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## Talent-Hungry Employers Offer Workers Help With Naturalization

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Amazon.com Inc. is at the forefront of a push to help workers obtain citizenship and other immigration benefits, an effort to attract and retain talent as government officials and business groups alike see immigrants as key to meeting US labor needs.

The online retail giant's "Welcome Door" program targets refugees and other humanitarian-based immigrant employees such as asylum seekers with assistance that includes reimbursement for work permits. The program also offers lawful permanent residents with legal support for their naturalization applications.

Amazon began offering the benefits to workers in the US in April and will expand it to other countries later this year, said spokeswoman Ellie Russell.

The California Farm Bureau Federation, an organization of farmers and ranchers in the state, announced similar plans late last year.

A significant portion of California's agricultural workforce includes lawful permanent residents. Those workers—who are typically older, more experienced, and higher skilled—are also the kind of employees who are most critical to retain for farmers and ranchers, said C. Bryan Little, director of labor affairs at the California Farm Bureau Federation.

"A lot of these people occupy key jobs in these agricultural establishments," he said. "We want to give them an opportunity to be able to become an employer of choice in their community."

Both initiatives demonstrate the premium employers are willing to place on maintaining their immigrant workforces. They're also being rolled out as many industries face new hiring struggles—a challenge farmers dealt with for years before the current labor shortage.

"It's all about employee retention," said David Bier, associate director of immigration studies at the Cato Institute. "Employee turnover is a huge cost to employers because you have not only the lost productivity and the time the worker is unavailable. You have the added cost of finding and training a new replacement as well."

Immigrants have made an outsized contribution to US labor force growth since 2010, a Goldman Sachs analysis found. But the pace of new immigration fell over the last two years.

It makes more sense for employers to absorb a few hundred dollars to keep valuable employees who may have a choice of jobs, Bier said.

## **Win-Win**

Labor Secretary Marty Walsh recently called on lawmakers to overhaul the US immigration system, saying that merely adding more temporary visas isn't enough to make up for labor shortages. But even if Congress makes green cards and citizenship more widely available, hefty fees—and a complex application process—stand in the way of workers securing full citizenship.

About 67% of naturalized citizens borrowed from high-interest sources like credit cards or payday lenders to finance the \$725 naturalization fee that US Citizenship and Immigration Services charges, according to a survey from BlueHub Capital, a nonprofit community finance organization. The survey included more than 1,200 respondents who were non-citizen immigrants or naturalized between 2016 and 2021.

The organization this year launched a platform called One Percent America to offer low-interest loans to help green card holders afford to become citizens.

“We’re not giving people the option to affordably pay for these USCIS fees,” said Jaime Escott, vice president of marketing at BlueHub.

Private-sector employers pay significant amounts to sponsor workers for employment-based visas. But because citizenship isn't required for work eligibility, “companies usually stop at that point and don't see the need for covering those costs,” said Helena Coric, senior manager of integration programs at the National Immigration Forum, which is partnering with Amazon and the California Farm Bureau Federation to provide legal services for naturalization.

Completing that process provides immigrants with more security and the ability to reunite with immediate family members more quickly than they could under a green card.

“Being able to promote this benefit when the employee is signing on is huge,” Coric said.

“Knowing an employer is going to provide this deeply discounted legal assistance can really increase retention, especially if that employer ends up extending the benefit to an immediate family member as well.”

## **Few Waivers**

USCIS has promoted naturalization opportunities by conducting outreach to immigrant communities, offering educational tools, and running a social media campaign to encourage those eligible to pursue citizenship, a spokesman for the agency said.

The agency also has a fee waiver process for certain forms and will propose adjusting fees charged for immigration and naturalization benefits for the first time since 2016, the spokesman said.

Immigration advocates, however, point out that fee waivers are available to only the poorest immigrants. Immigrants can receive a waiver of naturalization fees if their annual income is below 150% of the federal poverty level—roughly \$20,000.

USCIS Director Ur Jaddou touted a forthcoming update to the agency's fee schedule in an April Congressional hearing on the agency's fiscal 2023 budget request.

The agency's latest attempt to update fees under the Trump administration was blocked by a federal court in a case alleging that then-acting Homeland Security Secretary Chad Wolf was

illegally serving in his role. The advocacy groups that sued also showed that the increased fees would unfairly burden low-income immigrants, the court held.

The Department of Homeland Security, USCIS's parent agency, estimated that there were 9.2 million green card holders in the US eligible to become citizens as of January 2021. States like New York and local governments such as the city and county of San Francisco and Montgomery County, Md., have launched their own citizenship assistance programs to make it easier to apply.

The effectiveness of those programs shows cost is a significant barrier, said Jorge Loweree, policy director at the American Immigration Council.

### **Other Immigration Costs**

The financial burdens of the immigration system aren't limited to naturalization. Applicants for the Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals program, which offers protection from deportation and work authorization, pay \$495 to renew their status.

"That's quite a chunk of money we have to give the government every two years," said Juliana Macedo do Nascimento, deputy director of federal advocacy at United We Dream.

While the long-term status of the program remains in question, universities, employers, and nonprofits have all provided DACA recipients with financial assistance to renew their protections. For those who aren't employees or students of those institutions, there often "just isn't enough money in the nonprofit world to pay for everybody who needs it," Macedo do Nascimento said.

The reality is that USCIS's operations depend on collecting money from the people to whom it provides services, Loweree said. In the future, the agency could shift some of those costs to people in categories better able to afford them, he said.

"If somebody has demonstrated that they're fully committed to this country and want to fully participate in our democracy, we should be welcoming them to the US with open arms," he said.