solvent again without having to rely on tax dollars.

However, analysts said the fee increase will result in fewer legal permanent residents, especially lower-income immigrants, applying for citizenship, limiting their political power because only U.S. citizens can vote.

In the past, Republican and Democratic administrations have kept the cost of applying for naturalization low to encourage immigrants to apply for citizenship, said Jessica Bolter, associate policy analyst at the Migration Policy Institute, a nonpartisan think tank.

Only immigrants over 18 who have been legal permanent residents for at least five years, or three years if married to a U.S. citizen, can apply for citizenship.

Until now, the lower citizenship application fee was "in recognition of the value of citizenship and the belief that those who qualify should be able to access citizenship," Bolter said. "So this naturalization fee is increasing more than other (fees) because this administration is trying to make up for the fact that it was held artificially lower in the past."

The large increase in the naturalize fee comes as USCIS is trying to work through a large backlog of citizenship applications exacerbated by the new coronavirus pandemic, which forced USCIS to shut down in-person naturalization interviews and naturalization oath ceremonies for several months.

"So it just adds another obstacle to naturalization for people who might be eligible," she said.

The 81% increase in the online naturalization application fee (83% increase for paper applications) is the second highest increase ever, Bolter said. The highest increase was in 1999, when under the Clinton administration the fee to apply for citizenship increase from \$95 to \$225, a 137% increase.

Combined with the fee increase, the elimination of fee waivers will result in fewer immigrants applying for citizenship, especially lower-income immigrants, Bolter said.

Under the Trump administration, USCIS is eliminating fee waivers for all immigrants, with the exception of a few categories, including victims of domestic violence, crime and human trafficking victims, Afghani and Iraqi nationals who assisted the U.S. government and minors applying for special immigrant visas who still are under supervision of a juvenile court or child welfare agency, Bolter said.

USCIS is eliminating most fee waivers for immigrants applying for green cards and for work authorization, she said.

"So this is also going to be really impactful," Bolter said. "Not only are these fees increasing but the mitigation measures to ensure that" immigrants who are eligible but "simply didn't have the resources to apply" are also being eliminated.

There were about 9.1 million legal permanent residents in the United States in 2019 eligible to naturalize but hadn't, according to Department of Homeland Security's most recent data.

Of those, the largest share, about 2.5 million, were from Mexico, followed by China, with about 490,000, and the Philippines, with 370,000, according to DHS data.

About 810,000 legal permanent residents applied for citizenship in 2018, according to the most recent USCIS data. Of those, 761,901 became citizens.

David Bier, immigration policy analyst at the Cato Institute, a libertarian think tank that supports higher levels of immigration and foreign workers, believes the combination of the naturalization fee increase and elimination of fee waivers will result in more immigrants deciding not to become citizens.

"I would expect you will see more people foregoing that opportunity" to become full Americans, Bier said. "Especially when you already know it's not a quick process. It might take over a year or maybe even longer as a result of the" backlogs of immigrants waiting for their citizenship applications to be processed.

He said the fee increases are part of the Trump administration's ongoing efforts to restrict legal immigrants to the U.S.

USCIS is raising the fees on many other categories of immigration benefits, including for H-1B high-skilled workers, H-2A seasonal agriculture workers and several other temporary worker categories.

USCIS is raising fees to cover the increased cost of processing applications for many benefits after the Trump administration implemented many "onerous" new regulations that have made applying for certain benefits unnecessarily more difficult, Bier said.

For example, the length of some immigration forms are "double or triple" than what they were under the Obama administration, and many new questions have been added, Bier said.

"All of that requires significantly more staff time," Bier said. "Now we are seeing that reflected in the fees that are going to be charged to sponsors and immigrants."

Jessica Vaughan, policy studies director at the Center for Immigration Studies, a think tank that favors less overall immigration, supports the fees increases, calling them "long overdue."

"We need to have fees that are high enough to keep USCIS fiscally stable, and we can't run our immigration system on the cheap, because there are security considerations and too much fraud," Vaughan said in an email. "Most people agree that US taxpayers should not have to subsidize the cost of adjudicating applications in the legal immigration system, especially when there are also other costs for welfare benefits that they end up subsidizing."

She also supports eliminating many of the fee waivers, which she said have been "a major fiscal drag on USCIS."

Fee waivers increased under the Obama administration, adding to their costs, she said

In 2018, USCIS waived fees for 350,000 applicants. These waivers were valued at \$368 million, averaging about \$1,051 apiece, she said.

"That's a pretty big chunk of the \$1.2 billion deficit that they are facing," Vaughan said. "These waivers were expanded significantly after a policy change implemented in the Obama administration. Now Trump is rolling that back a little bit, so that legal immigrants don't have to subsidize the applications of so many others."

She doesn't believe the fee increases will lead to a decrease in immigrants applying for citizenship. In the short term, the increases may result in a spike in immigrants applying for citizenship before the fees go up in October, she said.

"Despite the higher fees, immigrants will still want to become citizens because they love this country and because they want to sponsor family members. I don't see that changing much," Vaughan said.